EMPOWERING WOMEN FARMERS

Women are fundamental to smallholder food production the world over. In Kigoma, we support female-headed households for two primary reasons (although listing many more would not be hard). Firstly, research (and our own experience) shows stark increases in livelihood benefits for children and families when assistance is given to women versus their male counterparts. As our fundamental goal is to assist as many people as we can out of poverty, we are eager to see the benefits of an increase agricultural return manifest in the lives of all family members (whether this is a higher protein diet, affording to send children to school, or hiring day labourers to replace using their children). Every dollar we invest in women farmers is multiplied through their family, leading to more people benefiting from our work.

Secondly, while current legislation in Tanzania gives equal rights to men and women to buy, own, and use land, in rural areas such as Kigoma, customary norms remain very strong. Women are marginalised due to lack of awareness or an inability to assert their rights in a historically male-dominated social structure.

The majority of the women we work with are widows. These widows can be subjected to arbitrary land disputes brought about by their deceased husband’s family.

It is a rarity to find a married women or single women owning farm land independently of a man (either a spouse or male relative). We are working with local authorities and partner NGOs on a land-titling project for our farmers, securing their land and their future. Seed Change’s work with female farmers aims to empower women and address the gender gap as opposed to maintaining a gender blind policy that deepens the divide through indifference to inherent power relations and the plight of women.

In Kigoma palm oil has traditionally oil palm has been viewed as a ‘women’s crop’ due to its low value. As we witness the value associated with cultivating oil palm increase due to the high-yield trees, Seed Change is wary of a possible shift in control of the crop from females to males. By engaging directly with women and helping them get land tenure, we aim to secure and substantiate their role. In addition, we carefully crafted survey questions in our monitoring and evaluation program to assess these changes and keep an eye on developments overtime.

Seed Change has identified one female representative from each village to act as a liaison and advocate for the women farmers of her village. The Female Lead Farmer helps us stay informed about obstacles these women are facing, helping us to adjust our programs to better serve this community. In Mahembe village, our Female Lead Farmer is also the Secretary of Widows – a role that makes her well-connect and highly knowledgeable about the triumphs and tribulations of women in her community.

If women farmers had the same access to agricultural inputs and credit as men, there would be “100-150 million fewer people living in hunger.” - FAO