

FATE

**Feminisation, agricultural transition and rural employment: Social and political conditions of asset building in the context of export-led agriculture**

*Summary*

Agriculture is by far the most important source of employment for men and women in the poorer regions of the globe. 86% of the world's rural population depend on farming, 450 million are agricultural wage workers (FAO et al. 2010b, IAASTD 2009). Small-scale, subsistence-oriented agriculture is a vital source of resilience and livelihoods (Doss 2011), and it is widely recognised that agriculture remains a primary engine of rural development and growth, providing a critical route out of poverty (IFAD 2011, WDR 2013). However, agriculture in the global South is also viewed as underperforming, and demands for more capital-intensive commercial agriculture have been issued promoting forms of employment that can generate higher returns (WDR 2008, 2013). Non-traditional agricultural exports (NTAE) have been a response to these demands, creating wage labour and, notably, stimulating high levels of female employment in rural areas. The developmental impacts and gendered implications of these dynamics are the subject of the research proposed here. FATE will analyse the effects of the increasing integration of rural women into export-led agriculture, and the conditions under which these effects contribute to asset-building, enhance individual well-being and capabilities, or, by contrast, increase dependencies and vulnerability.

While rural employment and women's work in the agricultural sector have received some attention, little evidence exists with regard to the implications of changing employment conditions in the context of this new wave of agricultural commercialisation and how it relates to the alleged feminisation processes in the labour market and other sectors. Research on the shifting patterns of agricultural employment and their gendered implications is limited by a lack of data, particularly on rural women's employment. This lack is partly due to the fact that these issues lie at the intersection of agriculture and labour concerns, and are not adequately addressed across these two sectors. Indeed, a number of ill-founded and oversimple assumptions about the rural labour market have shaped the discourse on rural employment and rural workers. In-depth and comparative and longitudinal research is thus needed to inform the debate on these issues. The FATE project aims to connect these separate strands and thus contribute to informed policy making.

The gender perspective (Chant et al. 2009) provides an important analytical lens for assessing how potential risks associated with transitions are spread and negotiated between different social groups, as well as for understanding how such changes affect gender relations and women's status in society. In the proposed study, gender is viewed as a category which is mediated through other social structures, namely class/caste, generation, and ethnicity (intersectionality).

A cross-case comparison adopting a mixed-methods framework will serve to highlight outcomes of NTAE employment for different groups of women (in terms of age, class, caste, and ethnicity) and compare them with alternative income-generating opportunities on individual and aggregate levels. Four study sites on three continents with different, but highly dynamic trajectories of export-based

agriculture were selected from the UN priority category of least developed, landlocked countries: Bolivia, Lao PDR, Nepal, and Rwanda.

The findings will feed into debates on the transformative power of economic change induced by globalisation, and particularly of the current shifts in rural employment and their effects on multiple forms of disparities which have been seen as hindering development. Responding to a demand of a number of countries which have found themselves locked in low-value-adding production, this research will contribute to policy frameworks which not only aim at creating jobs but also at rewards. By generating original data, the study aims at identifying social and political conditions which encourage asset-building and thus help transfer high-value crops into high-value jobs for rural workers. Transdisciplinary in nature, this project will provide evidence-based knowledge for governance – knowledge that can inform negotiations of gender equality in the context of agricultural transition and rural employment, opening up pathways to sustainable development in rural areas.

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