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Farmer field schools in southeastern Madagascar: Best practices for gender-sensitivity

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Abstract

The Farmer Field School (FFS) approach is used by many development projects in low- and middle-income countries to promote agricultural technologies among smallholder farmers. Typically, this involves a fixed group of members meeting regularly to discuss farming challenges, receive practical trainings, and practice new techniques on a joint plot. Within a project targeting food and nutrition security in southeastern Madagascar, three NGOs have implemented individual variations of the FFS approach in three different districts, each targeting women in reproductive age (15 – 49 years). Because women’s involvement in agriculture is often marginalised in southeastern Madagascar, this study aims to identify best practices for including women in FFS. To describe the three FFS approaches and their respective benefits and disbenefits from the women farmers’ perspective, we interviewed 60 women FFS members, three NGO representatives, and three local agronomists in charge of supervising the FFS groups. We also observed 11 FFS sessions and held 20 focus group discussions with women FFS members. Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed through thematic coding. We found that participation in FFS is often challenged by women’s high workload of household chores and the perceived difficulty of the techniques. Adoption of the promoted practices can be limited, for example, by their physical difficulty (e.g., digging holes), women’s low decision-making power in their family’s agriculture, single women’s lack of access to manure, and mental barriers that consider specific activities as ‘men’s duties’. However, we also identified multiple best practices for increasing the gender-inclusiveness of FFS. This includes timing FFS sessions with women’s daily chores by holding sessions early in the morning for example, avoiding long walks by setting up vegetable gardens near houses, combining agriculture-focused FFS activities with social and non-farming activities, such as cooking demonstrations, focusing on agricultural practices that require little physical effort. Our findings provide recommendations for increasing the gender-sensitivity of FFS in southeastern Madagascar. These best practices can help development stakeholders to enhance the involvement of women farmers in agricultural training activities, to improve their productivity and to strengthen their livelihoods.

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