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Bearing the brunt: Gendered impacts of heat stress on agri-food systems

POOJA KORI, RANJITHA PUSKUR

International Rice Research Institute, Evidence module, CGIAR GENDER Platform, India

Abstract

Extreme heat caused by climate change and human environmental exploitation has become one of the deadliest and costliest threats to global agri-food systems. Men and women have specific roles and responsibilities within agri-food systems, yet structural inequalities limit women's control and access to resources, information, and extension services. These inequalities shape the ways in which men and women experience, respond to, and are affected by heat stress. Despite this, a significant evidence gap exists in understanding the nuanced gendered impacts of extreme heat on women in agriculture. Adopting a gender and intersectional lens, this paper argues that gender-blind interventions fail to address the gendered impact of heat stress and further exacerbate gender inequalities in agri-food systems. Evidence suggests that women in agriculture, especially in regions like Asia and the Pacific, face significant challenges caused by extreme heat and societal norms. They endure long hours under the scorching sun without proper access to shade, cooling places, or adequate breaks for rest and hydration. These conditions, coupled with limited access to proper sanitation facilities and appropriate workwear, pose serious health risks, particularly for pregnant and elderly women. Additionally, women bear the burden of additional responsibilities such as caring for family members, ensuring food security, and managing the effects of reduced crop yields and food safety concerns caused by high temperatures.

The paper argues that these challenges are more pronounced among marginalised communities, particularly female-headed households, subsistence farmers, and wage labourers. The paper also explores the resilience and mitigation strategies employed by women farmers. Prioritising women's health and well-being is crucial to building resilient and sustainable agri-food systems. Comprehensive interventions targeting women's health, workplace environments, and social norms can aid in coping with higher temperatures. This paper argues for broadening of climate change adaptation discourse by highlighting gender inequalities in heat stress experiences and advocating for comprehensive approaches that prioritise building resilience in vulnerable populations and promoting gender equity in climate action.

Keywords: Agri-food systems, climate change, gender, gender-responsive adaptation strategies, heat stress