

## **Empowering women in agriculture is important to the world:**

### **Ingrid Fischer**

*Supporting female smallholder farmers can increase GDP, decrease food insecurity*

BY: FERTILIZER CANADA

On March 8, 2018, Fertilizer Canada is celebrating International Women's Day (IWD) and the ways the industry is supporting the rise of female influence in the agriculture sector.

Recently, Fertilizer Canada and the Co-operative Development Foundation of Canada (CDF Canada), made a joint commitment to increasing food security using climate smart methods for smallholder farmers in developing countries, with a focus on reducing barriers for women. Our association is pleased to see a commitment to supporting gender equality reflected in the Canadian federal budget and looks forward to seeing an increase in support for women in our sector through our efforts and the efforts of other organizations.



Ingrid Fischer, Director, Business Development with the CDF Canada, works closely on issues of gender equality and female development. Below are her thoughts on the importance of supporting women in agriculture in developing countries, and also here in Canada.

***Q: Tell us about your career in the agri-food sector and how you came to be Director of Business Development with CDF Canada.***

**A:** I grew up on a family farm in northern British Columbia, so I have always been acutely aware of where our food comes from and the effort that goes in to producing it: the joys and sometimes heart break of producing food.

Early in my career at the edge of the agriculture industry as a credit union manager, I did a volunteer stint overseas with what is now CDF Canada. This got me hooked on international development.

Working overseas I saw first-hand the tremendous impact that could be made in food productivity, nutrition, education and general household wellbeing by having investments in agriculture. I also saw that relatively small investments in capacity building and agriculture can have huge impact at the household level.

When you are engaged in international development one of the things you learn very quickly is that governments, multilateral and other organizations – including businesses – are reluctant to engage in capacity building. After 18 years overseas working first hand in the development I

decided to come back to Canada as a business director, where my main role is to raise funds to be able to do capacity building because that is where I see the sustainable impact is.

**Q: How is CDF Canada involved in supporting the rise of women in agriculture, specifically female smallholder farmers in developing countries?**

**A:** According the FAO, on average 50 per cent of women in Africa, 30 per cent in Asia and 20 per cent in Latin America are engaged in agriculture. But what we see when we are on the ground is that women don't benefit proportionately for the labour that they put in.

There are a lot of reasons for that, but a lot of it has to do with the barriers they face. Women face all kinds of barriers: legal barriers, cultural barriers and practical challenges such as lack of access to land or time constraints. They can lose their land because the land ownership is tied to their marriage and if the marriage fails, they lose access.

CDF Canada's focus has always been very much keeping in mind that if 50 per cent of the agriculture force is not getting all of the information, support and capacity building they could, obviously the industry is not as productive as it could be. Underlying all the work that we do is gender equality and finding ways to break down all of those barriers.

We look at intergenerational gender sensitivity training to address barriers that arise from traditional gender roles and how we address some of those barriers.

There are really practical things that we can do, things like putting demonstration plots on women's land instead of men's land so it's accessible to women. It's providing training programs that happen at times that women can access them. Don't do them at supper hour, do it at a time when the children are in school and women have time to participate. Women are often challenged in developing countries because they are generally less well educated than their male counterparts. We need to start with basic things like literacy and numeracy training so that when they attend a training course and it's theoretical they can actually understand or read the material.

Lastly, looking at leadership training, we work through co-operatives which are excellent, safe places for women to test out leadership skills. We promote women to leadership positions within co-operatives, from that platform they learn skills that help them take leadership positions outside of the co-operative to be able to advocate on behalf of women and change the products and services that are offered to women by increasing their voice.

**Q: Small farms produce 80 per cent of food in developing countries, employ 62 per cent of their populations and generate 27 per cent of GDP. Since the majority of these small farms are managed by women, the importance of addressing barriers that limit success are obvious. What are some of the barriers facing female smallholders today?**



FERTILIZER CANADA

FERTILISANTS CANADA

**A:** The key is access to land, control and retention of land resources; agriculture is land based. If you cannot have land or know that you can retain the land then your likelihood of improving the land is less.

A lot of cultural traditions don't provide women with equal access to resources or restricts their movement.

For example if you want to use a rototiller but you aren't allowed because operating equipment is culturally inappropriate, it's a barrier that limits the amount of land you can cultivate. It's the gender inequality that creates the issues of lack of access to land, lack of resources and lack of education that allows them to access training. Beyond that are the roles that women do play in the field. If it's a family unit, the women are often doing the really labour intensive jobs such as weeding, and then they aren't allowed to market the product. They put in the labour but when the crop is marketed it is handled by men and sometimes the money doesn't flow back to the women.

**Q: *How are these barriers being addressed, by the CDF or other partners?***

**A:** One way is to conduct gender training; the other is when we are doing development work we make sure, as much as possible, that we are including as many women as men – if not more women – in the opportunities that are made available. If we are setting up demonstration plots we want to make sure they are close to where the women are.

We are trying to bring education and training as close to the ground as we can, it's getting women leaders to do the training. We train a few lead farmers who then train other farmers and we try to get as many women lead farmers as possible in to those situations.

It's important to make sure that women are in co-op leadership positions so that they are involved in the decision making about how assets are distributed. Whether it is about whose production gets warehoused and in the warehouse first or how crops are sold. We need to make sure that women are included in those decisions.

Issues around literacy and numeracy are seen as a reason not to put women in leadership positions, and it's important to fill that gap.

**Q: *What outcomes can be expected as women in agriculture – in both developing and developed countries – become more empowered?***

**A:** In developing countries it has been estimated that if women are more empowered or have more access, we could see a two to four per cent increase in GDP in those countries, reduction of food insecurity, and therefore hunger.

Women look at things differently, different decisions are made around how food is distributed, how it's used and resources are accessed.



FERTILIZER CANADA

FERTILISANTS CANADA

The fundamental benefit of empowering women is reduced food insecurity and therefore competition for land, which are major drivers in conflict. If we look at the unprecedented number of refugees we have around the world today, at the root of that is competition for land and food insecurity, even though it gets cloaked in other things. The big issue around the benefit around empowering women is reduced conflict.

**Q: *With this conversation in mind, we'd like to ask you the same question we have been asking throughout our International Women's Day campaign: What does it mean to you to be a woman in agri-food today?***

**A:** To me, being involved in agri-food means that I'm part of a very practical solution, not the whole solution, but one solution to mitigate the social instability around the world.

I think it is important that we continue on this vein of ensuring that women have access to be able to farm and be involved in agri-food, because it is important to not only the women directly involved – it's important to the world.

-30-

***Fertilizer Canada*** represents manufacturers, wholesale and retail distributors of nitrogen, phosphate, potash and sulphur fertilizers. The fertilizer industry plays an essential role in Canada's economy, contributing over \$12 billion annually and 12,000 jobs. The association is committed to supporting the fertilizer industry with innovative research and programming while advocating sustainability, stewardship, safety and security through standards and Codes of Practice. Please visit ***fertilizercanada.ca***.