

## IMPROVING AFRICA'S FOOD-SECURITY, ONE WOMAN AT A TIME

Food-security expert Jemimah Njuki explains why women are poised to take a leading role in Africa's agriculture industry



POSTED BY NIKI WILSON ON MARCH 8, 2018

[Ask Jemimah Njuki](#) how to solve some of the biggest issues in African food security, and she'll give you one word: women.

"Women carry much of the production burden," says Njuki, a senior program specialist at IDRC who oversees a portfolio of projects on food security, gender equality and the empowerment of women in agriculture. "Yet they face major hurdles in achieving meaningful roles in leadership and along the food-production chain. We need to change the way we think about the whole global food system, so that women become more central to it and benefit equally."

Here, Njuki makes a case for more woman-led research and discusses innovative solutions to the big issues of labour burden and harmful gender norms.

### **On the importance of women being involved in food-security research**

Here's what can happen when women aren't involved in decisions about what food-security problems receive research support. It could be easy, for instance, to favour crops that make a lot of money from foreign trade. This is the case in Malawi,

Jemimah Njuki, a food-security expert with IDRC, believes that greater involvement for African women in food-security and agriculture research can benefit the whole continent.

where they grow a lot of tobacco and the majority of profits go to men. Women, however, have much more control over a crop such as beans, which is a key crop for local markets, domestic food and nutrition security. Women researchers are more likely to understand this nuance because it's part of their lived experience. Knowing this, they can place more attention on crops that empower women and increase their income.

### **On alleviating the burden of unpaid work**

Women in sub-Saharan Africa spend about 40 billion hours a year collecting firewood to cook food. This is time they could use for gainful employment, education, leisure, which is important for health, or to advance themselves in whatever way they want. A lot of this unpaid work leaves women without those choices.

One of the projects IDRC funded to alleviate some of that burden is [the development of pre-cooked beans](#). Women use a lot of firewood and water to cook beans — it takes about three hours to put them on the table. These new beans are made in a

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factory and are almost ready to eat. They are available as a dried good, and women can put them on the table in 10 to 15 minutes.

In addition to saving time, women can also now sell the beans to the factory. It took some work to create this market. Women needed access to new varieties of beans, and to credit so that they could purchase the seed. They had to organize themselves to produce enough to supply the market. We partnered with the [Community Enterprises Development Organisation](#) in Uganda, which worked with 25,000 farmers, 52 per cent of whom were women, to produce enough beans to supply to the factory. These women have increased their income by more than 30 per cent.

### On changing gender norms

In many countries and cultures there are entrenched gender norms around how food is allocated and shared. In some cultures, women eat last, or are not allowed to eat certain foods.

Gender norms also affect the roles women take on in food production and allocation, and can leave them at a disadvan-

age. For example, in Malawi and Zambia, there is a very clear division of roles in the fisheries sector. Men go out to fish, and women buy the fish from them to process and trade. But this creates a power imbalance; there have been cases of men wanting to be paid in sex.

To address that imbalance issue with the men, IDRC worked with a company that uses drama techniques to change norms and behaviour. As a result, we've seen the attitudes of men changing, and the cost of purchasing came down.

Men are seeing that when they work together with women as equals — when women participate in making decisions — their households improve and they make better investments in nutrition and education.

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### READING AS THINKING

**Before reading the entire article:**

1. Observe the pictures, read the captions and answer the questions below.

<p>What do you see in the pictures? (Who? What? What is happening?)</p>	
<p>What do the pictures remind you of?</p>	
<p>How do you think the pictures relate to the article?</p>	

**After reading the entire article:**

2. A) What are some barriers in African food security that women face to achieve meaningful roles in leadership and along the food-production chain?

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- B) How are these barriers being addressed

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3. How would women researchers improve food-security research?

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4. In sub-Saharan Africa, women spend a lot of time collecting firewood (40 billion hours). Think of a chore you do regularly. Calculate the amount of time per year that you spend doing this chore. Think about how you could be more efficient.

A) What would you do differently?

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B) How would this change affect your life?

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5. Think of a time where you experienced a power imbalance. Explain what happened and how you felt.

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6. What is the importance of the development of pre-cooked beans in alleviating the burden of unpaid work?

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7. What is something that you learned from the article that you found surprising? Explain your answer.

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### Think-Pair-Share

#### 8. *Think*

Fill in the following table about your daily activities.

Time allotted	ACTIVITY (WHAT? WHO? WHERE?)

#### 9. *Pair*

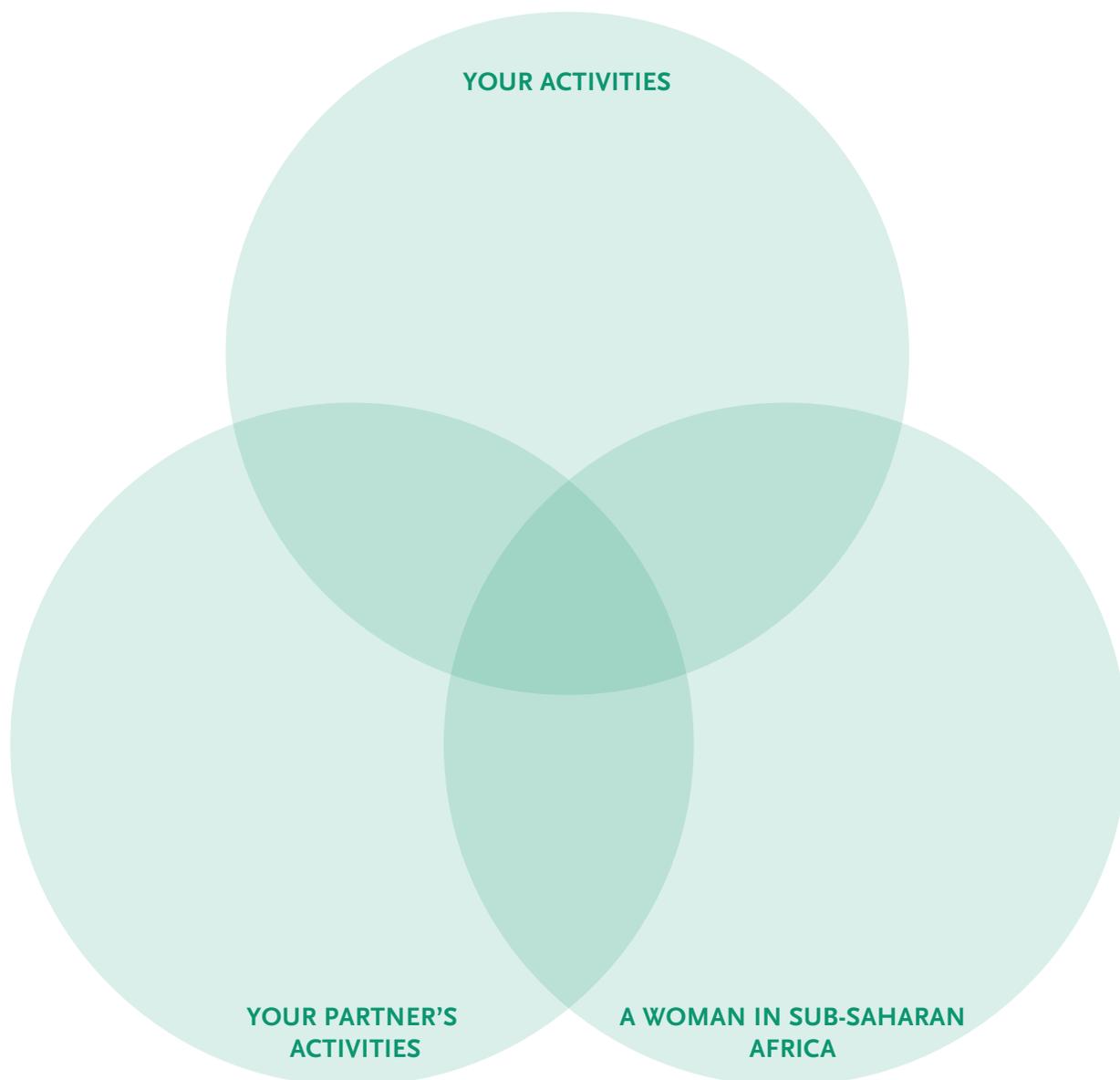
With a partner, research what a day in the life of a woman in sub-Saharan Africa might look like. Estimate the amount of time required to do these activities.

Time allotted	ACTIVITY (WHAT? WHO? WHERE?)

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10. Use the Venn diagram below to compare your daily activities with those of a woman in sub-Saharan Africa.



11. *Share*  
Present your Venn diagram to the class.

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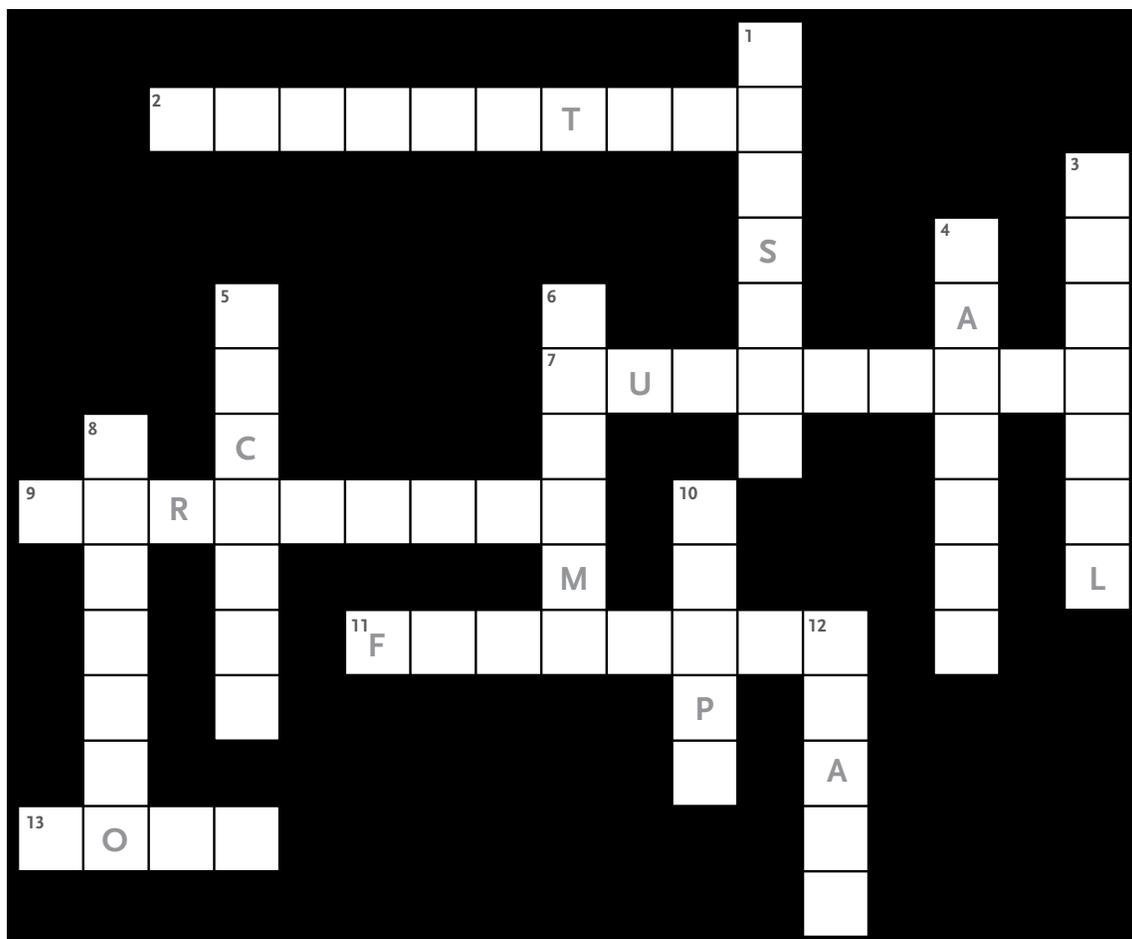
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### ONLINE

1. Using [Google Maps](#), locate Homabay, Kenya, and explore the town by using Street View and the satellite and map modes. Using the quick facts section and other research tools, find the following:
  - a. The population
  - b. The neighbouring towns
  - c. Major bodies of water
  - d. The distance to the capital, Nairobi
2. [Learn more](#) about empowering African women through agriculture.
3. Watch this [video](#) to learn about street-food vending, a women-dominated industry in Accra, Ghana.
4. What's the importance of land rights for women? Find out [here](#).
5. Watch [Jemimah Njuki's TEDx Talk](#) about agricultural development in Africa.
6. Read this [article](#) about pre-cooked beans to learn more about their importance.

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### CROSSWORD:

#### Across

2. Creative
7. Nourishment
9. Dossier
11. Women in sub-Saharan Africa spend about 40 billion hours a year collecting this
13. When the attitudes of men changed regarding norms and behaviour, the cost of purchasing came \_\_\_\_\_

#### Down

1. Recreation
3. Profitable
4. The capital of Kenya
5. Where the new pre-cooked beans are made
6. Earnings
8. In Malawi, they grow a lot of this and the profits tend to go to the men
10. Beans, wheat, corn, etc.
12. IDRC worked with a company that uses this technique to address the imbalance issue in food production and allocation