

PROCEEDINGS OF INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

VOL. 1, NO. 2, 2007



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: BRIDGING THE GAPS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture is a field that cannot be overlooked if any nation is to attain a global sustainable development. The efforts of women in agricultural development need critical evaluation. This paper examined the roles of women in sustainable agricultural development. The extent to which women participate in agriculture was examined. Infact, while the paper has positioned itself to that of being in total agreement that women are being marginalized in the area of global development despite their efforts in agricultural development, it suggested for a total re-strategising of womenfolk through extension advices offered by extension training programs.

INTRODUCTION

The role of women in agricultural development has been an issue for quite a while. In order for women in agricultural programs to promulgate a more holistic and sustainable agriculture, it is crucial that a woman's invaluable labour, skills and knowledge are recognized and valued. According to Hammons (1994), the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that in the mid 1980s, 54 per cent of those economically active in agriculture were women and about 98 per cent of the rural women classified as economically active were engaged in agriculture. The author further reported that women farmers contributed substantially to both commercial and subsistence agriculture, including livestock production and fishing, as casual labourers and unpaid family workers. Hence, the success of any nation's agriculture depends to a large extent on women.

Women as a Bridge towards Attaining Sustainable Agriculture

It has been established that women constitute the major proportion of the world population (USDA, 2000) and that women all over the world play a very important role in agriculture. They also contribute immensely to household income and chores (Kumar, 1991). In Sub-Saharan Africa, women are substantial contributors to all fields of work with their efforts being out of proportion with their counterparts in other parts of the world. Much of women's work is unpaid, whether in agricultural production, domestic work related to social production, or informal sector activities. However, since the bulk of women's work falls within the zone of poor visibility or invisibility, it is difficult to easily define what their work is and the length of time they spend working. A number of factors may be responsible for this: either because the nature of work performed by women is not assigned any economic values at all or is less valued than work performed by men. Women's work is greatly undervalued in economic terms (UNDP, 1995). It has also been found out that women (on a per capita basis) allocate more labour and time to both household maintenance and agriculture; while men work slightly less in agriculture and much less in non-agricultural activities. Lack of attention to women's needs and potential in agriculture may result in a substantial amount of foregone economic growth. It is worth restating that women generally play crucial roles in economic development. International Labour Organisation (ILO) statistics also indicated that about 33 per cent of the world's paid labour force is composed of women (Leslie *et al.*, 1988). In agriculture, at least 40 per cent of the total work force is composed of women. They are estimated to produce about 40 per cent of all food in Latin America and approximately 80 per cent in Africa (Joeke *et al.*, 1988). Gender disparity has been perceived in different ways but overall, it affects human behaviour in a given society. According to Campbell (1998), gender discrimination occurs when gender specification is used to disfavour gender groups, or when gender-neutral criteria are used to effect allocations which disproportionately disadvantage a gender group and such disfavour or disadvantage is inexplicable in terms of prejudice or bigoted disvaluing of the gender in question. Clearly, discriminatory treatment can apply to any gender group; male or female. Campbell (1998), however, noted that gender discriminations are overwhelmingly against women, and that men, given their dominant role in the society, have exploited this imbalance to the prejudice of women. The author went further to state that gender inequalities breach women's fundamental human rights and are costly to the nations that ignore them. Since women constitute a proportion of any nation's population, communities that deny their people equal opportunities to fulfill their economic and creative potential therefore, place impossible constraints on their prospects of eradicating poverty (UNDP 1996 and 1997).

Women and Food Production

The sustainable production of food is the first pillar of food security. Women account for 70-85 per cent of household food production in sub-Saharan Africa, 65 per cent in Asia and 45 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean (Hammons 1994). They achieve this despite unequal access to land, to inputs such as improved seeds and fertilizers and to information. Given equal access to resources and human capital, women farmers can achieve yields at par or even higher than those of men (IFPRI, 1994). Almost all crop produce require some form of processing after harvest. This may be in order to extend shelf-life, value addition or to facilitate usage. Rural-based processing offers opportunities in terms of employment, adds value to products, reduces waste due to spoilage and encourages development of technical and marketing skills in villages. Increased processing of agricultural produce could therefore result in substantial benefits for a nation's economy. Women are essentially responsible for 60-80 per cent of agricultural produce, crop processing and unpaid farm labour on their husbands' farms (Adekanye, 1988). We also need to learn from, and build on, women's knowledge in traditional alternative farming with the tools and technology that sustainable agriculture farmers have utilized. This learning, innovating and building is an integral aspect in promoting gender-sensitive, appropriate and sustainable forms of agriculture (FAO, 1996). In South-western Kenya, for instance, at a given household income level, women-controlled income shares had a positive and significant effect on household calorie consumption, while off-farm income shares generally controlled by men, had a significant, but negative effect (Kennedy, 1991). One explanation offered is that women tend to be mainly responsible for the provision of food in the household while men have other responsibilities. In Rwanda, a similar household pattern emerged with females deriving most of their income from subsistence income. Total female incomes were lower than total male incomes and men had more than ten times as much of farm earnings as women, but there were no female-headed households with severely malnourished children and a less than proportionate number was found to be calorie-deficient (von Braun and Wiegand, 1991). Women's share of household cash income in Cote-d'Ivoire has a positive and significant effect on the budget share for food (Haddad and Hodinott, 1994). Thomas (1990, 1996), also finds that the probability of child survival is nearly 20 times greater when unearned women rather than men earned income. In general, women's income share seems to be associated with household expenditure patterns that are more "child-oriented", and to be associated with improved outcomes such as health and education of children. Women also tend to act as shock absorbers for the rest of the household by working longer hours or by disinvesting in their nutrition status (Herz, 1989; Saito *et al.*, 1992). It has further been estimated that in some countries like Bolivia, Mexico and in Northeast Brazil, women's actual participation in agriculture is greater than 50 per cent. Ignoring women's roles can thus lead to reduced labour inputs, increased learning time for new production techniques and loss of producer feedback, all of which reduce project success (Carloni, 1987). The underestimation of women's work is partly due to the fairly common practice of classifying the majority of rural women as housewives for census purposes, regardless of the economic activities in which they engage in. Even women tend to label themselves as housewives (Inter-American Development Bank, 1987). However, if women had the same capital endowments and had used the same level of factor inputs as men, the value of their output would have increased by more than 20 per cent. Capturing this productivity potential among women farmers and livestock managers by improving the environment in which they produce could add significantly to overall agricultural productivity in many regions. It could also improve the viability of countless agricultural projects' investments (Bamberger *et al.*, 1994). A project was set up in the Cameroon to increase per hectare yield of sorghum and groundnuts by establishing and institutionalizing a self-sustaining regional system for production and distribution (Narayan, 1994). Improved seeds were used and this resulted in reducing food scarcities and seed importation. It also led to improved nutrition and increase in rural incomes. Improved sorghum and groundnut seeds were to be tested and multiplied at three centres and distributed to cooperating farmers who would produce larger amounts for sale. Extension agents and a leaflet campaign would disseminate packages. Forty couples per year were to be trained as model farmers in a young farmer-training centre (Narayan, 1994). The project paper, however, gave little attention to gender division of cropping enterprises. The training centre had a slot for a home economist to work with women, but there was no indication of what agricultural training was intended for women. However, a special evaluation study was able to point out that women's small domain included responsibility for the groundnut crop. Although project resources do not indicate how responsibilities were allocated by gender, the extension system was mostly male-dominated (Cloud, 1987). In essence, women's participation emerged as a strong factor in contributing to project success (Narayan, 1994).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Women do not get appropriate share of agricultural extension advice and other services despite their prominent role in agriculture. The following recommendations are hereby suggested for a more sustainable agriculture. *One potential remedy is to increase the number of women trained as agricultural extension agents. *A second is to give agricultural training to women working as community development or home economics officers. *A third strategy is for extension agents, whether men or women, to meet with farmers in groups. This practice would reduce or remove the cultural constraints against interaction between individual male extension agents and female farmers and would enable the women in the groups to share information among themselves. * Agricultural research institutions also need to make use of women's indigenous knowledge of family systems, which has been largely untapped.

CONCLUSION

The female role is at least a double one. Women have the primary charge for reproduction and the care of their offspring. At the same time, in most of the developing world, and increasingly in the developed world, women play a major role in the production of goods and services. Their role in agriculture has also been established as seen in this paper. Any nation that therefore, wants to attain a sustainable development must not under rate women. It therefore, suffices to say that women should be well compensated for their involvement in global development. This should start from the smallest unit of the world, that is, the individual families through the regions of government up to the highest governing body of any nation.

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