The feminisation of agriculture

Editorial

The majority of the world's agricultural producers are women. They produce over 50% of the food that is grown worldwide – more in most developing countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women produce around 80 percent of food, both for household consumption and for sale. Women are usually responsible for food processing and also make a major contribution to food storage, transportation and marketing – although they seldom control the revenue generated. In almost all societies, rural women tend to work longer hours than men. Although the gender distribution of work and responsibilities varies with country, culture and situation, women are usually responsible for at least a large share of food production, preparation and processing, as well as the more fundamental roles of nurturing and caring for children and the elderly.

Despite these recognised facts and a considerable amount of development rhetoric about gender issues, women are still restricted in their role as farmers by unequal rights and unequal access to and control over resources, especially land. In India, Nepal and Thailand, for example, fewer than 10 percent of women farmers own land. In Kenya, although 98% of women work full-time in the agrarian sector, only 5% have land ownership titles (Schüssler p.28). Equal rights are internationally agreed upon in a number of instruments (see box), however this is slow to translate into practice.

In addition, women still carry out their work without much help from agricultural support mechanisms such as extension agencies, input suppliers and credit institutions. Women farmers receive less than 5% of extension services worldwide. The priorities of the woman farmer are rarely reflected in agricultural research or national policies, and when they are, this is often not translated into practice in agricultural development planning. Women, as producers, still remain largely invisible and unsupported. Mainstream investments and development interventions tend to focus elsewhere – and as a result, they are often ineffective.

So far, rural women have shouldered their burdens and often manage to cope. Modern times, however, have added to their load. In many parts of the world today there is an increasing trend towards what has been termed the 'feminisation of agriculture'. Men are becoming increasingly absent from farms and rural areas. In the face of economic change, men are migrating from rural areas to towns and cities, in their own countries or abroad, in search of paid employment. In addition, war, sickness and death from HIV/AIDS take a high toll on rural male populations. Women are therefore taking more and more responsibility for agricultural production, and there has been a great increase in the proportion of households headed by women.

Single: de facto or de jure?

A woman (or man) can be "single" in two different ways: de jure or de facto. If she is not married, or a widow, she is in fact and in the legal sense single – she is single de jure.

If she is married and her husband is alive, but for one reason or another is not living with her, she is considered single de facto. That is, she is not single in a legal sense but in practice.

It is an important distinction, as a woman's status and rights are often strongly dependent on her marital status. In particular, a woman's access and rights to productive resources, as well as the income from what she produces, is often strongly dependent on her civil status.

Ethiopian farmer and her ensete crop. Photo: Flemming Nielsen

One-third of all rural sub-Saharan African households are now women-headed. Women heads of household are often younger and less educated than their male counterparts, and have less land, less capital and less labour available to them. The land and other resources that they do use and have access to are usually controlled by the owner (often their husband) who also has the decision making power and retains it even if absent from the farm.

What can be done to support women farmers? The contributions of authors to this issue of LEISA cover a wide range of issues addressing the many facets of women's role in agriculture.

Different priorities, strengths, and needs

Women farmers often have different priorities to their male counterparts, and this can, in many cases, be related to their more direct role in feeding the family. Pionetti (p. 22) describes the stark contrast in the depiction of agricultural practices by women and men farmers in India. Men eagerly speak of their cash crops and commercialised agriculture, whereas women farmers speak about the food crops they grow, and value crop diversity. Chiwona-Karltun *et al* (p.14) describe how men are more interested in sweet cultivars of cassava, because they have a well-established market, whereas women prefer bitter cultivars for food security reasons, even though it takes more work to process.

In China, as in many other cultures, there is a traditional expectation that 'men control the outside world, and women the inner world of the home'(Song and Jiggins p.6). Such traditional perspectives can contribute to the lop-sidedness of "gender blind" information, collected by outsiders with the intention of helping a community. It is usually the men who provide information to outsiders, as such communication belongs in the "outside world". This means that women's priorities are often overlooked, unless they are specifically taken into account.

With the "feminisation" process, women must expand their world to include "outer world" aspects of agriculture and community responsibilities. Not taking women into account can mean ignoring not only the particular needs of women as opposed to men, but whole households headed by women who now have to take on double the responsibility.

The social effects of a changing economy

Economic change, driven by external forces, can unbalance gender relations and leave women with limited options. Lapoutre (p. 24) describes a process of community upheaval where rapid appraisal methods, which mainly focus on tangible information, were simply not sufficient to understand the processes of social change. By digging deeper and understanding the social dynamics of the situation, members of the community were able to relate the negative spiral of changing economic and social circumstances to changing cultural habits and preferences. Based on this understanding, it may be possible to rebuild a healthy community with space for women to develop, economically and socially.

Understanding the social aspects of economic change can also help to assess the merits of other options. Eisses and Chaikam (p. 26) describe the social benefits obtained by members of the Don Jieng Organic Farmers Group, who, after changing to organic agriculture, did not have time to work in the city, due to the increased labour requirements of organic production. Moreover, they no longer needed to work in the city to pay for agricultural inputs. The economic benefits of farming organically were not very different to the economic benefits of farming with inputs, but the social benefits of having the men in the village meant that membership of the organic farmer's group doubled within a year.

Access to and control of resources

Access to and control of resources is a power issue. In most developing countries, women's access to land and other resources is constrained as a result of cultural, traditional and sociological factors. This can also extend to agrarian reform. Schüssler (p.28) highlights the need to pay special attention to gender perspectives in all forms of land redistribution, entitlement programs and accompanying measures. This means not only making sure that women do not face active discrimination such as (in points-based land distribution schemes) awarding men higher points, but also compensating for indirect discrimination - such as awarding points for a higher education, in areas where women are discriminated against in the education system. Without a title to land, women have less control over their production and are often also denied membership of co-operatives and other rural organisations, and the accompanying benefits. Women have more and more responsibilities in the agricultural sector - they must also be allowed the power to effectively meet these responsibilities!

Mainstreaming gender considerations

Development organisations need to take gender considerations into account. Women have different needs and priorities, which are at least as important for food security as those of the men. "Gender mainstreaming" means that all activities conducted by a particular organisation must take into account different gender needs, and target them explicitly. De las Mercedes Rocha *et al* (p.18) and van Walsum (p.10) describe the importance of including both women and men in gender sensitisation - and how to bring it back into your own organisation.

Gender is the term for the socially and culturally defined roles for each of the sexes. Although women are women everywhere on earth and men are men, what is considered a "normal activity" for each of the sexes varies from place to place and from culture to culture. In one place it is normal for women to do most of the land preparation, whereas in another, it may be done exclusively by men. In one place it can be normal for women to do the fishing, whereas in another, fishing is reserved for men. The variation in these roles suggests that the different activities of women and men in practice have less to do with their biological sex, than with the social and cultural context in which they live. We talk about gender rather than sex because while a person's sex does not change, gender roles are socially determined and can evolve together with society.

Women's rights in international treaties – some examples

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights http
- World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development 1979
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- Agenda 21 adopted at the Rio Summit 1992
- Vienna Declaration and Program of Action 1993
- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995
- Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Program of Action of the World Summit for Social Development 1995
- Habitat Agenda adopted in June 1996 by the World Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II)
- Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/13 concerning "Women's equal ownership of, access to and control over land and the equal rights to own property and to adequate housing".

See www.ileia.org for links to many of these agreements on internet.

Simple technology to lighten the work

Women tend to work longer hours than men, and yet their needs and priorities are rarely considered in the research and development of agricultural technology. Simple labour-saving technologies can help women considerably in daily tasks such as food processing and storage, as well as food production and work related to water, sanitation, fuel and food preparation. Ross and Ross (p. 9) provide examples of several simple tools that can help relieve women's drudgery, such as wheeled hoes and broadforks. By taking women's needs into account in technology development, such simple implements can greatly increase women's quality of life - and the time available to do other work.

Never underestimate what women can do!

Where women are given space and opportunities, they can become tremendously valuable leaders in restoring community cohesion. Women Animal Health workers in India, for example (Ghotge and Ramdas, p. 16) apart from their role as 'healers', have also begun to take on leadership roles within the village women's groups and the community. They have been helping to resolve conflicts within families and to mobilise others in the village to address gender issues. These women feel that by acquiring specific skills through training, they have gained status in the family as well as in society. They work closely and in harmony with the village healers, who are usually men.

Women's groups involved in participatory technology development (Van Walsum, p.10 and Lemunyete p.20) have developed many successful technologies and these groups have even, in some cases, formed their own teams to train other groups and their families in the technologies developed.

The solution to the problems posed by the feminisation of agriculture is not simply a matter of recognising the value of women in a static sense. Rural communities are changing, and the role of women must be seen in the context of their role in community development. One fact becomes very clear, on reading the contributions of authors to this issue of LEISA: Women are the primary supports of the community. Food security, as well as the social health of the community, depends on including them in the development process.

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References
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- The Hunger Project, 1999. **The African Woman Food Farmer Initiative Reference Guide for Leaders**. http://64.224.173.9/prize/99/prospectus.html