

Seminar

Opportunities for women's empowerment through value addition in agri-food chains



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Setting the scene

On 14 November 2012, a mini-seminar was held on opportunities for women's empowerment through value addition in agri-food chains. The seminar was organized by the Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) and Gender Studies, both part of Wageningen UR as integral part of the international CDI course 'Market access for Sustainable Development'. Besides 35 mid-career professionals from the international course, the seminar brought together about 30 representatives from research institutes, government, NGOs and consultancy.

Opening address



Mr. Houterman, director of Nuffic, held the opening address of the seminar. He stated that attention for women in agriculture seems to be growing, and emphasized that Nuffic's NICHE programs pay attention to how gender issues can be integrated in higher education institutes. To Mr. Houterman, this is a challenging task, given that gender policies are not always aligned to donor policy programs and practices.

Subsequently, Mr Houterman stressed three important dimensions of integrating gender in order to change performance of institutions.

First, gender is a parameter of quality. A more diverse management team performs better, which calls for a sensible human resource development policy. Second, educational institutes need to pay attention to the accessibility of education for women at different levels. Third, the content of the curriculum is very important. In addition, he stressed that insights in the roles and responsibilities of men and women in agri-food chains are much needed.

"We assume gender issues are always addressed. However, it doesn't work out if you pay attention to gender because 'you have to'. Putting these issues into practice is sometimes difficult." Joep Houterman, Director of Nuffic.

Mr. Houterman concluded by stating that everybody has good intentions, but they evaporate easily. Attention for gender is always perceived as extra step. He stated that we should keep in mind that including gender at all levels increases the quality of projects and contributes to good education, economic growth and equity.

Women's added value in agriculture

The opening address was followed by a keynote speech given by Prof. Dr. Carolyn Sachs, Chair of Gender Studies, Pennsylvania State University (US).

Dr. Sachs started with highlighting the important role that women play in agricultural production, and hence in feeding the world. Female farmers are often undercapitalized, produce under inefficient conditions, and are often invisible in agricultural value chains, as Dr. Sachs illustrated by using a variety of research experiences from Peru, Sri Lanka and the US.

In line with Mr. Houterman's address, Dr. Sachs stated that, for a long time, gender was not more than an add-on in agricultural extension and policies. In this regard, the focus had been on focusing on fewer, but more capitalized farmers.



It now seems that times have changed, due to different factors, such as innovation, farmer entrepreneurship,



and the rise of specialized markets. As a result, there seems to be more appreciation for farmers' diversity, knowledge and innovation, farmer-led development, farmers organizations, and gender mainstreaming in agricultural value chains.

"Key issues for gender, food and agriculture are who controls the food system, who grows, processes and sells food, who eats what, and the connection with environmental impacts of the food system." Prof. Dr. Carolyn Sachs, Pennsylvania State University.

Dr. Sachs continued with stating that female farmers form an opportunity and great potential for more diversified farming systems, value-added production and commitment to the environment, and they are more likely to be engaged in sustainable agriculture and organic/certified production. Female farmers become entrepreneurs in value-added production in different ways, from processing farm products, to organic and sustainable production, to direct selling, agri-tourism and on-farm education. She illustrated these statements with ample examples from the US and other countries.

Nevertheless, there is a gender divide in scaling up, and female farmers often face several barriers for scaling-up their production and adding value in the agri-food chain. Scaling-up interventions are often geared towards men, and the majority of female farmers has limited access to land, financial resources and credit, knowledge and training, and certification processes.

To Dr. Sachs, networking is key for integrating women more optimally in agri-food chains. For all farmers, but for women particularly, it is essential to make connections between local and non-local actors in the community and the wider chain. Attention needs to go beyond production, and should also focus on mentoring capacity, and female membership, participation and leadership in (farmer/agricultural) organizations.

The presentation of Dr. Sachs was followed by a lively discussion in which different issues were addressed. This varied from gender dynamics in the household and production domains, to vertical and horizontal integration in different type of markets.



Four parallel sessions

Dr. Sachs' presentation was followed by four parallel sessions that enabled the seminar participants to zoom in on a sub-topic of choice. The seminar was concluded by a plenary discussion in which statements that emerged from the parallel sessions were argued. The following is a short overview of the four sessions and the plenary discussions.

Opportunities for women empowerment through fair trade / organic certification

Chaired by Msc. Noortje Verhart, Royal Tropical Institute

"Where codes fail to address working conditions and unfair treatment of women, their effectiveness significantly weakens." Stephanie Barrientos, 2001

Certification acts as a means to measure and verify that certain aspects of sustainability are addressed in a chain, such as good production methods, improved social and labour conditions, and capacity development in the chain. Certification is characterized by 'carrots' (price premiums) versus 'sticks' (control), and aims to lead to more transparency and traceability, and to an improved access to international markets.



To Ms. Verhart, gender is not the main goal of certification, and impact studies on certification often fail to incorporate gender relations – leaving the household as a 'black box'. Benefits from certification, varying from a higher income to training and other services, do not automatically benefit men and women equally.

The above led to a debate on the following questions:

- (1) Can certification act as a catalyst for change in gender relations and women's empowerment?*
- (2) What can certification address?*
- (3) How can certification contribute to women's empowerment?*

Main points from both the parallel and plenary session were that special attention is needed for inclusion of smallholders in certification processes in general, and of female (smallholder) farmers in particular. In this way, we get to know whether and how certification can also be a powerful gender empowerment mechanism.

To realize this, attention needs to be paid on taking away barriers that women face in (entering) certification processes, such as illiteracy, and a lack of knowledge on certification requirements.

The debate also resulted in raising new questions: How does standardized certification relate to local markets and contexts? Is certification mainly market-driven? What are the best products for women to enter certification processes?

Given the current gender gap in certification impact studies, clear gender monitoring and evaluation processes are needed to differentiate for impact of certification within households as well, enabling to enter the 'black box'.

Opportunities through self-organization in cooperatives: advantages and pitfalls for women's empowerment

Chaired by Dr. Ir. Conny Almekinders and Dr. Margreet van den Burg from Gender Studies, Wageningen UR.

The session started with a presentation on the position and activities of female farmers organizing themselves in the 20th and 21st century in different countries across the world. Different types of women's agricultural organizations and the diverse roles of women in such organizations were mentioned. Examples were shown of African agricultural organizations in which women are conducting adding-value activities.

"Female empowerment in agricultural organizations and cooperatives should go step by step. It requires strong leadership and good monitoring to achieve gender mainstreaming in such organizations."
Dr. Margreet van den Burg, Wageningen UR.

Subsequently, research results presented that collective action in cooperatives seems to be a valid working principle when members have ownership and have obtained a required minimal level of capacity. And, female collective action seemed most successful in the more 'feminized' products and value chains, such as dairy and vegetables.

The presentation was followed by a discussion in which participants' shared their experiences on this topic. Experiences from Indonesia revealed that, in one case, some women blocked other women's participation, while in another case, women and men worked quite efficient together – which was quite successfully mediated by an external facilitator.



Experiences from other countries showed that education is important to get women participating, and that value adding can work by going step by step - starting with the most important components. Other important factors that were mentioned were the role (local) governments can play, women's self-esteem, and equal opportunities for female participation.

This discussion led to the statement that *'Cooperation is a valid principle that works for women when a number of conditions are fulfilled – such as clear economic benefits, ownership and good leadership'*, which was debated in the plenary session.

Participants stated that women's self-organization in cooperatives can work if there are clear economic benefits for women that they individually cannot achieve. Yet, certain conditions will need to be fulfilled, such as equal access and participation of all members. A cooperative should function as a *vehicle* with potential economic and social benefits, otherwise it is not an efficient institution for linking female farmers better to markets.

The role of Farmer Field Schools in women's empowerment through value addition

Chaired by Msc. Annemarie Westendorp, Van Hall Larenstein, part of Wageningen UR.

The session was introduced by a presentation elaborating on the concepts of Farmer Field Schools (FFS) and empowerment.



Farmer Field Schools arose in the mid-1990s and can be described as a group-based, participatory learning process. During Farmer Field Schools, farmers – in men, women or mixed groups – carry out experimental learning activities that help them to understand crop (management) practices. Farmer Field Schools are used by governments, NGOs and international agencies to promote Integrated Pest Management.

The concept 'empowerment' is ambiguous, and is characterized by different views and changing paradigms. In this context, it was defined by Ms. Westendorp as (1) increased access and control over resources, (2) individual's agency and own potential to

achieve change, and (3) transformation of power relations.

"When comparing a farmer's practice and an improved practice, it was noticed that farmers learned to observe change looking at pest management, agro-ecosystem management, etc."
Msc. Annemarie Westendorp, Van Hall Larenstein.

The contextualization of Farmer Field Schools and empowerment led to a debate in two sub groups, focusing on the question: *"What could be the contribution of Farmer Field Schools to empowerment?"*



The groups stated that female empowerment through Farmer Field Schools seems to have potential, hence is a long-term process. In addition, women empowerment in this regard requires more than increased knowledge *only* as obtained through Farmer Field Schools.

The discussion continued in the plenary session, in which the statement *'Farmer Field Schools and gender issues should be treated as a business case'* was discussed.

Some participants stated that if we want to have more female producers, there is no other option than aligning gender practices with a more business and strategic approach, and Farmer Business Schools can be a way to achieve that. Others (partly) disagreed, and stated that gender issues cannot be solved by a business perspective only.

Others stated that a closer examination on Farmer Field Schools is needed regarding women's opportunities and constraints in participating, and the consequences on their livelihoods. It was concluded that Farmer Field Schools can be seen as a participatory tool to incorporate women in agricultural practices and extension, whereby good gender sensitization is needed.

Value chain coordination and women's empowerment: exploring the links

Chaired by Andrei Cechin, PhD Candidate Management Studies, Wageningen UR.

Central question was: *"How can empowerment of women – i.e. increasing their ability to make strategic life choices – have a positive impact on value chain efficiency?"*

Mr. Cechin stated that value chain efficiency normally reduces unnecessary costs in value chains. With lower costs, end products become cheaper. This is especially valid for basic food crops in developing countries, thereby increasing households' food security.

"Participation in terms of numbers does not tell anything about empowerment, nor about efficiency. The question is how women participate, as compared to men, and what the gains are for both men and women." Participants of the seminar.

Nonetheless, efficiency in value chains is hampered by transaction costs – i.e. those costs involved in the *coordination* of value chain activities. In value chains where chain operators are highly dependent on each other and where information asymmetry is high, transaction costs tend to be high as well.

To Mr. Cechin, social capital is one way to reduce transaction costs. Social capital tends to be strong among women's groups and other organized groups, hence he argued that social capital may offer opportunities to both empower women and make value chains more efficient.

The discussion continued around the relation between value chain efficiency and participation of women in value chains. A participant gave the example of fishery in Lake Victoria, advocating that only organized women could protect themselves, and only then one should start to think of value chain efficiency.

Another example was given on Masai women who managed to upgrade their position by improving the quality of their dairy products. This example showed that women's



empowerment and value chain efficiency, under certain conditions, indeed can happen simultaneously.

This session was concluded with the observation that organized women indeed seem to have a better position to either negotiate improvements (f.e. on prices), but this does not necessarily mean that value chains become more efficient. On the other hand, efficiency does not automatically lead to improved gender relations, especially if intra-household relations are not taken into consideration.

This seminar was part of the annual CDI course 'Market access for Sustainable Development'. More information about this course and other courses can be found on our website: www.wageningenur.nl/cdi.