

How women see their lives changing

Alice Welbourn

Women are good at adapting to change. But theirs is an unequal struggle since, in the reshuffle of responsibilities, their workload usually increases. They cope, but they no longer have time to laugh and joke. Alice Welbourn reports the outcome of participatory appraisals in various African countries about rural women's perceptions of change.

In March 1991 I was with a group of female development workers conducting a Rapid Rural Appraisal exercise with some village women in Malawi. We had climbed up the hillside with them, had together looked at their tobacco, maize and groundnut crops, discussed with them their problems of reduced land fertility, fertiliser costs and crop diseases. I had been responsible for noting down the names of all the trees we passed, their uses and their origins.

"This tree has figs which are eaten. Its sap is medicine for ringworm. That tree's leaves can be eaten as a vegetable. It's a good medicine for measles and prevents blindness in children ..." and so on. Many of the trees we passed were indigenous but some were introduced species. I noted them all down carefully in my book. When we reached the brow of the hill we looked back down to the valley where the road twisted through the village. There we saw our fellow workers waiting for us to finish. "Oh dear," we said, "we're sorry, we'll have to go."

"Oh no!" cried the women - "we wanted to show you where we go to collect our fuelwood ..."

"Hold on a minute", I replied, thinking I had misheard, "we've been walking with you for the past hour and we have seen many trees. Why do you come all the way up here and beyond for your fuelwood?"

"Well, it's true there are trees near our houses," explained the women, "but those trees are cut down by the men to use for tobacco curing. Didn't you see all the curing sheds in the village? Tobacco requires lots of fuel, so the men don't want to go far to collect the firewood. So we have to come all the way up here. Beyond the top of the hill there's some unallocated customary land, so we can collect firewood for our homes from up there."

Tobacco is the main source of income for these villagers: for the better-off who own the crop and profit from its sale,

and for the worse-off who work as hired labourers on the tobacco fields. So growing and curing tobacco is the primary economic occupation. The increasing demand on fuelwood in Malawi through tobacco production is a recognised problem. But is it also recognised how women are the ones who bear the extra hard work as a consequence? We certainly learnt a lesson that day. (We also learnt to respect the time which villagers offered us, rather than fixing our own time to stop work.)

Putting farmers first

Rapid Rural Appraisal is also known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Rapid Catchment Analysis, Participatory Learning Methods - at the last count, there were 33 different titles. What matters is not the name but the approach to development work, which places farmers first and turns us, the development workers, into the learners.

Various techniques such as land resource mapping, seasonal calendar construction, well-being ranking and other ranking exercises are used to find out from communities what their needs and priorities are. It is the farmers who construct the diagrams and explain their environment.

If only we ask them

Another example, from Kenya this time, shows how much information we can learn from villagers themselves, if only we think to ask them:

Promilla Adhiambo, whose husband was identified as a model farmer, showed us how the intensification of their farming system had changed the amount of work she did. As has become common practice for analysing seasonal differences, 12 stones were placed on the ground for the months, and seeds were used for estimating. For their farming before intensification, Mrs Adhiambo scored each month with black and white niger seeds, giving 10 to the busiest month as a benchmark. She then used white pigeonpea seeds, roughly the same size as the niger seeds, to indicate how labour had changed with intensification. It had increased in every month, as shown in Figure 1. Her husband, who until then had been dominant in discussions, fell quiet. The NGO staff present said they were struck at how much the labour requirements for a woman had increased (Chambers 1992).

Pressure on women

As shown by the two examples from Malawi and Kenya, environmental and economic pressures tend to have a negative impact upon women. In both cases, women's time was affected by these pressures and women's workloads are being increased.

In a recent study of women's needs in rural Sierra Leone, women in the poorest village of the study explained how the annual burden of debt repayments has increased, meaning that they have to spend more time working in the fields than they used to. Even if their children are sick, there is nowadays increased pressure from their husbands to get back to the work in the fields. They also say that many men run away from the

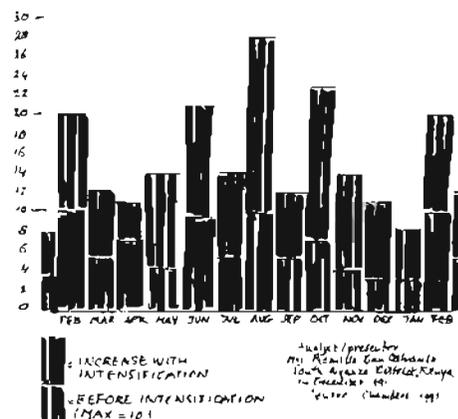


Figure 1. Seasonal analysis: increase in a woman's labour with agricultural intensification. Estimates using seeds as counters.

village for shame, unable to repay their debts; and that they no longer have time to laugh and joke as they used to (Welbourn 1991).

Talking about environmental degradation is talking not just about agriculture. It is talking about physical and psychological, as well as material well-being. Figure 2, a seasonal calendar drawn by women in a village in Sierra Leone, illustrates the linkages between the farming cycle and the workload in the field (Welbourn 1991, 1992). But the work at home never ceases. The great difficulty for the poor - and for women especially - is that they rarely have the power to change what is happening to them.

Women adapting

The success stories are depressingly few. Nonetheless, women are usually extremely good at adapting to changed

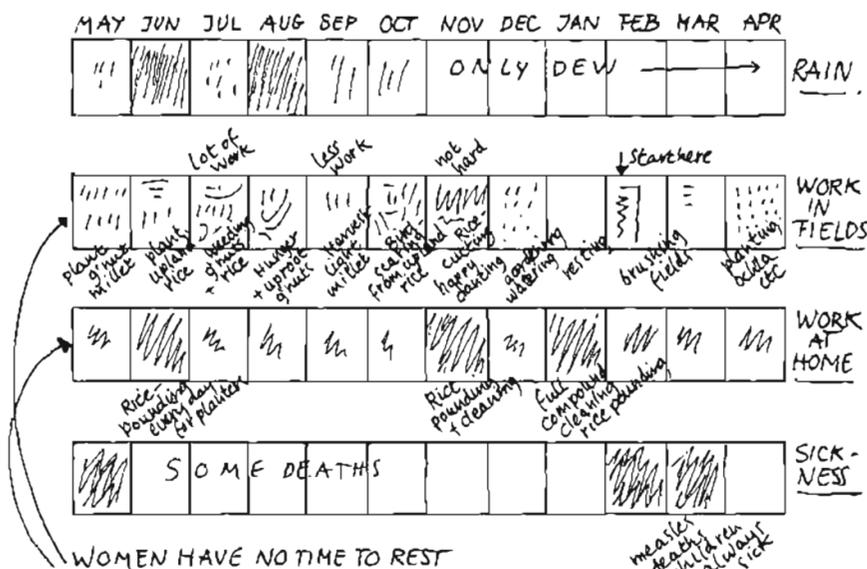


Figure 2. Women's calendar, Tenababramala Village, Sierra Leone

circumstances. One approach adopted by women is to join self-help groups, which can sometimes help to overcome traditional barriers constraining individual women's access to resources. Another approach is to develop sources of off-farm income.

In northeastern Ghana, women have adopted both strategies. Whilst individual women find it hard to have access to land, as a group they are able to have land granted them by a chief. So better-off women, who have more time, have formed groups with this goal. With the land as surety, they are able to get credit. With this credit, they can buy inputs to grow cash crops such as groundnuts.

However, as the women in one village told me, it is still virtually impossible for them to recoup the costs of their investment, because they only have access to the oxploughs once all their husbands have used them. By then, they have missed the first rains and it is too late. Other problems of input supply include shortage and high costs of seeds, fertiliser and pesticides at critical times. These problems limit women's ability to succeed in cash-crop production.

Off-farm income through such activities as sheabutter production, basket and hat making, charcoal production and trading in these as well as in food, are all popular dry-season activities for women. As environmental pressures limit economic returns from the land, women become increasingly dependant on such alternative sources of income.

Limiting the damage

Similar examples of women trying to cope are found in most of the world. In many ways, these strategies could best be described as strategies of damage limitation, where women are trying to make the best of a tough situation. They are aware that these strategies do not help solve the problems of environmental degradation. Using inorganic fertil-

isers and pesticides, as well as charcoal production, clearly harm the environment. But women are only doing the best they can under the circumstances.

The question is: How can women – and men! – be given support to turn damage

limitation into positive action to improve their environment? (There is often a danger of expecting women to be responsible for the environment on top of all their work. Don't forget men, too!)

Positive action

The responsibility lies with us, as development workers, to change from our roles as experts and tellers-off, into listeners and learners. Only then can we respond to the needs of those whom we are supposed to be helping – and that is what so rarely happens

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Human needs and their satisfiers

There is more to "quality of life" than meets the eye of an external observer. The list of items expressed by Philippine smallholders in answer to the question "What are the things that make you feel bad if you are deprived of it?" may be a fairly universal one. No attempt was made to prioritise. The respondents were men and women.

Need	dimension	Satisfiers
A	Subsistence	food, income, housing, family's physical health, mental health, living environment, ability to work, social setting, ability to procreate, clothing, medicine
B	Participation	attendance in group work, meetings and the like
C	Leisure	taking care of farm animals, drinking with peers, cockfighting, going to market, group work, games
D	Creation	engaging in hobbies, designing new things
E	Protection	family, regular work, farm and farm animals, children, savings, insurance, social security, dwelling, capacity to help others, social environment, capacity to plan for the future, capacity to take care of self and others
F	Affection	true friends, family circle, ability to express anger, happiness and love, privacy in the home, sense of humour, being generous to others, able to respect and appreciate others
G	Identity	sense of belonging, self-esteem, commitment, ability to decide on important matters, having a religion, a language, a home, being recognised as a member of the community
H	Freedom	freedom to dissent, freedom to be different, equal rights, freedom to be open-minded
I	Understanding	curiosity, availability of books, educators, workgroups
J	Justice	presence of lawyers, there is fairness, effective local councils

Source: Elmer Sayre. College of Agriculture, PO Box 89, 9000 Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines.

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