

# Introduction

## WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

*Women have proven that they are persons in their own right, who always have, and always will, make up a major contribution to the development of the world despite the lack of recognition and acknowledgment of this contribution to the gross national products (GNP) of their countries.*

Gertrude Mongella<sup>1</sup>

Women's involvement in the agricultural sector is a well recognized fact, particularly in developing countries where they are the most important food producers and where they assist their husbands in most of the farming tasks. Yet, they are still perceived basically as "housewives" and their involvement in agricultural activities is considered as a natural extension of their homemakers' role. As a result of this misconception, programs for economic development in rural areas are almost always designed by men "with the needs of men in mind."<sup>2</sup>

Although official statistics indicate that women constitute more than half of the agricultural labor force in the developing world, yet the bulk of women's contribution is unremunerated and is not considered as "work" neither by national accounts experts, nor by women themselves who often respond when asked whether they work or not, that they do not have the time to do so. This failure to value women's work reduces them to "virtual non-entities in most economic transactions - such as property ownership, or offering collateral for bank loans"<sup>3</sup> - and limits, as a result, their potential to become economically productive. In fact, rural women do not have equal access to resources be it land, credit or technology.

Gender asymmetry as far as access to land is concerned, remains one of the major obstacles that rural women face. Traditionally land passes from father to son, while women are relegated to farming small or remote plots of fragmented land. These difficulties are even more accentuated in the case of women heading households. A review of land reform programs in various countries indicates that "female heads of households seldom have access to land even when their productive activities call for it."<sup>4</sup>

This inaccessibility to land deprives rural women from the collateral needed to get credit support. In addition to this constraint, access to credit is jeopardized by the following assumptions:

- Rural women are primarily involved in subsistence production rather than market - oriented activities and have no say in cropping and input decisions; consequently, their credit needs are often underestimated by financial institutions. In 1990, only 5% of the \$5.8 billion multilateral bank loans for

agricultural and rural development reached rural women. In African countries, where women account for more than 60% of the agricultural work force, their share in total credit allocations to the agricultural sectors is less than 1%.

- Rural women represent a high credit risk. They are unable to manage credit, except when it is a small loan. Such loans carry, however, high administrative costs for financial institutions which, as a result, are reluctant to extend them.<sup>5</sup> This assumption is not, however, supported by empirical evidence which indicates that very often rural women use credit more effectively and more responsibly than men.

Access to technology is also another issue that needs to be tackled when talking about rural women. This technology when available is not always "appropriate" nor "affordable". It should be "appropriate" in the sense that it would maximize efficiency without threatening jobs, harming the environment or being too sophisticated; "affordable" in the sense that it would not be too expensive to be bought by rural women who are often very poor.

Gender asymmetries regarding access to resources have obviously a negative impact on rural women's productivity, on their decision-making power both within the household and in the formulation of development strategies as well as on their self-image. There is, therefore, an urgency in addressing these issues by those involved in rural development, be they government agencies or private and civil organizations. The file in this issue of *Al-Raida* will be examining the situation of rural women in Lebanon. More specifically, it will essentially analyze women's participation in the tobacco industry, everyday problems they face and their contribution to economic development.

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### ENDNOTES

1 Mongella, Gertrude, *Report on the 1994 Meeting of the International Steering Committee on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women*, Rome: Quintly S.p.A., 1994, p.111

2 Fawzi al-Sultan, in *ibid.*, p.65

3 UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1995, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.97.

4 United Nations, *Development for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. Women in a Changing Global Economy*. New York: United Nations, 1995, pp. 37-38.

5 Fawzi al-Sultan *op.cit.*, p.65.

6 United Nations, *op.cit.*, p.38.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 38.