

WOMEN IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: A FORCE FOR CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing tendency to examine the role of women in rural development, to understand their particular contribution, and to implement programs and projects to improve the quality of their lives.

Studies confirm that women produce between 60 to 80 percent of the food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production, yet their key role as food producers and providers and their critical contribution to household food security is only recently being recognized.¹

Until the last 20 years, rural women have been neglected both in terms of understanding their exact position as a human resource in rural areas, and identifying the particular constraints they face.

WOMEN ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE IN AGRICULTURE

In Lebanon, as in most developing countries, the major constraint to the effective recognition of women's actual roles and responsibilities in agriculture is the scarcity of gender desegregated data available to technicians, planners, and policy makers. The role of women in agriculture has been undervalued in most official data. Due to inconsistencies in reporting, poor methods of data collection and the use of narrow definitions of work and employment in national statistics, data often fail to capture the real contributions of women in agriculture. As a result there has been a widespread erroneous notion that women have a marginal role in agriculture. However, more recent efforts to include desegregated data by gender at the national level, as well as information gathered in micro studies and special surveys, have shown that women's contribution to agricultural labor has been severely underestimated, and that in fact, women's participation rates are quite significant, especially when unpaid labor is taken into account. Official statistics reported a decline in the percentage of women participants in agricultural professions from 26% in 1970 to 7.6% and 11.4% (when considering female unpaid labor) in 1995.² On the other hand, field studies and PRA surveys conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture, in addition to other estimates and projections revealed that women, as paid and unpaid laborers, represent up to 40.7% of the total paid and unpaid agricultural workers.³

The variations in data dictate the necessity for more detailed studies and the importance of caution in interpreting data on rural female employment and underemployment basically because several variables should be examined such as migration, lower wages for women, climatic and agronomic factors, seasonality in the demand for labor in agriculture etc. In addition, differences in the definitions of "employment," "underemployment," and "unemployment" must be clearly understood in cross-national studies.

RURAL WOMEN - AN ENORMOUS HUMAN RESOURCE... WHAT CONSTRAINTS DO THEY SUFFER FROM?

Rural women are a crucial resource, vital to agricultural development, food security, and sustainable socio-economic growth; however, these women remain restricted within the marginal role allotted to them:

1. While women are the main stay of small scale agriculture, farm labor force, and day-to-day family subsistence, they shoulder at least one third of the agricultural work and have more difficulty than men gaining access to resources such as land, credit, productivity enhancing inputs and other agricultural services. Special credit facilities for women are limited and only a small number of women farmers apply for loans. The agricultural sector is a risky field, and the lack of experience, information, and illiteracy prevailing among women, act as obstacles interalia to them receiving agricultural loans from banks. Analysis of the data available from PRA surveys indicate that women give up their inherited land to their brothers or fathers, who, in turn, offer them protection from their husbands and husbands' families in times of conflict, as well as support in times of need.⁴

2. In the past, research and extension systems largely ignored the need and priorities of women farmers, and only recently have they shown any concern for women's increasing responsibilities in agriculture. Women have no access to improved agricultural technology which has been widely recognized as a prime force of increased agricultural productivity, as well as an engine for accelerating rural economic growth. This is primarily due to the absence of gender based extension systems within the government's specialized departments. Until 1975 public extension services in agriculture were mainly provided by 48 male extensionists. Women extensionists were totally absent, thus depriving women farmers from the extension services and, consequently, from the acquisition of any skills.

3. As paid or unpaid laborers, women may spend up to 14-19 hrs/day in crop and livestock production, in addition to domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, baking, child rearing, and collecting water and fuel for household use.

Table 1: Average Number of Hours Spent per Day on Agricultural and Domestic Activities in non-irrigated Areas by Task, Gender, (1993)

Task	Male	Female
Collecting wood or shrubs for fuel	1.0	1.0
Carrying Water	1.0	2.0
Preparing food	-	1.0
Cleaning house	-	2.0
Caring for children	-	3.0
Planting	3.0	-
Weeding	-	2.0
Irrigation	-	-
Milking	-	1.0
Milk processing	-	2.0
Caring for livestock	-	1.0
Marketing animal products	-	0.5
Processing crops*	3.0	3.0
Marketing crops	6.0	-
Total	14.0	18.0

Source: Lebanon.Ministry of Agriculture, PRA Surveys, 1995.

* Includes harvesting and other Agricultural Practices.

4. A gender division of labor is observed in the Lebanese farming system based on the nature of the agricultural enterprise itself and the operations used in the production process. Men are involved in capital-intensive mechanized crops and operations such as mechanical land preparations, irrigation, spraying and tractor driving, while women are responsible for the labor - intensive work that requires painstaking physical effort and perseverance such as weeding, hand sowing, spraying fertilizers, vegetable pinching, etc.

5. Women's role in livestock is even greater, as they are responsible for all aspects of animal husbandry, and to a lesser degree for marketing and herding. They feed and gather fodder, care for small ruminants, rabbits and poultry, clean stables, milk animals, make butter, cheese, yogurt, and other milk by-products.

6. As it has been observed women are less likely to be involved in more mechanized and capital - intensive farms geared to market - oriented production; also, women from landless families and/or small land holdings perform tasks and work for

longer hours than those from large land holding and rich rural households. Poor women are more likely to seek temporary employment or permanent labor on other farms. Owing to social restrictions, they are also more liable to work in agriculture outside their own villages.

7. Men appear to have predominant control over decision making, though more in-depth studies are needed to determine the precise roles and powers each gender has in household decision making processes. PRA's and field observations have indicated that almost all decisions pertaining to agricultural production practices are men's business. In-addition, all marketing decisions and the allocation of subsequent generated income are totally male dominated. Even when the husband is away for a short time, decisions wait for his return. However, if his absence is prolonged, the wife could have more authority over the decision - making process, in consultation with other male family members.

Table 2: Women's Decision - Making Authority at the Household Level

(Percentage of Wives who Report that they Usually Decide) 1994.

	Husband present	Husband Away
What to grow	None	None
Use of fertilizer	None	None
Better seeds	None	None
Use of pesticides/herbicides	None	None
Use of veterinary medicine	None	None
How much to sell (crops)	None	None
How much to sell (livestock)	None	None
Seeking loans (crops)	5%	5%
Seeking loans (livestock)	N.A.	N.A.
Buying tools	None	None
Allocating water (crops)	None	75%
Allocating water (livestock)	90%*	90%
Hiring Labor	None	None
Attending extension meetings	75%**	-
Allocating family expenditures	None	None

Source: Lebanon. Ministry of Agriculture, PRA Surveys, 1995.

* A woman dominated activity.

** % of those who reported that they would attend after consultation with their husbands.



Photo: R.M. Habre

8. Women - headed households are poorer than male - headed households especially with the disparities prevailing in agricultural wages. Women are often paid two thirds to one - half of the wages earned by men for the same number of hours. The average daily wage for women ranges between 7000 - 10000 L.L./day depending on the area and the type of work; whereas that of men ranges between 13000 - 17000 LL./day. It ought to be mentioned here that the percentage of women - headed households has been increasing over the past ten years due to extensive male migration to the cities which forces men to abandon their agricultural lands seeking better employment opportunities as well as the increased number of widows in the war period (from 9.2% in 1954 to 20% in 1994).⁵

9. Although existing laws allow women to obtain land, credit, employment, and social insurance, the application and effectiveness of these laws are still governed by a wide range of socio - economic, traditional, and religious factors. At the same time, there is lack in the legal provisions that govern employment in agriculture for both women and men. The Lebanese labor law, passed in 1946, excludes from its provisions those working in agriculture. Accordingly women in this sector are not protected by laws that govern employment organization such as working hours, maternity leaves, health measures, etc. The situation is further aggravated by the National Social Security Fund that excludes temporary labors, daily paid and seasonal labors, categories within which the majority of women working in agriculture fall.⁶

10. The number of women seeking higher education in agriculture is on the rise (47% of BS. graduates and 59% of MS. graduates respectively out of the total number of graduates in Agriculture in 1993). However, female employment rates, in the Agricultural sector, remain considerably lower than male rates for two main reasons:

- Employment opportunities are mainly available in agricultural private firms where females have had lower chances of employment especially in war times when extension services are primarily restricted to private firms that prefer male engineers for field and commercial services;

- No openings for recruitment were available in the public services until the early 1990's.

It should be mentioned here that females have better chances of employment in teaching and research at universities and research institutes.

SOME ACHIEVEMENTS

There has been an increase, from 1990-1997, in the number of governmental, non - governmental, and international programs and projects, as well as initiatives in support of rural women in general. Projects have included providing loans and training, as well as establishing rural women cooperatives. Numerous government, parastatal, academic, charity, and NGO agencies have been operating in niche areas such as women's literacy, women and child health care, sewing, embroidery, and other pre- formed feminine tasks. Focus has been also placed on the provision of training in household small scale agro-industries. Small projects are addressing the direct needs of women farmers as food producers in terms of strengthening their technical know how and providing sustainable resources for agriculture production.

Policy makers at the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) are becoming more conscious of women's contributions in this field owing to the support of the international organizations. Rural Women components within agriculture development projects have triggered the Ministry of Agriculture to press towards the establishment of a specialized gender unit the mandate of which will be to mainstream gender-sensitive considerations into agricultural policies and practices.

A SAMPLE PROJECT AT THE FIELD LEVEL

The Rural Women Development Program (RWDP) at the Ministry of Agriculture (within the irrigation rehabilitation and mechanization project, funded by the Lebanese government, World Bank, and IFAD) is a good example in terms of its direct response to the problems facing women in agriculture, and in establishing the necessary administrative support and organizational structure at the Ministry of Agriculture in order to ensure the sustainability of rural women programs.

To be specific this program entails:

- a. designing and executing training and income generating activities within an integrated farming approach where agriculture production, livestock production, cropping, and food processing are integrated;
- b. tailoring extension programs to meet women farmers' needs. The programs include mechanized agriculture, technology transfer, and step-by-step on job description and demonstration of agricultural practices and livestock best production procedures. All activities are executed in collaboration with research centers and the active development programs in the project areas;
- c. orienting women farmers towards new, highly demanded, easily marketable crops. Those include agriculture production in soilless culture, mushroom production, "endive" production,

drying flowers, etc. New interventions are piloted in one village, and when proved economically feasible are extended to other areas;

d. strengthening the local indigenous groups and women NGOs through contracting active local NGOs for project execution in full collaboration with RWDP;

e. enhancing and supporting the formation of women committees and promoting their involvement in already existing NGOs and village clubs/committees.

Unlike other related development projects, RWDP program is not confined to one administrative area in the country. It is designed to cover around 80 villages distributed in the three districts of Lebanon where agriculture is concentrated: the Bekaa valley, the South, and the North.

BENEFITS OF RWDP PROGRAMS

The overall impact of the RWDP activities within the project areas will be significant. Extension and associated activities will enable increasing crop yields and higher household income. Women will benefit from those interventions that are specifically directed at alleviating their priority constraints and meeting their priority needs. The long-term impact of the training program will not only be restricted to the skills learned and the direct generation of income, but also to increased self-confidence and general awareness which will enable women to be more active in the future development of their areas.

This is a 5 year program which started in 1996 and is supposed to end by the year 2000. In the year 2001 what would the situation of women farmers be like? It would be the responsibility of the specialized gender unit which would have been established at the Ministry of Agriculture; otherwise the whole issue of internationally supported development projects will be brought to the table for evaluation. In fact, it is the sustainability of such projects that should be placed as a top priority issue.

REGIONAL COORDINATION AND NETWORKING

It ought to be mentioned at this level that the situation of Lebanese rural women in agriculture is shared to a large extent among many other countries in the Near East region. The Near East office and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (RNEA/FAO) were geared in the last five years towards the development of a Regional Plan of Action for Women in Agriculture in the Near East Regions 1996 - 2000., or RPAWANE 2000, through a participatory people-centered approach. Eighteen Arab and Near Eastern countries including Lebanon are participating in this endeavour. Four strategic areas of concern have been identified by RPAWANE 2000:

1. Collection, analysis, and dissemination of gender disaggregated statistical data;
2. policy advice, institutional support, and capacity building;
3. women in agriculture and sustainable development;
4. networking and people's participation.

Major contributions of RPAWANE 2000 have been

accomplished in the region. A major output is the establishment of a Regional village - anchored network for gender and food security - in a concerted effort among the Near Eastern countries including Lebanon, RNEA/FAO/ and other UN agencies. The importance of networking and people's participation stems from the fact that, unlike top-down prescriptive programs, they are self-regulated, cost-effective, and flexible frameworks that could serve to strengthen institutional collaboration on national, regional, and international levels and create a wider sharing of ideas, experiences, comparative advantages and resources.

Mobilization of resources would be one of the essential three muscular arms that the network would have. The other two include: collection, dissemination, analysis, the use of disaggregated data and statistics and program/project formulation and implementation. The invitation is hereby extended to all national and international agencies, donors communities, NGOs, private sector, academic and research institutes, and all WID and GAD machineries to join in this endeavor.

ENDNOTES:

1 FAO. 1990. *Women in Agricultural Development, Gender Issues in Rural Food Security in Developing Countries*, RAO, Rome.

2 Comité National de la Femme. 1996. *La Femme Libanaise 1970-1995, Chifres et Sens*. Volume 1, 1996.

3. United Nations. *World Demographic Estimates and Projections, 1950-2025*. (New York, United Nations). 1988.

4 Ministry of Agriculture. 1995. *Women in Agriculture in Lebanon*. National Report. In Preparations of the "Policy Framework and Regional Program of Action for Women in Agriculture in the Near East (RPAWANE)." Ministry of Agriculture, Lebanon.

5 Same source based on Tabbarah and Osseiran. *National Report Presented to the World Population Summit*, 1993.

6 Mughazel, L. 1994. "The Legal Status of Women Working in Agriculture." Paper Presented to the National Workshop on Women in Agriculture and Rural Development, Beirut, March 25, 1995 (in Arabic).

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