

## **WOMEN'S LACK OF ACCESSIBILITY TO AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES: A SOCIO-CULTURAL EXPLANATION**

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"...Although the woman plays such an important role in agricultural production, the extension services never approach her, but always her husband or brother..." (Georges, 1961 in Boserup, 1970:55). "An agricultural extension agent has worked in his area for over 10 years. As far as women are concerned, however, he only comes to us to buy bananas and other, foods for his family" (Wiley, 1981:66).

### **INTRODUCTION**

The two statements above indicate that female farmers are discriminated against in terms of provision of extension services, despite their significant contribution to agricultural production in developing countries. This paper seeks to address the question of accessibility of women to agricultural extension services.

### **WOMEN'S ROLE IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION**

Women are greatly involved in agriculture in most of the third world countries. Several reasons have been advanced to explain this. Mvena (1984), attributes the phenomenon to the introduction of modern schools which take away children's labour and small wages paid to male migrant labourers. Such wages force the men to leave their families behind. Even when they remain at home, they are more involved in non-agricultural work such as trade and masonry leaving women to do almost all the agricultural work.

The activities performed by women in agriculture are many and varied. They include; clearing, preparation of fields, seeding and planting (Curr, 1978:22). It should be stressed that tasks undertaken by women in agricultural production vary from one society to another, depending on the existing division of labour on the basis of gender. Van den Ban and Howkins (1988:271) emphasize this point by stating that:

In most countries some tasks such as land preparation are traditionally done by men, and other tasks such as weeding, by women. Harvesting may be done jointly by men and women.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that women grow half of the World's food and at least 80% of the food produced in the African continent (Development and Cooperation, Issue No. 4/1991). In Cameroon, food and cash crops are grown by women and men, respectively (Dixon, 1980:31). In terms of labour expended by women on agricultural production, the same FAO statistics show that women form 47% of the agricultural labour force in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Tanzania, it is estimated that, on average, women provide sixty percent of all the labour force in agriculture (Wiley, 1984). This is probably why Boserup (1970:26), dubbed the African region as that of "female farming per excellence".

### **WOMEN'S LACK OF ACCESS TO EXTENSION SERVICES**

Agricultural extension essentially involves the teaching of improved methods of farming to farmers by extension agents. This is done in the hope that the adoption of recommended methods by the farmers will result in increased production and by implication, improved standards of living of the farmers. Thus, to a large extent, the success or failure of the extension services can be judged by the extent to which it contributes to the improvement of production on the farm.

It has to be emphasized that the clientele with which the extension services deal with is heterogenous. This reality requires that specific measures must be tailored to address the specific needs of a given group of clientele. Failure to recognize the above fact has led to the failure of many extension systems to address the gender issue, among other issues.

In general, extension services in the third world are directed mostly at men. The men are expected to pass on information from extension agents to women through the trickle-down communication model. The inherent danger of working with female farmers through men has been highlighted by Van den Ban and Hawkins (1988:271) by declaring that "...If he teaches the men, and they in turn teach the women, much of the information is lost, especially in the feedback of ideas from the women to the extension agents". To emphasize this inherent danger, Mbilinyi (1977) expressed the opinion that as long as the woman is left out in interactions between agents and farmers, she will remain ignorant of her exploitation. A poignant example of failure due to neglect of women is related by Boserup (1970:55). Her observations are from Senegal where, Chinese instructors (from Taiwan) failed in their efforts to introduce better techniques in paddy production because they taught only the men, when in fact it was their wives who are the producers of paddy. The wives being untaught, continued, to follow their old ways. As a result of such observations, Boserup (1970) was forced to conclude that the gap between labour production of men and women will continue to widen.

#### REASONS FOR THE MALE BIAS OF EXTENSION SERVICES

The neglect of women by many extension services can be traced to the socialisation process through which new members learn the culture of the society. The process is of great importance to society as "it determines what each individual will contribute to the society as well as what he or she will get from that society" (Wilmot, 1985:40).

In traditional primary socialisation, girls and boys are given different orientations and get shaped into what the society likes them to be. Thus, girls are prepared for womanhood by being engaged in household tasks which are mostly done by women. Most importantly they are taught to talk softly, to be shy, defer to men and serve them. Boys on the other hand, are taught and expected to be among other things, independent, skilled, aggressive and defy pain. These are attributes normally associated with manhood. Any man devoid of these qualities is considered a weakling and hence a disgrace not only to men but also to his society in general. It should be emphasized that much of the personality expected of a member of society is developed at this stage. The subordination of women is also inculcated during this period and it translates into unequal distribution or access to resources in the society. The differential socialization processes probably contribute to the difficulties male extension agents have in reaching rural women.

In many countries male extension workers are not allowed to have direct contact with women and where they can, communication is not as smooth as would have been possible with female extension agents (Van Den Ban and Hawkins 1988:271). Because of the above cultural barrier, Swatz's (1985) idea that breaking the present system of marital relations would enable women to head their own households and hence improve their status, is unlikely to provide a solution for, irrespective of their marital status, the behaviour of women like that of men, is influenced by the existing social norms. Accessibility of extension services to women is also constrained by the fact that they normally do not own land. Inheritance laws are to blame for this. Even in those African societies where traditions provided for ownership of land by women, land reforms initiated by Europeans and the establishment of settlement

schemes, distorted the good traditions because land holdings were transferred/allocated to a household as a unit. Automatically, such holdings came under the control of the man by virtue of his being the household head (Boserup, 1970; Tinkes, No date; Mbilinyi, 1977; Hons, 1983 and Brain as cited by Spring and Hansen, 1979).

The above state of affairs affected Tanzania despite its Villagization Act. The Act stipulated that separate village plots of land could be allocated to each village member. The dictates of the Act were often not followed in many places for authorities continued to allocate land to the household head (Mascarenhas and Mbilinyi, 1983:96). As a result of this corruption of the spirit of the Villages Act, men unlike women can make both short and long term plans regarding use of the land they effectively own. The tenant-like status of the woman puts her in a weaker position for, unless sanctioned by the land owner, she cannot for example, decide to grow a crop of her own choice. Hence, extension workers find it appropriate to consult the land owners, the men, even when it is more appropriate to deal directly with women who actually work the land.

The problem of lack of land ownership among women could be ameliorated if the women had the wherewithal to purchase it on the market. But in Tanzania, this alternative is not available to many women, as they are confined to the subsistence sector geared to meeting household subsistence needs. The possibility of obtaining credit to purchase land is not there because of demands for collateral, which many women lack.

Another reason for lack of access to extension services for women is the heavy workload borne by them (Vourela and Reuben, Mascarenhas and Mbilinyi, 1983:97-119). In addition, women have less access to education when compared to men (Stitcher, 1984; 193-194; Mbilinyi 1977:15-16). This disparity not only impairs women's employment opportunities in the labour market but also increases the lack of ready access to extension services. The extension workers' catchment clientele are individuals who are relatively well educated and with whom they can easily communicate on extension matters. This behavioural pattern disqualifies many illiterate women.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusions**

Given the above, it can be concluded that the continued inaccessibility of extension services to women inevitably leads to decline of agricultural production, particularly food production which is dominated by them. Indeed, Tanzania and much of the developing world can ill-afford to continue underutilising a large percentage of its human resource simply because of the desire to maintain a culture which has been proved to facilitate the marginalisation of women. The daunting task facing the extension services and related institutions is how they should go about changing the status quo for the betterment of agricultural production.

### **Recommendations**

In order to increase accessibility of extension services to women, it is suggested that attempts be made to modify the process of socialisation. This should comprise deliberate efforts to interest women in what are regarded as men's pursuits by many cultures from an early age. In addition, women should be encouraged to form farmer groups in order to increase their bargaining power and demands for direct access to extension services. Furthermore, the training of more female extension agents should be emphasized to increase woman to woman interactions and hence sidestep social taboos which reduce male - female interactions in the developing world.

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