

Future
3-11-88

Women + Agriculture

30 November, 1988

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR SKILLED EMPLOYMENT
FOR RURAL WOMEN

By

M.S. SWAMINATHAN,
President,
International Union for the Conservation
of Nature and Natural Resources

I. INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, Late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi began the re-orientation of Government policies and programmes for the purpose of achieving a more effective coupling of economic growth and equity. Equity involved ^Sadequate attention to the needs of the economically, ecologically and socially disadvantaged sections of our population. Achieving growth with equity demanded ^Sconcurrent attention to ^Ceconomics, ecology, gender and generation^L. In terms of gender, the emphasis was on enhancing the productive role of women and reducing drudgery and danger respectively in the household and reproductive aspects of their life. Various in-depth studies were undertaken to identify and articulate the real issues confronting women in their triple role. The Reports of the Committee on the Status of Women in India and of the National Commission on self-employed women and women in the informal sector are significant landmarks in such studies. The VI Five Year Plan (1980-85) introduced for the first time in the history of Five Year Plans ^{of India} a special chapter on Women and development whose major emphasis was on the economic upliftment of

the status of women through greater opportunities for salaried, self and wage employment. The National Perspective Plan for women published last month by the Department of Women and Child Development of the Ministry of Human Resource Development provided ^S an excellent synoptic account of the studies and work ^{undertaken} ~~done~~ so far and offers a blue print for action during the rest of this century.

II. THE CHALLENGE

~~Several~~ ^{Several} ~~studies~~ ^{studies} ~~carried out so far~~ in the field of agriculture indicate that in spite of the key role of women in crop husbandry, ^{including horticulture} animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry and post-harvest technology, both in the past and now, those in charge of formulating packages of technologies, services and public policies for rural areas have ^{largely} tended to neglect the productive role of women. Consequently, the development of technologies specifically tailored to women-specific occupations and the involvement of women in technology development and transfer have received inadequate attention from both scientific and administrative departments of Government. The same is true in the case of training. The very term "Home Science College" used in our Universities is indicative ^{of the stress} on the household responsibilities of women, rather than ^{on their} ~~productive~~ role as producers of economic wealth. The National Perspective Plan for Women and the report of the National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector contain valuable suggestions, which if implemented, would help to accelerate economic

The VIII Five Year Plan has further strengthened this approach

growth with equity in terms of gender. We should analyse at this Conference their implications for future strategies and programmes in research, education, extension and public policy. It is not only in India that we face the enigma that ^{in spite of the} ~~while on the one hand women play a pivotal~~ ^{played by women} role in farm operations, ~~from the time a seed is sown to the time the grain is consumed,~~ ^{generally} on the other, they tend to be bypassed by research, training and extension agencies. The role of women in the African continent was described with great emotional feeling by ^{an} ~~the~~ Ugandan poet in the following words

"Women of Africa

Sweeper

Smearing floors and wall with cow dung
and black soil // cook, ayah, the baby on
your back // Planting, weeding, harvesting //
store-keeper, builder, runners of errands

Women of Africa - what are you not?"

^{a description} ~~of~~ This ~~situation~~ ^{the rural areas} is equally valid in ~~most parts of~~ ^{many developing countries in Asia} the developing world. Fortunately, the implications of this situation for government policy as well as for priorities in science, technology and training have started getting greater attention in recent years. But even now, the conversion of words and sentiments into action is slow. The eminent Filipino Social anthropologist Prof. Gelia Castillo after participating in an international workshop

on "Women, Technology and Development" held last year in New York, summed up the papers presented in the following words:

"There is a lot of gender, not much technology and little development".

If wish to avoid a similar fate for this Conference, what are some of the critical areas which we should come to grip with?

Enough information is now available ^{on} the priority areas which need urgent and integrated attention. ^{in rural areas of} There are: *I would like to mention a few.*

first, the hardship arising from unemployment, under-employment, uncertain employment, and unpaid or underpaid employment;

second, the drudgery involved because of the predominantly unskilled nature of the work assigned;

third, the lack of flexibility in terms of working hours, place of work and duration of work; *(particularly important for pregnant women and nurses/mothers)*

fourth, the adverse impact of labour displacing technologies ^{and} *scarcity* ^{of} *lack* ^{of} *jobs in the non-farm sector*

fifth; the lack of adequate maternity, health care, creche and associated needs;

sixth, little or no access to credit and other production inputs;

seventh, inadequate opportunities for the acquisition of new skills and for extension assistance; ^{often} compounded by the handicaps of illiteracy.

discriminatory
eightth, land or other asset ownership rights and social status;

Finally, paucity of organisations which can help women with the needed management expertise and collective strength.

From the point of view of scientific research and education,
The response to these challenging problems has to be in two time dimensions, ~~from the scientific and educational viewpoints~~. First, there are many things which can be done immediately with the technologies on the shelf and the institutional infrastructure already in existence.

Secondly, we should initiate specific research and development programmes which within the next 5 to 10 years can help to convert ^{a large proportion of} unskilled jobs into skilled ones, diversify opportunities for employment and introduce flexibility in the place, time and duration of work.

III. THE RESPONSE

First, let ^{us} ~~be~~ illustrate with a few examples what can be done immediately.

In the short term, we should build ^{on} the ~~historic~~ ^{traditional} ~~and current~~ professional skills of rural women and enhance their beneficial impact on income and quality of life, by removing the major handicaps and constraints. For example, since the dawn of agriculture, women in developing countries have played a major role in the following areas:

- a) Seed production and management and conservation of biological diversity.
- b) Energy management

c) Crop/livestock/fish ~~pond~~ management

d) Post-harvest management including the utilisation of forest products.

What steps can our Research and Development Institutions take to strengthen ^{the role of} women's ^{these} ~~roles~~ in the ~~above~~ areas?

a) Seed Production and Management and Conservation of Biological Diversity:

Women have traditionally been seed selectors and preservers. Whether literate or illiterate, they have the ability to spot the healthy plants whose seeds they carefully preserve for sowing next year. We could not have made hybrid cotton a commercial possibility ^{in India} but for the skills of rural women to produce hybrid seeds of high purity. If we organise our seed production at the village and block levels and entrust the work to women, after giving appropriate ^{in seed technology} training, the problems of our seed industry ^{can} ~~will~~ become problems of the past.

Similarly, in the area of conservation of biological diversity, women have traditionally been active conservationists. Their involvement in the organisation and conservation of heritage sites, biosphere reserves, national parks and community gene banks will enhance the effectiveness of the conservation movement.

b) Energy Management:

Women have not only been collecting fuel for cooking but have also been finding nutrition for both crops and farm animals. Organic recycling and collection of fodder and feed have been their traditional occupations. Today

there are new opportunities in the field of renewable energy management and ^{biomass} utilisation, which they can handle effectively, if assisted to do so.

c) Crop/Animal/Fish/Forest Management:

Experience in the Philippines and elsewhere has shown that women can organise integrated pest management (IPM) involving biological and cultural control, genetic resistance and need based application of chemical pesticides, in a very effective manner. This will help to prevent pest resurgence and epidemics. Similarly, women can handle effectively bio-fertilizer production programmes and help to organise and implement integrated nutrient supply systems (INS).

In the case of horticulture crops the spread of IPM and INS techniques becomes even more important.

Womens' roles in animal husbandry and aquaculture ^{including induced breeding} can also and fish seed production can be further strengthened through appropriate training.

d) Post-harvest Management:

Here, there are possibilities for considerable improvement in all the links in the producer-consumer chain. Preparation of ^{of a wide range of} value added products ^{now} is feasible ^{from} ~~for~~ every part of the plant and animal biomass.

To achieve all this, Agricultural Research and Training Institutions should integrate the following ground rules in all their programmes:

- i) Job destruction and job creation must be concurrent events.

through more
opportunities
for both
on-farm and
off-farm
employment

- ii) The aim of technology should be labour diversification, drudgery reduction and better energy conversion and not labour displacement. *Perpetuation of human drudgery cannot be an acceptable method of employment generation*
- iii) Knowledge and skill transfer mechanisms should be tailored to the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of rural women and ~~the~~ opportunities for remunerative marketing.
- iv) Every effort should be made to increase the active participation of women both in technology development and dissemination.
- v) There should be synchronisation in time and place between knowledge and skill transfer and the supply of the necessary inputs including credit; for the purpose, the growth of Womens' Organisations ~~or~~ ^{and} the strengthening of the professional management capacity of Mahila Mandals should be ~~assisted~~. *promoted*

IV NEW FRONTIERS

Several new
Developments in ~~the following~~ fields have opened up
new opportunities for making rural jobs knowledge-intensive
and skilled *for generalising more off-farm employment* and introducing the dimensions of flexibility
in the place and duration of work.

a) Biotechnology including bioprocessing, microbiology, tissue culture, genetic engineering and applications in animal ~~improvement~~ ^{breeding} and disease ~~management~~ ^{control}.

b) Information technology including computer applications and ~~mobilisation of~~ ^{software development for} mass media, particularly T.V. and radio ~~for awareness generation and knowledge dissemination.~~

c) Space technology including conservation monitoring and supporting ground truth work.

d) Micro-electronics which lends itself to decentralised production ~~and arrangements~~; and

e) Management Technology: ~~The role of management is to help in integrating~~ ^{which would help} all the elements of a technological package in a mutually supportive manner. In particular, the managerial and organisational aspects of decentralised production supported by a few key centralised services need attention. Also, ~~the planned~~ ^a strengthening of the beneficial linkages among the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors ~~will have to~~ ^{can} be achieved through ^h ~~the~~ ^{can} detailed micro-level planning.

CONCLUSION

In order to ~~achieve the above~~ ^{accomplish their objectives}, I would like to

suggest ~~the following~~ three immediate steps ^{which can be}

^{initiated by ICAR and the Department of Women and Child Development:}

a) "Technology Blending" Centres should be organised

at the district level in order to combine the good feature^s of traditional and frontier technologies. Such

Technology Blending Centres should ~~primarily aim to~~ ^{accord priority to} upgrade ^{the} the productive role of women. ^{on the needs of women} Such a focus ^h will

help both men and women, while the reverse ~~approach may~~ ^{will not be true, as past experience shows} ~~lead to women being by-passed by technological innovations.~~

b) We need a ^{carefully planned} ~~dynamic~~ programme for Training

Rural Women in Skilled Employment. The training methods used should be adjusted to the level of literacy and the domestic obligations of the trainees.

Let ~~this~~ ^{us try to make this} Conference lead to more relevant technology, more equitable development and less gender discrimination.

c) we should foster the growth of women's organisations which can serve as the link between ^{land to land and} ~~land to land~~.

The situation is similar to our experience with national demonstration. For example, small farmers' fields help big farmers also, while the reverse will not always be true.