

Women's Role in Agriculture

by Rahat Fahmida

Women throughout the ages have contributed a great deal in the country's agricultural development sector. Once considered "invisible" women constitute an important percentage of the world's total agricultural labour force. Regardless of the scenario in which women work in agriculture their participation in rural development is crucial to an adequate food supply. In Bangladesh a woman's role in the agricultural development differs from one part to the other to a certain extent.

Officially the ratio of economically engaged women is much lower than that of men. More than 90 per cent of the rural population live in the rural areas and both men and women are equally dependent on agricultural pursuits for their living. Generally a large number of women remain engaged in domestic and agricultural activities which contribute to production. Women in the villages are constantly found to remain actively in the process of production and provide essential services upon which production depends. They usually work about fifteen hours a day and have less time for leisure than men. Yet their contribution to production has very seldom been recognised in the official statistics or in the estimation of GDP, or even socially.

Women are mostly engaged in post-harvest activities for paddy. They help with threshing but generally do the drying, winnowing, parboiling and husking.

During a visit to the interiors of Deohata, a village in Tangail district, a great deal was visualised about a village woman's role in agriculture and development, over and above her duties as a housewife. Ayesha, in her mid-twenties, is the wife of a farmer. She was friendly and frank enough to explain clearly her processing job revealing the minute details of her skillful and tiring post-harvest work. But it was rather astonishing, that not even for once did she complain, but instead was proud of the fact that she was indirectly helping the family economically. Ayesha said,



Threshing paddy is generally a women's job besides winnowing, parboiling, drying and husking. —Star photo

"When paddy has to be boiled it is usually first thing on waking up or just after breakfast. It is a long process. After paddy is boiled, it is laid on bamboo mats in the courtyard to dry. If it happens to be a fine and sunny day the dried paddy is taken into the house in the late afternoon.

"The boiled paddy cannot be cooked and eaten until it is husked. This is a job which cannot be done by one woman alone. The 'dhek' is a large heavy instrument and generally two women are required to operate it, while a third stirs the paddy as it is being pounded, removes it when husked and puts in new paddy. As little more than a 'seer' (nearly one kilogram) can be pounded at once, it is understandably a long job. This usually takes either half a morning or half a afternoon husking paddy." It goes without mentioning that their household work is not taken over by some one else. They carry on with their usual domestic work after this.

It was observed in Deohata, that recently there are tendencies to do more and more post-harvest operations outside a farmer's house or rather

The tiring but 'satisfying' post-harvest work apart, Ayesha, a housewife from a remote village in the Tangail district, contributes to the family's income in other ways, too. She laid out a small house garden as the basis for a better family nutrition and when possible she has a market oriented production of small quantities of common and seasonal fruits and vegetables.

'bari'. For example, the milling of paddy in rice mills is becoming more common and dryers are being installed to replace the sun drying by the women. But most of the villagers regretted that the qual-

ity of work done by rice mills is inferior to that done by the 'dhek'. Hence the installation of more rice mills is questionable, though some women have plans of installing one in their house. This is because, certain cheap dryers are available and is claimed to handle about three to four maunds per hour. This could be a reasonable investment, once they tackle the controversies.

Ayesha added with an aim for a dryer for her 'bari', "all activities to be done by women will have to be located in the 'bari' for the foreseeable future. The villagers are very conservative, and the custom of 'purdah' is quite strong." It is true that a rapid social change regarding 'purdah' in such interior villages cannot be expected.

After discussing all the interesting stages of Ayesha's post-harvest job and her plans, it was discovered that she contributed to the family's income in other ways, too.

A Village of Hope in Pakistan

Farhana Haque Rahman

Travelling south during the dry season from Rawalpindi toward Lahore on the Grand Trunk Road, one is struck by the landscape: rocky, serene and faded, with deeply eroded plateaus and precipitous escarpments that, from a distance, give the impression of a series of miniature Grand Canyons—dusty Acacia and long-spiky leaved cactus dominate. Where the terrain permits, farmers have planted wheat, millet and maize—patches of pale green. This is "Barani", (rain-fed) country, where hundreds of thousands of Pakistani men and women struggle to survive on land that is deteriorating before their eyes.

As one approaches the village of Pindmattay Khan in what is known as the Sohawa Catchment Area, tractors loaded with "Bajri", a mixture of gravel and sand, used for building, rumble north toward Rawalpindi or Islamabad. They share the road with large trucks decorated with paintings of local film stars and draped with glittering gold and silver decorations—flashes of colour in an otherwise drab world.

Pindmattay Khan is a typical village in this part of Punjab. Three enormous bantian trees shade the open market. Some of the houses are whitewashed mud brick; many are mere huts made of wild reed. A few cows, goats and chickens wander about the packed dirt courtyards, where the women work and children play. At the village well, women gather to fill their earthen pitchers with water.

Sajeda, a full pitcher balanced on her head, her six-year-old daughter Fahmida holding onto her "chador" (shawl), will talk as she walks the half kilometre to her mud plastered house. She is in her early 40s and has four children—three boys who are in primary school and Fahmida.

Her husband, Pateh, farms 8 acres of land he inherited from his father. The harvest of wheat, millet and lentils are good; what the family does not eat, he sells in the market. The income he earns from surplus crops has allowed him

to invest in poultry and goats, which Sajeda tends, and to send their sons to school. The family eats well, she says, and there's enough money to buy the embroidery materials for the quilts, tablecloths and cushions she makes; they can even afford to occasionally attend the local cinema.

But life has not always been this good.

Ten years ago, Pateh could cultivate only one third of his land for the rest was rocky, eroded and did not get enough water. Despite back-breaking labour, which Sajeda shared, yields were very low, and there was not enough food or income to sustain the family. In desperation, he left his ancestral land and went to Peshawar, where he found a menial, low-paying job that at least provided some income. Sajeda and their three young sons, stayed

four-metre eroded "cliff" that separated higher and lower land, these bunds hold and control the monsoon waters so that they no longer wash the soil away and can be used to irrigate the fields once the rains have stopped. Then this field was levelled and tractors ploughed deep, bringing up the fertile soil that lies under the surface rocks. After that, improved types of millet were planted and the right fertilizers used. He held up a long ear of millet. "This is the result."

Sajeda, now heading for a hillock behind the village to gather fuelwood, her daughter Fahmida still clutching her "chador", smiles in recollection. Pateh, not a man to accept miracles readily, was impressed but dubious. "Who has done this?" he had asked. The man answered: "The farmers themselves, with help from

not occur overnight, she notes. Earthen bunds had to be built, gullies plugged up, the land levelled and ploughed. The project made available the materials and equipment. The farmer provided most of the labour. When all of his 8 acres were ready, Pateh was given a small loan in the form of seeds and fertilizer through the local Farmers Cooperative. At first the harvests were still low—about 5 "maunds" (40 kilos to a maund) an acre—but he's a good farmer and listens carefully to the Extension Worker. He learned how to rotate crops and use fertilizer correctly, and now yields have more than doubled.

Her washing done, Sajeda returns to the house where her mother-in-law is cooking potato curry and "Roti", flat bread, on the open air stove. Wiping sweat from her forehead, she says a few words to her sister-in-law, who is busy applying a new coat of mud plaster, and then has to get on with her work. There are goats and chickens to be fed, cow-dung cakes (to be used as fuel) to make, food to prepare. The house must be swept and later she will help her sister-in-law with the plastering.

She's content, she says with a smile, and thankful that Allah has permitted her husband to return, and with him the improvements in her family's life. Pindmattay Khan is now a village of hope, not despair. Truly a miracle. The life-giving rains are still unpredictable, but crops now grow where before they would not and there's enough to eat. If Sajeda has time before the sun goes down, she will embroider another cushion cover.

(The Barani Area Development Project was initiated in 1981 in the Sohawa and Chammal Catchment Areas with an IFAD loan of US\$ 12.8 million. By the time the project ended in 1989, over 14,000 farming families had benefitted from soil and water conservation measures, improved seeds and fertilisers, livestock development, credit and strengthened Extension services. Agriculture was improved on over 64,000

See col. 4

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behind to work the land as best she could.

After several years of separation and survival with difficulty, Pateh's brothers told him that something new was happening in Pindmattay Khan: people from "outside" had come with a project called the "Barani Area Development Project" to help poor farmers fix their land and grow more crops. Skeptical at first, he was even persuaded to attend a field day at a demonstration plot not far from his village. He knew the land well and what he saw he could at first not believe: a plot not unlike his own, no longer worth cultivating, was not only grown and high with millet, but the ears were three times the size of those he had grown.

A Pakistani, who called himself an "Extension Worker", explained the miracle. First, he said, pointing to a concrete structure that looked like a staircase built into a

IFAD—the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

"And who is this IFAD?" "A United Nations Agency that works from a city called Rome, in a far-off country called Italy, an organization that is devoted to helping poor farmers like you grow more food and earn more money so that you can feed your families." "If I return from Peshawar—will this IFAD help me?" "Yes, it will help, but you must do most of the work." "I'm not afraid of work," said Pateh and went to tell his wife that he was coming back home to his land and family.

Sajeda and her little daughter spread her headload of twigs and branches out to dry in the courtyard before heading to a nearby pond to wash clothes and utensils. Before the pond was dug by the villagers to hold the monsoon rainwater, she had to walk many kilometers to do her washing. The changes that have made their life better did

MEN ARE THE HEAVIEST BURDEN FOR AFRICAN WOMEN

Women in sub-Saharan Africa remain subservient to men largely due to the age-old idea expressed in the saying "a home with two cocks crowing ceases to be a home".

The connotation that women must be submissive to men may sound crude, yet it remains one of the foundation stones of Africa's political, economic and social structures. And it explains why, for thousands of years, and African woman's place has been in the kitchen.

Some of that thinking has changed, but a lot of what governments claim to be doing to improve women's status often proves to be a political gimmick to sway female votes. On the ground little changes.

In most of Africa today, women, who outnumber men by between 3-5 in every 100 people — are by far the poorer sex. They are estimated to own less than two per cent of the region's total property and about 80 per cent are illiterate or semi-illiterate.

Yet experts say 50-70 per cent of current annual food production depends on women's labour. Also, without women standards of living and sanitation would fall dramatically, especially in rural areas.

Although women provide 50-80 per cent of the region's total farming and domestic labour, national development programmes — usually designed by men and often inspired by male prejudice — rarely benefit the majority of women who have inadequate access to social services.

As one African economist put it: "Government shout — they never act; basically because they are full of men and men in African have the monopoly of things, a tendency that seems to be growing contrary to what governments claim".

In some countries like Zambia, positive steps have been taken to involve women in development activities — though the results so far are negligible.

In line with the government's assertion that, after 26 years of self-rule, it is now serious about burying the "kitchen philosophy", a law was passed last year giving a widow the right to own 20 per

cent of the wealth of her deceased husband.

Until then, scores of women had been left in the cold for entrenched traditions never allowed property sharing between widows and relatives of the deceased, even so, the evil remains firmly in place in many African societies.

Minister of Finance and Development Planning, Gibson Chigaga, recently announced positive incentives aimed at women to achieve greater participation in development programmes.

In his 1991 budget speech, Chigaga said he wanted the old system of budgeting, "where women received nothing or very little" to die. He announced big increases in lending rates to 37 per cent for small-scale farmers and businesses, and to 40 per cent for big businesses — a move that will hit women badly.

Women face many other problems. Male resistance to treating them as equals seems as strong as ever at all levels of the community — from the village chauvinist refusing to eat meals with female family members and the stubborn banker unwilling to lend to female clients, all the way to the backward state bureaucrats who stick to a policy of "male promotions only" regardless of the skills and experience of women workers.

As one fisherman said: "It is not right to work under a woman, it is not right to be questioned at all by a woman, that is how we in Africa live, how our ancestors lived — full-stop".

Even among the educated cream of Africa, thousands of men still misinterpret a woman's role as meaning total submission to men and view equality of the sexes as a Western imposition.

Samuel Chinyama, 35, for instance, would not mind sharing a few cares with his wife, Linda, but if he did, he says, he would be stuck on what to do "if my parents and friends found me sweeping, cooking or serving food while my wife is reading a novel with her legs up on the table".

Chinyama is only one of the millions of Africans who share the hypocritical belief that "a man should only do manly jobs", even though scores of unmarried men in rural and urban Africa perform all the domestic chores without as much as a wink from parents or friends.

Some reject integration on grounds of fear, as one man said: "The trouble with liberation for women is that most women themselves do not understand it — they think it is revenge on men, to send us to

Chairperson of the Women's Affairs Committee, Mary Fulano, said: "We are moving into district councils, government departments, parastatals and the private sector to set up WID desks." But before Chigaga unveiled the credit scheme for women, the central bank had an-

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An African woman's lot is a tough one. As child-bearer, housewife, farmer, fetcher of water and firewood, most women are destined to a life of labour and service to men. Efforts to involve them in development programmes often run up against deep-seated male chauvinism which permeates the highest levels of government. But, as Gemini News Service reports, the Zambia government has launched a promising initiative for women farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs. By Elias Nyakutemba

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the kitchen and torture us at work when they are in power."

Yet such beliefs continue to contribute greatly to Africa's under-development. Said a historian: "African women are well known for their endurance, to hunger, heat and long hours of working in the field — what we have forgotten is that all that energy could easily be channelled into useful development."

In Southern Africa, for instance the art of farming with ox-drawn ploughs — traditionally the preserve of men — is fast being taken over by women. Experts believe that in rural areas large doses of investment and extension service could help women double current crop production in less than 10 years.

One major obstacle to integration lies in the two kinds of education — the Western style of formal education in schools and the traditional ideas of village teaching — which produce a cultural tension within many Africans.

Said a university lecturer: "It's like we do not really know the boundaries because the cultures are wide apart — what Africa does not know is what it should really adopt. At the moment, it's that fight which is going on. — GEMINI NEWS"

ELIAS NYAKUTEMBA has worked with Zambia Information Services since 1974. He contributes to regional newspapers, magazines and national radio.

From col. 6 hectares, and more than 10,000 hectares were reclaimed for cultivation.

Drawing on lessons learned and responding to the needs of smallholders in other parts of the "Barani" area, IFAD has designed a second project that will assist some 92,000 impoverished households to grow more food and earn more income.

Like the first, it will support self-help conservation measures, with greater emphasis on small-scale structures and the use of low-cost grass planting to stabilize the earthen bunds. Reforestation of denuded watersheds and fragile rangeland will help arrest erosion and increase supplies of fodder, fuelwood and timber.

The author is an official in the Information Division of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Rome, Italy.

Women Farmers Gain Foothold

TEN years ago, Malati Mandi was a nameless woman farmer. She and her counterparts were known only as kamrin, India's collective word for women labour.

Their work in the farm, though significant, went unrecognized and unappreciated.

They worked harder than men but received less wages. They didn't own anything in their names. The family land, family homes belonged to the men even though the women put in more labour to earn a living for the family, on top of doing all the housework.

Now, life for Malati and many other women farmers has shifted for the better. They have formed an organization called Samiti (Gramin Mahila Samiti Unnayan Samiti, or Rural Working Women's Development Society) which has endowed them with some powers and which sees that they are given access to facilities such as training and credit.

Through the organization, the members were able to air some of their grievances and to gain representation in the Panchayats (locally elected Councils) where some of their members serve a term of five years.

Similar organizations have sprouted from the nucleus Samiti. These organizations have provided women with a forum to learn about their rights and to consult with Panchayat members to make sure government programs are tailored to their needs.

The most successful activity undertaken by the Samiti in Malati's district is the conversion of wasteland into sericulture plantations. Training provided by the Forest and Sericulture Departments taught the women to make compost rather than use synthetic fertilizer which could harm the soil.

They cultivated Tassar silkworms. Ninety-eight per cent of their trees have survived—a record surpassing even that of plantations directly under the government.

Women in other countries are also achieving successes in the traditionally male-dominated area of farming. In Lao PDR, Minh Pathammavong runs an integrated farm which she and her husband developed through hard work and resourcefulness.

"I realised that if we want to be good and successful farmers, we must develop our farms through our own initiatives," she told a gathering of women farmers at a forum in Manila organised by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and

the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

"I was thrown into farming when I got married in 1973. At the beginning, I had no experience in agriculture, but I loved it very much," says Minh. At that time, all they had was a five-hectare rice field and about 100 hens. After the hens had laid eggs, they bought 200 more hens. "This way," adds Minh Pathammavong, "we developed our farm slowly with our own investment."

In 1987 she took part in a

Women perform most farming activities, but mainly as invisible, unrecognised workers.

by Lita Consignado-Lee

project initiated by the UNDP and the Food and Agriculture Organization. The project integrates farming with fish culture.

Their farm today has 7,000 hens, a fishpond, buffalos, coconut and kapok trees, ornamental flowers, a vegetable and fruit garden, rice-mills, bulldozers, jeeps and a mini bus.

Minh's job includes selling the produce in the market, keeping the accounts and looking after the welfare of 40 employees. "I take care of them and their children by providing them three good meals every day and good salaries," she says.

Hao Lijun, from Beijing, is another successful woman

farmer. After finishing high school in the township, Hao returned to the village to farm. She heads a contract pig farm with the help of the local government and fellow villagers.

In 1989 the farm sold 682 pigs to exceed the government's quota 70 per cent and the contracted target by 30 per cent.

The farm received awards from the municipal farm bureau and the municipal livestock bureau. It was also cited as a "skilled and champion advanced collective" by the mu-

nicipal and country women's federations. Hao was herself recognized as an "advanced individual."

Unaisi Volavola is a sugarcane farmer from Fiji. When her husband died, she single-handedly took charge of the farm and looked after the welfare of the family.

"The task was difficult at first," says Unaisi. "Money for capital development activities, such as purchasing farm implements and animals, was scarce. But the birth of the Co-operative Thrift and Credit Society alleviated part of the problems by giving the farmers access to financial assistance."

Her gender has not been a problem. Unaisi explains: "I

always engage my sons in harvesting while I have my own pair of bullocks and implements, plus a tractor for farm cultivation and maintenance. For technical advice I am free to ask the Fiji Sugar Corporation farm and Field Advisers."

She adds, though, that individual farmers usually lack technical skills, especially the training for such things like credit simplification, and have inadequate access to credit facilities and procedures.

Like Unaisi, Do Thi Kim Lien of Vietnam is also the sole breadwinner after her husband deserted the family, which includes her husband's parents and grandparents. She manages a farm 165 km from Hanoi and 22 km from the district town—not accessible by road. She says she manages all the farm work from ploughing, harrowing, seed sowing, transplanting of rice, manuring to harvesting the crops.

Although she reached only the fifth grade,

"Women carry the bulk of farming activities in Asia and the rest of the world, but their substantive role is not reflected in government programs," says Yuriko Uehara, the ADI's specialist for Women in Development.

Indeed, as Ms. Irene M. Santiago, chief of the Asia-Pacific section of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), notes, "If the region wants food security and sustainable development, it must be realised that supporting women is a vital necessity." —Dephnetus Women's.



Women taking part in the post-harvest works in the fields in preparation of the next crop.