

South's Food Security : The Gender Angle

Raana Haider writes from Cairo

"THE woman peasant is the most oppressed and exploited woman in Mozambique. Reduced to an object of pleasure, a reproducer of children, a producer of food for the family's subsistence, an unsalaried worker in the service of the 'head of the family', the woman peasant at the same time has a very great revolutionary potential from which the Mozambican Revolution cannot be cut off", said Samora Machel in an address to the second conference of the Organisation of Mozambican Women (OMM), held in Beira, 1976.

"Often relegated to areas where soil is poor and the ecosystem fragile, women farmers have little access to land titles, credit, appropriate tools, extension services and agricultural inputs. The result is that food production is poor and the land is easily depleted of its productive capacity with serious environmental and social consequences." This was a brief on women and sustainable agriculture at a workshop on Women and the World Conservation Strategy, Gland, Switzerland, 1987.

"Development, if not engendered, is endangered," according to Human Development Report, UNDP 1995.

What is the relationship between women and food security? Women have the majority share in family food production worldwide, differing by region. In sub-Saharan Africa, women grow 80 per cent of the household food; 70 to 80 per cent in the Indian subcontinent and 50 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. In all regions, roughly half of all cash crops are cultivated by women farmers and agricultural labourers, reports *The World's Women: Trends and Statistics* 1970-1990, United Nations, 1991.

The global food crisis demands an analysis of gender-specific constraints on food production and a gender-sensitive analysis of policy implications. Gender relations of production is defined by Jean Davison in *Agricultural, Women and Land*, Westview Press, Colorado, 1988 as socio-economic relation between female and male that are characterised often by differential assignment of labour tasks, control over decision-making and differential access to and control over the allocation of resources, including land and income.

The household unit should not be treated as a collective unit representing a single individual (often the male head of household). The differential allocation of resources within the household determines the economic standing of the individual. Declining soil fertility, increasing loss of male labour to migration has resulted in increasing the woman's workload. In addition to the unique role of biological reproduction, she has virtual sole responsibility for childcare. Social reproduction in the form of domestic work and other services are vital for the survival of the family unit and society is also her exclusive domain. Her productive work, whether paid or unpaid constitutes a triple area of workload and responsibility.

The introduction of large-scale cash cropping for urban needs and export earnings in developing countries has had fundamental and long-reaching implications on the lives of rural women and men. As men

have concentrated on market cash crops, they have in turn taken control of the better land, monopolised agricultural credit facilities, production technologies and agricultural schemes. Women have been relegated to marginalised land and subsistence farming on meagre resources. Correspondingly, her contribution to the cash crop farming has been reduced to labour-intensive tasks such as hoeing, weeding, harvesting and processing. The control of the production and the income accruing from the cash crop cultivation is within the purview of men.

According to Michael Cowen is 'Change is State Power, International Conditions and Peasant Producers', in *The Journal of Development Studies* 1986, in Kenya, maize tends to be cultivated by men if it has an exchange value and by women if it is grown as a subsistence food crop. When maize loses its commercial value, the crop reverts to female production.

The bi-modal strategy of agriculture — one which feeds the commercial sector and one the subsistence sector has also double-edged effects. Labour-saving technology, one of the key features of cash cropping agricultural production is highly productive and profitable to the entrepreneurial class of men. However, the impact on rural women's lives is less positive — the subsistence sector receives minimum attention and investment.

Women, today have been substantially affected by the reallocation of resources as cash

crop demands shift and alter the economic production system; landholdings, land-use patterns and production techniques. In this context, cash and not land has become the most crucial resource remarks Victoria Bernal in *Lossing Ground — Women and Agriculture on Sudan's Irrigated Schemes: Lessons from a Blue Nile Village*, in *Agriculture, Women and Land*, edited by Jean Davison, Westview Press, Colorado, 1988.

The lack of land ownership and income makes women economically vulnerable to men. In the African context where women produce 80 per cent of agriculture, the term 'tenure' applies to land-holding rights, including land which is transmitted through inheritance, loan or rented for an established exchange value and outright sales. Male access to land is largely based on social factors such as rank among male siblings, size of family and status within the community. The fate of being male is of little or no consequence. However, women's access to land is often dependent on their relationship to men and their marital status notes Jean Davison.

Marginalised the land hierarchy, a woman is also denied access to credit which would give her the power to purchase land. In a study in Cameroun, only 2 out of 56 Young Farmer Resettlement Scheme Loans were awarded to women. A district officer, when questioned as to why so few women received loans, replied : "This

programme is designed to help young families stay in the rural area and of course no self-respecting man would want to move to a farm owned by his wife."

Barring economic necessity/desperation, there is considerable male reservation to women participating in gainful agricultural production. The Gezira Scheme implemented in Sudan found "it is highly improper for younger women to appear in the fields unless the money and labour situation really became desperate.... New rules of decency required a greater segregation of women than in the past as much in the organisation of the household as for outside occupations. Strong resistance arose towards women going to the fields to work and it even became disgraceful for a woman to be compelled by poor economic circumstances to go to the fields". It was noted by Georges Brauscha in a 1964 University of Khartoum, 'Case-study on Village Development in the Gezira Scheme'.

With limited landholding rights, minimum access to credit schemes, women are further marginalised by denial to improved agricultural techniques, agricultural extension programmes, mechanisation, improved seeds, pesticides, herbicides, insecticides, fertilisers and other tools and means to increase productivity. The tools necessary for increasing agricultural production are frequently harnessed by men, leaving women reliant on physical labour. Membership to agricultural cooperatives and associations are also often exclusively male organisations. Agricultural schools often deny admission to female applicants.

Even though farmers with access to credit and modern agricultural inputs have increased their output, their rising contribution to total food supplies is frequently insufficient to offset the declining production of the majority of women producers. Women's role in providing food security is only possible by equipping women with the means to increase production but not at the expense of themselves. For women, there is no need for more work. However, there is an urgent need for less and more efficient means of performing existing work.

Women constitute the central element in the food production chain. They execute different cost-benefit ratios from the same set of policy options. There is an urgent need to evaluate the impact of these policies on all agricultural producers and not men only. For the advantages of technological change are never shared equally by all population groups. The recipients of technological change are the beneficiaries; in the process, many disadvantaged women have been marginalised. However, since women are disproportionately the global food producers — food security demands that women receive more attention from resource agents and development planners. As backbone of the country they have earned the right.

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No EXCUSE...

Densely - populated cities are burdened by heavy traffic, air and noise pollution. Road-widening is a temporary solution. A human and environment-friendly transportation system fosters use of bicycles and public transport.



1996 Omega Tour: Yokohama, Singapore, PGA Champ, H/L, 9:30 World Cup Classics 1990, West Germany v Yugoslavia 1st Round, 11:30 Asia Sports Show, 12:00 Inside PGA Tour, 12:30 Formula Nippon From Fuji Circuit, Japan 2:30 Cricket... The Great Asian Matches Wills World Cup Cricket, Pakistan v India, 8:00 Asia Road Racing Champs, Indonesia 9:00 Formula Nippon From Fuji Circuit, Japan 10:30 Trans World Sport 12:00mn Prime Boxing 1:30 Thai Kickboxing Highlights 2:30 Sports India, 3:30 Marlboro League 96, Chinese National Football League Tianjin v Jinan 5:30 International Motorsports News

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