Case Studies

Women, Agriculture and Food Security

Around the world, 60 to 80 percent of small farming is done by women.

WOMEN’S HEALTH AND FARMING

At age 34, Dukhani Chaudhary in Alaun, Nepal, wonders why she came down with tuberculosis three years ago. “The doctors told me I had TB,” she recalled. “They said it was because I was working too much and not eating enough.” More and more rural women in Nepal are turning up with health problems that range from mild to serious. In Birganj, doctors at the lone government hospital say they are observing more cases of sickness among women than men, and the situation is not likely to improve. The reality is that the women do all of the work in the house and in the fields while their men have gone away to earn money in cities, a recent need and custom in the new, globalized economy.

Alaun is a typical Nepali village. Nearly all of its able-bodied men have left for Birganj, the city some 10 km away, or have made their way across the border to India to look for jobs in the transportation and construction businesses. The responsibility of cultivating patches of land, tilling fields and harvesting crops of rice and potatoes is borne entirely by women who age prematurely under the burden of child bearing, rearing and tending to large households which include aged parents. Most village women also walk miles daily to fetch firewood, fodder and water from vanishing forest lands.

According to Dr. Qussay Al-Nahi, chief of health section of UNICEF’s country office, the women are more vulnerable to illness also because of their socio-cultural position in society. “Discrimination against girls begins from birth. They don’t feel they have the right to question any burdens put on them. In addition, the men often return with sexually transmitted diseases and pass these on to their wives.”

Source: Adapted from “Healthier Women means Healthier Economies”, in IPS, 7 January 1998.

AN AFRICAN WOMAN’S STORY

Wanjiku is thirty years old and lives on a small farm in Kenya about a 100 miles from Nairobi. She has three children. To make cash for health care, schools, etc., her husband works in Nairobi, coming home once a month.

Wanjiku has been the family member responsible for farming their small plot and providing basic food for the whole family, which is common in Africa. Her days typically begin at 5 am and she is busy until dark, gathering water, tending the house and children, washing clothes, making all meals, and doing all farm work.

Wanjiku tries to grow enough vegetables beyond her family’s food needs to sell to help keep her sons in primary school. But on his last visit, her husband told her that the government has been advised that growing flowers for export to Germany, Kenya could get more loans to help with its debt repayments. Her husband told her that the government gave him a small loan to buy seeds to start growing flowers, so she must forget about vegetables (there is no aid for growing food to eat or sell locally).

Wanjiku was concerned how were the children to eat. Her husband said that they will buy tinned food with the money from selling flowers. But she knows that until the profits from the flowers come in, she will need to use the remaining food carefully and make sure that her two sons in primary school eat their fill first. When Wanjiku’s young daughter was sick, Wanjiku decided not to go to the health clinic in the village to see the nurse because she does not have the one shilling fee that the clinic now charges and hopes that she can treat her at home. The child needs more food, but they cannot eat flowers.
FOOD SECURITY

Case Studies
Women, Agriculture and Food Security (continued)

SUBSISTENCE FARMERS, EL SALVADOR

Yolanda Lopez (27 years) lives with her husband and young family in the countryside. They try to make a living on a plot of rented land. “I get up at 4:00 a.m., light the fire, make coffee and fetch water from the well. Our nearest well is some 30 minutes away, and I make several trips a day.

Then I wash, grind and pat the maize for tortillas (pancakes made from maize). If you’re quick you can grind all the maize in about two hours. I prepare about 60 tortillas each day because that is all we have to eat—tortillas and beans. Then I work in the fields. We grow maize, millet and beans.

At 6 pm we return home. Then I prepare the next meal; sometimes we have rice as well as beans. We go to bed at about 8 p.m. I usually leave the washing to Sunday, also the sewing and mending. They say Sunday is a day of rest; for the poor, every day is a work day.

Our lives are difficult. We barely survive. It only takes something like bad weather or illness and there may be no food. There is no help available for us even though we show our willingness to work hard.”

Source: Trocaire

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the similarities in the lives of the women in the case studies above? What social and what economic forces have an impact on them?

Put yourself in the place of such women when they can’t grow enough food for their children. They may see their children going hungry, becoming ill, and even dying. What would you feel as you went through a day in the life of such a woman? Express your concerns, fears and hopes.

Even though they make up the majority of small farmers, women in developing countries face discrimination in owning land (in some countries, a widow can be thrown off her land when her husband dies—this is a growing problem in some parts of Africa, where men are dying of AIDS, and many women are becoming widows with no way to feed their children). Women in traditional societies have a difficult getting credit to buy seeds, etc. They are often left out of community decision making that impacts farming. Training for using technology and new methods for better agricultural yields is often targeted to men in these communities. A recent FAO survey found that female farmers receive only 5% of all agricultural extension services worldwide. The growing farming-for-export crop production in developing countries is most often controlled by men and is encroaching on female-controlled domestic farming, needed for family food security. The U.N. has said “women held the key to food production,” and changes are necessary to assist them. Discuss the changes needed, how you would prioritize them, and who could help bring these changes about, on a local, national, regional and international level.
Case Studies
Women, Agriculture and Food Security (continued)

SIGNS OF HOPE
Below are two brief case studies to demonstrate that positive change can happen for women farmers. Read these and the prayer in the next column. Discuss ways of sharing hope and using the prayer in different settings and with different groups.

WOMEN AND FARMING IN EL SALVADOR

Genoveva Landaverde and her family used to live in extreme poverty, with barely enough to eat and nothing to sell in the market. Sometimes they survived on half a tortilla a day. Genoveva was one of the first women to join the Association of Women for Peace (AMUP), located in San Francisco Morazan, a mountainous area of El Salvador. The Association, sponsored by the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, gives special assistance to women farmers. For the last three years, she has grown a variety of plants on her small plot, including tomatoes, strawberries and medicinal plants, using a simple irrigation system which helps produce crops throughout the year. Genoveva is able to feed her family and share their surplus with the old and sick. She believes that God has made her fortunate and so she now has a responsibility to help feed others.

A FOCUS ON WOMEN’S FARMING NEEDS

After learning that women worked two to three times as many hours as men, an extension training project in Ethiopia decided to hold training sessions in the villages to accommodate women’s busy caretaking and farming schedules. Listening carefully to the women helped extension agents identify topics that women would be eager to learn about and could really benefit from. The training has been helpful to the women.

In India, research revealed that increasing poultry production, which is controlled by women, improved both household nutrition levels and cash savings. Increasing goat herds, on the other hand, set back efforts to expand women’s education, because girls were pulled out of school to tend the larger herds. Based on this information, project planners shifted their emphasis to poultry production.

PRAYER

God of justice, help us be co-creators of justice.

Today we pray for justice for those who labor in the fields.

For those who
Plant the seeds.
Weed the fields,
Water the crops,
Control the pests,
Harvest the produce,
Transport the bounty.
Bargain in the market.
Preserve the harvest
Fear for the weather.
Pay for the seed.
Glean the fields.
Waste nothing.
Feed their family.
Fall to sleep exhausted.
Get up early to work.
Go to bed hungry.
Have little to give to their children.
Are full of gratitude for the smallest harvest.
Who struggle to keep hope alive.

God of love,
Bless all mothers struggling
To love and feed their children,
And help us to play our part
To make hope and food
Abundant for all.