

# No Shortcut to Food Security: From A Women's Perspective

Summary of the full study prepared by Isis International-Manila, 1999

by Luz Maria Martinez

The theme “No Shortcut to Food Security: From a Women’s Perspective” has been an Isis advocacy for the past few years. This advocacy tries to capture the point that to ensure food security, the society must ensure environmental sustainability and the equitable distribution of wealth for women and men. The foundation must be built on the qualitative aspects of life. Without these elements, the next century will breed only greater hunger, deprivation and conflicts. This foundation must include empowerment, self-reliance in the context of participatory democracy, access to essential resources and services, means and access to information for decision-making, diversification, the reshaping of the sexual division of labour, institutions that safeguard civil and social rights especially of women, and peaceful alternatives for social conflict resolution. (*No Short Cut to Food Security: From a Woman’s Perspective*, Nancy Arcellana, Isis International-Manila Information Pack on Women and Food Security, 1996). In short, there are no quick fixes or shortcuts to food security.



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It is with this advocacy that Isis International-Manila has conducted this research. In previous years, Isis has produced reports and publications that examined obstacles to food security vis-a-vis globalisation, state initiatives for liberalisation and the macro impacts of economics and politics. This time, we felt that it was important to take a look at the other obstacles women encounter in carrying out their role to produce and provide food for their families.

This research tries to look at women's status and roles in ensuring food security in four Southeast Asian countries: Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam and Laos. Drawing from data relevant to these countries, the paper looks at the impact of international restructuring and neo-liberal policies on food production. We wanted to identify the impact of gender blindness on translating policies and programmes.

The first two countries are viewed as democratic, and have subscribed to the global free trade models. The other two are under pressure to do the same but until now have maintained a socialist model but taking initial steps to open up to market pressures. We asked how women fared in these systems? How markedly different are their qualities of life and what obstacles do they encounter that are similar or different?

The research was conducted from November 1998 to January 1999. It is a survey and analysis of existing secondary materials. It is by no means an exhaustive survey of articles and reports. Its main goal was to prepare for the "Peoples' Response to the Food Security Crisis in Southeast Asia Con-

ference" that went on from 24 to 25 February 1999.

### **Globalisation and the Asian Crisis**

The last two decades have witnessed a much greater internationalisation of the production and sale of commodities and services and a much bigger flow of capital across borders than at any other time in world history. The combined turnover of the major stock markets in a single day is equivalent to the turnover in international trade in one year.

## **Globalisation has resulted to increasing displacement of small farmers from their land and the impoverishment of**

The last decades have also seen a massive decline in living standards, a growing inequality between income and asset distribution and a sharpening of the scissors effect between "town" and "country" in the "Third World." The 1998 UN Human Development Report notes that "the world's richest people have a combined wealth of over US\$1 trillion, equal to the annual income of the poorest 47 percent of the world's people.

Average per capita income of the richest countries was 11 times that of the poorest in 1970. It rose to 38 times in 1975 and as much as 58 times in 1985. The report also admits that "inequalities between men and women, between ethnic groups, and between geographic regions are particularly

tenacious... Poor regions such as the state of Chiapas in Mexico usually stay relatively poor even when the economy as a whole expands."

The Asian economic crisis, which some argue is a by-product of globalisation, has further increased poverty in Southeast Asia. For example, it has had a massive impact on the production, availability and accessibility of basic food products. In the Philippines, agricultural production dropped by a staggering 12.7 percent in the first half of 1998. In Malaysia, the volume of imported rice increased by about 13.5 percent in the first quarter of 1998 compared to that of the same period last year. In Indonesia, some 80 percent of animal husbandry enterprises have been closed due to lack of food for livestock.

The economic crisis has also forced food prices to rise dramatically. Over the past two years, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines have more than once raised the prices of food. Prices of main food items in these countries have increased by 10 to 20 percent. The crisis has also resulted in the restriction on the availability of loans even to buy food products and a decline in investments in agriculture and food production.

The last two decades have seen a major restructuring of agriculture towards export-oriented production. Land and crop conversion schemes were pushed to shift from subsistence to commercial crop production, specifically of export-oriented crops. Government support was shifted to large-scale commercial agriculture, which marginalised small-scale farmers. In the Philippines, for

instance, Republic Act 7900 (High Value Crops Development Act of 1995) provides incentives to agricultural business corporations to shift to export-crop production. Tax holidays, infrastructure support and bank loans are some of the incentives offered. Land and production capacities become more concentrated in the hands of a few landowners or corporations. This has led to the bankruptcy of many local farmers.

The export-oriented model of agricultural production and the resulting decline in food crop production has led to food-importing countries becoming more dependent on the industrialised countries and on transnational corporation (TNCs) for their most important and basic food requirements. This reliance for basic food-stuffs on imports undermines the role of national governments. The World Bank, World Trade Organisation (WTO), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and TNCs become more influential in determining domestic development directions.

**Social Impact**

Globalisation has resulted to increasing displacement of small farmers from their land and the impoverishment of the rural poor. The displacement has resulted in a massive increase in urban and overseas migration. There has been an increase in labour migration, particularly of women, from the agricultural to the industrial sector. In Thailand, over 80 percent of the workforce in the export industry are women, aged between 16 and 25 years old. They earn low wages. In the Philippines, peasant wo-

men and their families are displaced from agricultural activities and become domestic helpers in town centres and become service workers in restaurants and the “hospitality” industries, which may include prostitution. The shifts in production patterns have led to the further marginalisation of women and their dislocation from their traditional sources of livelihood. The yearning for land and the question of land reform is very much a burning issue for the rural, semi-urban and urban poor in these countries.

negative consequences for women. It is also widening rural and urban disparities as development assistance primarily benefits urban and semi-urban areas where nine percent and 11 percent respectively of the population reside.

**Women and agriculture**

Statistics from the UN indicate that except for the Philippines, there were more females than males in Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos in 1995. This trend is projected to continue until year 2010. (see Table 1)

**Table 1 Sex structure of the population, 1995**

	1995-Population (000)		2010-Population (000)		Women/100 men--1995
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Philippines	34,149	35,108	44,106	45,231	97
Thailand	29,366	28,898	33,627	33,111	102

Source: UN, *The World's Women, 1995*

The increasing degradation of the environment is also creating a serious and even critical impact on agriculture. Rapid industrialisation and the export-driven model of the region had led to acute pollution and depletion of soil and soil fertility, forests and fisheries.

For the non-capitalist economies in Southeast Asia—Vietnam and Laos—initial indications show that Vietnam has, so far, weathered the crisis better than its ASEAN neighbours. For example, food production in Vietnam increased in 1998 and the dong seems to have been better protected than other currencies. But the full impact of the crisis is perhaps yet to be felt.

The initial impacts of the “reforms” are leaving gaps in social services with particularly

There is also a high concentration of women in agriculture in the four countries studied (as seen in Table 2). In Vietnam and Laos, over 70 percent of economically active women are in agriculture. In the Philippines and Thailand, there is a concentration of women in the agriculture and service sectors, a trend which follows overall international trends in the service sectors in developing and developed countries. The Philippines has the highest percentage of women in the service sector and the largest gap in percentage points in comparison to the percentage of men in the service sector, indicating a clear emerging trend of a sex-segregated work force pattern.

There are a small percentage of women in industry in

**Table 2 Employment by economic activity, 1998**

	Agriculture				Industry				Services			
	Percentage of economically active male population		Percentage of economically active female population		Percentage of economically active male population		Percentage of economically active female population		Percentage of economically active male population		Percentage of economically active female population	
	1980-94		1980-94		1980-94		1980-94		1980-94		1980-94	
Philippines	61	54	37	31	15	16	16	14	25	29	47	56
Thailand	--	42	--	38	--	26	--	19	--	26	--	31
Vietnam	71	70	75	73	16	17	10	11	13	13	15	16
Laos	77	76	82	81	7	7	4	5	16	17	13	14

Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 1998

Note: This classification is based on *where* the work is performed rather than the *type* of work performed. Agriculture in this definition includes traditional farming and hunting, forestry and fishing. Services include personal services *outside* the home. Therefore “economic” activity here is assumed to mean income-generating activity through the sale of a person’s labour and/or labour products in the marketplace.

the four countries, with the largest gaps in Thailand and Vietnam. This again follows international trends that display a sex-segregated work force pattern in the industrial sector. It is also worth noting here the decline in the male and female populations active in agriculture in the Philippines—the largest decline according to the four-country data.

their family and work are closely tied together.

This integration of women’s family and work is particularly the case among rural women and therefore has a major impact on agricultural “production.” Traditional female activities or work, such as growing and processing food consumed by their families, gathering fuel wood, collecting water and

countries are still the overwhelming majority of the population. A majority of the poor in rural areas, both men and women, are still excluded from this fundamental right to land. In fact, the concentration of wealth in developing countries is inextricably linked to the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few ruling elite families.

In Vietnam, “land is owned by the entire people, not to be privatised nor bought or sold” (Eighth National Congress Documents). Land can be leased from the state, known as “land use” rights. This has led to a far more equal distribution of land in Vietnam, compared to the situation in other developing countries. But even under this more “equal”

## Land is fundamental to agriculture. Land rights, therefore, is a fundamental right of the majority of agricultural toilers, who in the developing countries are still the overwhelming majority of

The data presented here also illustrate the problems involved in attempting to get a relatively clear picture of the actual work that women do—the actual working time involved, the types of occupation that women are engaged in and the economic and social value of women’s work. Today, it is widely acknowledged even in World Bank literature that, for most women, whether in industry, services or agriculture,

cooking are all unpaid work essential to the survival of families, communities and societies. None of this “work” is accounted for in statistics measuring work.

### **Women’s Land Rights: Ownership, Access and Control**

Land is fundamental to agriculture. Land rights, therefore, is a fundamental right of the majority of agricultural toilers, who in the developing

distribution, land allocation shrinks for women as plots increase. (see Table 3)

“In Asia, the most prevalent barrier to acquiring real property is inheritance laws which favour male inheritance over female,” according to the FAO Women and Population Division. The Beijing Platform for Action makes the removal of barriers to women’s access to land a high priority.

**Table 3 Agricultural land allocation based on area and sex of household head (%), 1998, for Vietnam**

Allocated Area (sq m)	Woman	Man
0-1000	14.0	6.5
1001-2000	20.6	10.7
2001-3000	20.6	15.6
3001-4000	15.2	13.1
4001-6000	12.1	17.4
6001-9000	8.2	12.2
9000-18000	6.7	16.5
>18000	2.8	8.1
	100	100

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization, 1998

**Table 4 Women-headed household, fertility rates and contraception, 1998**

	Percentage of women-headed households
Philippines	11
Thailand	22
Vietnam	32
Laos	--

Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 1998

### Access Rights

Even where law formally recognises a woman's right to own property, there are a number of factors that undermine this formal right by ignoring or denying women's access to land. A number of these factors pertain to cultural practices, which discriminate against women. One such practice is the "myth" of the male-headed household. Table 4 points to the large number of women-headed households ranging from 11 percent in the Philippines to 32 percent in Vietnam. These facts challenge the image of the model rural household as being male-headed.

Wherever there is a male

earner, women's earnings also form a major contribution to the household. Moreover, facts from the FAO Women and Population Division show that a larger percentage of women's earnings go to basic family maintenance compared to that of men's. Strong factual evidence show that it is women who take on the main responsibility for the manifested care of the household and, in this sense, are the genuine "heads" of households.

### Cultural Practices

Cultural practices are cited as one of the main reasons for unequal access to land for women. For example, land accessibility for women becomes complicated when getting married or divorced, especially when marrying outsiders from their own home villages. Because a woman is supposed to move to her husband's village after marriage, she cannot bring her previously allocated portion of land to her new home nor continue to cultivate on that portion. This flows from the land non-ownership laws and village labour being co-operatively pooled.

This is also a problem noted in other studies where women accede the little rights they have to their husbands. In a number of cases, this flows from women's perception of how society and their husbands in particular would want a "good" wife to behave. It could be a "trade-off" for achieving domestic "harmony."

Cultural factors also apply when it comes to women's control over land that they may formally have rights to. Land control would cover a range of decisions made on the use of the land, such as what crops

to plant, what and how much inputs to use, whom to hire, how much to sell, and control over returns.

### Security of Tenure

The Women and Population Division of the FAO describes security of tenure in this manner: "Land tenure refers to a set of rights which a person or an organisation holds in land. Security of tenure is not limited to private ownership but can exist in a variety of forms such as leases on public land or user rights to communal property. ... Tenure enables the holder to make management decisions on how land-based resources will be used for immediate household needs and long-term sustainable investment."

### Knowledge and Skills

Except for Laos, the literacy rate for women in three of the four countries surveyed is quite high. However, the statistics in themselves do not tell the full story that includes the quality of education, attainment of skills, and accomplishments of females. The statistics do not reflect the literacy of women in urban as opposed to rural areas.

The nature of education and skills development for rural women needs reviewing. As in the case of Vietnam where educational opportunities are available, the thrust of skills development is to satisfy the needs of economic globalisation that focuses on industrialisation, the consumption of the middle-class, and/or exportation as in the case of crafts training.

In situations where rural food production skills development are available, it is much less available for women than it is for men. Rural women who

are the growers and producers of local crops are likewise rarely seen as holders of knowledge.

### Access to Credit

Women's access to credit is part of the problem of inadequate credit availability for small farmers. Women, however, face particular problems resulting in them receiving only a minor share of total agricultural credit even in countries where they play a dominant role in food production. Some of the factors that limit women's access to credit are:

- ♦ Their inability to meet collateral requirements demanded by formal lending institutions such as banks due to their lack of access to land, cattle and other tools of production
- ♦ Complicated application procedures that alienate women.
- ♦ Extension programmes mainly oriented to men

### Conclusions

Because of the severe time and funding restrictions allocated to this research paper, there were a number of areas that were not studied in-depth. Among the areas identified for further study are:

- ♦ The state of grassroots organisations of women in the four countries and the region. This is also the most important question of strategy that challenges women: How to develop a powerful grassroots movement of women who take on these issues and assert themselves on the "powers that be," and involving women in rural grassroots campaigns and encouraging them to have a voice in the decision-making and leadership.
- ♦ Another area of further study is to see how local NGOs and community-based organisations can concretely contribute



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Women's contribution in agriculture remains invisible.

to the empowerment of rural women by transforming traditional values that are obstacles to women.

In this summary, the components of the study that looked at land use and deforestation, water scarcity and irrigation, biodiversity versus monoculture and alternative practices were left out. The full study however looks into these areas.

### Recommendations

1. A comprehensive land reform programme must address the issue of land rights for women. Such a programme must ensure women's access to land and women's participation in decision making.
2. A comprehensive and region-wide education programme with two major thrusts:
  - ♦ Education and training of rural women of all ages with special focus on adult literacy and training to raise the educational level of rural women and girl children and to cater to specialised training programmes which would benefit women food producers
  - ♦ Education for the general public, gender sensitivity training aimed at raising women's social status.
3. Promotion of alternative

forms of agriculture

4. The democratisation of the economy and politics at all levels of society's institutions—from the state to the family so that women and other marginalised people are fully involved and included.

5. Regional campaigns that address:

- ♦ International agricultural agreements and patents, to lobby for a change in direction of the Agreements on Agriculture (AoA) under the WTO, against transnational corporations and against the monopoly of seed and agrochemical companies
- ♦ Against privatisation of basic social services
- ♦ Environmental campaigns against the destruction of lands, air and water as well as preventing the destruction of indigenous communities and their lands.

To request the full version of the study, write to Luz Maria Martinez, Isis International-Manila, PO Box 1837, Quezon City Main, Quezon City 1100, Philippines, Fax: (632) 924-1065, E-mail: <luz@isiswomen.org>.✉

*Luz Maria Martinez is the manager of the Research and Advocacy Programme of Isis International-Manila.*