

Women Farmers Harvest More

By Olena Holubenko

KYIV—Nadia Kompaniyets was one of the first women in Ukraine to start her own farm in the Zaporizhzhya oblast (province) in 1992. Today, she is doing well enough to give money to 44 pensioners and take care of poor families and veterans of World War II. With her help, three village school graduates have also gotten admission to the Melitopol Agricultural Academy.

In Mykolaiv oblast, Halyna Vasylyeva too has managed to achieve something similar. Vasylyeva started her farm in Novobuzk and over the years, she has set up grain and seed processing units which have led to a 15 percent increase in profitability. Vasylyeva's farm covers 720 hectares and this year her crop yields were more than double the yields on collective farms. Like Kompaniyets, Vasylyeva too takes care of pensioners and responsibilities like medical services, money and food in the village also fall on her shoulders.

Both Kompaniyets and Vasylyeva have succeeded in achieving so much because they are a part of an initiative by the NGO Council of Women Farmers of Ukraine which has brought together women farmers from 14 oblasts in the republic.

This initiative not only brings together the women farmers but also other women from the villages. "We united

to help the women find faith in their own strength. Our purpose is to teach village women the market economy, encourage women entrepreneurs in rural areas and support the development of small and medium scale village businesses," says Lyudmyla Klebanova, president of the council.

Another success story of a woman who is a part of this initiative is that of Tamara May who has a 24-hectare farm in Kharkiv. May has converted half of her farm into a garden and is developing a programme called the "Gardens of Ukraine." May, however, is known not only for her good yields—she has also adopted two children and is a guardian for 18 others. Over the years, May has raised 26 orphans, 12 of whom have already achieved compulsory technical education. Now May is working on the expansion of a project aimed at setting up family-type children's homes. Five such homes have already been established in the country, and May has moved on to providing public education on bringing up orphans in village families.

This move to organise women farmers was much needed in Ukraine because, to begin with, 8.8 million of the 26 million Ukrainian women live in villages. Also according to the Committee of Statistics, of the 35,670 registered farms, 12 percent are headed by women. During the last two years,

there has also been a two percent increase in the number of women's farms. Half of these farms are registered in the southern oblasts of Odessa, Mykolaiv and Kherson.

What this NGO is hoping to achieve is not an easy task. Ukrainian agriculture is in a shambles and is not even able to supply enough food to the people. There are many reasons for this: market relations are legislatively regulated and there is a lack of technical equipment and energy supply. Moreover, the backwardness of land cultivation techniques has led to reduced production.

For instance, the Nizhyn region in Chernohiv oblast has a unique fertile soil and there was a time when it was very productive and Nizhyn cucumbers were exported as a special delicacy. "Now you can take as much land as you can cultivate but nobody wants any land because there is a lack of agricultural machinery. Who can cultivate land barehanded?" asks Maria Kolomiyets, an agronomist.

Since their agricultural machinery has not been upgraded, women have to till the land using hoes. If a farmer wants to achieve some efficiency she has to wait her turn to use a tractor to plough her land. "Every family grows vegetables on their farmland," says Elvira Reshitova from Crimea. "Some

people rent larger fields and sell half the yield and use the other half for personal use. Those who do not have land or have little of it buy local vegetables and go somewhere else to sell them," she adds.

For those women who do not have their own farms, survival is tough. Says Iryna Ivashchenko, "In our village Gorodyshche, all the women go to the forests to pick mushrooms in summer. We dry them and sell them in winter. But it is impossible to survive without a vegetable garden. There may be mushrooms and berries but if you have a farm you can also breed a pig or keep hens to get both meat and money."

To make matters worse, 40 percent of the villagers do not understand the reform process initiated by organisations like the Council of Women Farmers of Ukraine. So, the Council is hoping to be able to give information about management, marketing and policy and provide assistance in professional development and strengthening of women's businesses in villages.

Despite the lack of social infrastructure, difficult labour conditions and inadequate health care and educational facilities, Klebanova feels that her organisation has been able to achieve one major thing: giving credit to farming. According to her, farming is now being considered the most progressive type of ownership and economy in villages. Achieving more, she feels, is just a question of time.

Source: Women's Feature Service, 23 May 2000

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more than 2,700 hectares of barren hills with poplar and elm saplings.

In 1991, Yuqin was given 9,000 yuan (US\$107) by the provincial forestry department to carry forward her mission. After visiting her husband's grave and thinking hard how she should use the money, she decided to expand her work by building a primary school in the village, and putting in her own savings of 10,000 yuan (US\$119) for good measure.

Yuqin is not educated and only learned to write her own name because many admirers ask for her autograph. Today, as principal of the Wang-Qin Primary School (named after her and her husband's given names), Yuqin teaches children the importance of ecological protection and leads them in planting trees themselves.

Yuqin also has another achievement to her credit. While leasing the land-use rights of 11,529 acres of semidesert land and employing local people, Yuqin has also set up a company which produces farm, forestry and animal products. On an average, this operation has been making yearly profits of 400,000 yuan (US\$ 48,000) in recent years.

However, despite being the owner of a company and also having amassed plenty of money, the biggest source of happiness for Yuqin is still the number of trees that she has planted and continues to plant to green the desert.

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