

The following sections—*Women and Food Security*, *Women and the new Information and Communication Technologies*, and *Women and Media* are regular features of *Women in Action*. As these are Isis International-Manila's key advocacy areas, we keep track of the discourse on these issues and share them with our readers. Ed.

Women and Trade in Agriculture

Introductory Note by Mercedes Cruz

How is one to understand the phrase “men’s involvement in women or gender issues?” Gender has been in the language and programmes of more and more mainstream organisations in the last 10 years or so. The Food and Agriculture Organisation, the United Nations, and other international bodies, as well as NGOs concerned with food security issues such as the Southeast Asian Council for Food Security and Fair Trade (SEA Council) have been tackling the role of women in food security, in agriculture, and in trade.

The rising buzz of “genderspeak” in mainstream language and documents appears to have influenced, in varying degrees, a growing number of male decision-makers. Gender has been strikingly present in research studies and policy papers even

in big financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Funding agencies working with NGOs impose implicit or explicit requirements that projects to be managed by the latter should incorporate gender or “women’s components” or a “gender perspective,” one effect of which has been to create a demand for “gender sensitivity training.” The first question to hurdle is always: “Why is it important to look at gender in food security issues?”—or economics, or trade, or development projects, or water projects.

The article in this issue’s Food Security section, “Women and Trade in Agriculture,” is reprinted from the information packet *Trade Intensification in Asian Economies: What it Means to Women’s Work* published by Women and Gender Institute (WAGI), *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*, *International Gender and Trade Network*. The data sheets in the packet contain the latest available information and discussion on issues that show the increase in women’s share of the burden of agricultural production, even as agriculture production has decreased over the years. Rural women’s livelihoods and the survival of their households and communities are threatened by trade liberalisation. On a recent trip to Thailand, I have witnessed that as the men become active in leadership positions in cooperatives and networks, as they campaign for sustainable development practices, they leave the entire management of the farms to their wives. It is the men again who become busy with the “outside world,” leaving the women behind. Sustainable development, I would think, if it is to be holistic, needs to bring women into leadership and networking, side by side with the men. This will be realised as more and more men and mixed NGOs get involved in gender issues.



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Women and Trade in Agriculture

Agricultural production, conventionally, has been considered to be a male dominated activity. However, research done has shown that for some time now it's the women who have traditionally played a central role in agricultural production. According to the UNIFEM Progress of the World's Women 2000 Biennial Report, 50 percent of Third World women plough and level land and 70 percent are involved in planting, tilling and harvesting.

The same study indicates that in South and South East Asia, 60 percent of the work in agriculture and food production is done by women.

The figures in Table 1 reveal that in the last two decades there has been a decline in the number of men and women participating in agricultural production in some Asian countries. Researchers argue that this is due to the restructuring of national economies and agricultural production. Nevertheless women still continue to have a significant share of the labour force that remains in the agricultural sector.

Critics claim that data gathered in this area continues to

under-report women's participation in agricultural activities, especially those involving food production and processing for household consumption. Under-reporting of tasks done by women may be traced to the tendency to view women's work as secondary or ancillary to men's activities. Even the World Bank recognised that "women's labour force participation continues to be strongly influenced by gender differences in the definition of work...This is particularly relevant in the informal sector and in agriculture." (World Development Report, 1998)

Table 1
Share, in percentages, of the Economically Active

| | 1980 | | 1990 | | 1998 | |
|-------------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| Bangladesh | 61 | 67 | 74 | 59 | 78 | 54 |
| Cambodia | 80 | 70 | 78 | 69 | - | - |
| China | 79 | 71 | 76 | 69 | - | - |
| India | 83 | 63 | 74 | 59 | - | - |
| Indonesia | 56 | 59 | 56 | 54 | 42 | 41 |
| Korea | 39 | 31 | 20 | 16 | 14 | 11 |
| Lao | 82 | 77 | 81 | 76 | - | - |
| Malaysia | 49 | 36 | 26 | 28 | 15 | 21 |
| Nepal | 98 | 91 | 98 | 91 | - | - |
| Pakistan | 73 | 56 | 72 | 45 | 66 | 41 |
| Philippines | 37 | 61 | 31 | 54 | 27 | 47 |
| Sri Lanka | 55 | 48 | 43 | 37 | 49 | 38 |
| Thailand | 74 | 68 | 65 | 63 | 50 | 52 |
| Vietnam | 75 | 71 | 73 | 70 | - | - |

Source: Asian Development Bank, 2000



Women contribute significantly in agricultural production yet control over agricultural resources such as land remain not in their hands.

World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements

National policy governing agricultural production has had the objective of ensuring food security. Trade policy in agriculture has meant that many countries will have to restructure the industry to accommodate export-oriented, large-scale commercial agricultural production and compete with imported agricultural products as protective tariffs and subsidies are removed.

Trade liberalisation in agriculture is governed by the Agreement on Agriculture under the WTO. The Agreement committed WTO members:

- ▶ To open up their domestic markets to imported agricultural commodities including food stuffs. The Agreement has liberalised the importation of a wide range of agricultural commodities, thereby opening the economies of the developing countries to an influx of food imports.
- ▶ To reduce any subsidies providing support to domestic producers (such as financial subsidies). Domestic subsidies for developing countries were to be cut by 13.3 percent over

a ten-year period and by 20 percent over six years for industrialised countries.

These commitments were to be implemented between 1995 and 2000.

According to a 1999 study done by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), under the Agreement, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Thailand were some of the countries in Asia that experienced a surge of imported food products.

In Sri Lanka this led to a sharp drop in rural employment with some 300,000 job losses in the production of onions and potatoes. Thailand was the only country from this grouping to increase its agricultural exports.

Several studies show that trade liberalisation policies have eroded domestic agricultural production and severely undermined food security in the developing countries. It has also led to massive displacement of small farmers due to bankruptcy and the displacement of agricultural workers through job losses.

Given the central role of women in agriculture this has seriously undermined the livelihoods of women, especially women in the rural areas, as well as the very survival of their households, communities and societies (UNIFEM Progress of the World's Women 2000 Biennial Report).

Trade-Related Intellectual Property rights (TRIPS), is another WTO agreement that has far reaching implications for agricultural production in Asia. Because of rules on the patenting of products, microorganisms, and

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new plants, it has a direct bearing on food production and food security (as well as on drugs and pharmaceutical products).

Developing countries must now observe product patents (rather than process patents) and patents on microorganisms, which will inhibit them from producing the same product better, or more safely and cheaply. This could lead to the monopoly by multinational corporations of agro-chemical products, bio-fertilizers, and bio-pesticides. Some flexibility is allowed for developing countries through the use of a *sui generis* system of plant protection but it would be important to include farmers' rights in the system rather than just limiting the rights to breeders.

Rural women tend to carry the traditional knowledge of seeds and plants and their usage in a range of activities, ranging from food production to traditional medicines for maintaining the health and well-being of their families and communities. The impact of TRIPS on Asian women's 'ownership' and rights over this knowledge is very real and needs to be investigated further.

Women's Land Rights

Land is fundamental in agriculture and a majority of the poor in the rural areas still do not have any rights to it. Poor rural women have been even further excluded and

marginalised. Land control would cover a range of decisions made with respect to the use of the land, such as:

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

Even when women's rights to own land and property are formally recognised by law, these rights have often been ignored or denied due to a number of gender-biased cultural factors, such as the 'myth' of the male-headed household.

Issues

There is increasing evidence to show that agricultural production has traditionally been feminised. However, due to gender prejudice and gender blindness which underrates or virtually ignores women's unpaid reproductive work in the household, such as the growing and processing of food for household consumption, women's labour in agricultural production is underreported.

Trade liberalisation in agriculture, carried out under the WTO, undermines agricultural production in the developing countries. Furthermore, it threatens the livelihoods of rural women agricultural labourers, including the very survival of their households and communities.

Women's ownership and control over land—central to agricultural production—has traditionally been marginalised and continues to be marginalised today. One of the main reasons for this are cultural prejudices that are gender biased. According to critics this has a negative impact on agricultural production and food security.