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FACTORS LEADING TO LOW PRODUCTIVITY AMONG RURAL WOMEN IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

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Abstract

Women in rural areas of less developed areas of Southern Africa are involved in many agricultural production activities especially the production of food. These areas are known to be characterised by low agricultural productivity. Research was conducted to determine factors which lead to low productivity among women farmers. The hypothesis put forward was that low productivity amongst this class of farmers could be due to problems they encounter in the production process. The research was undertaken in the rural areas of Lebowa. Five schemes not linked to a development agency were selected at random. The reason for excluding schemes attached to development agencies was to ensure that only farms on which management is solely by farmers themselves are included. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire survey. Major constraints towards increased production were identified as: shortage of land; inadequate irrigation water; lack of management abilities; limited control over factors of production; limited education; unavailability of credit and inefficient market outlets. The following measures are suggested in order to improve agricultural production:- increase in the number of land holdings with freehold ownership of land; provision of efficient market outlets; infrastructure, credit and irrigation water; and provision of better qualified extension workers to improve farmers' knowledge of farming.

1. Introduction

In recent years much has been said about the role women play in rural and agricultural development. The issues addressed mainly concentrated on the extent and nature of participation of women as farm labourers; sexual division of work; time spent in agricultural production, women's earnings, their status and legal rights and other related matters (See Ordonez and Goldey, 1985; Warren, 1985; Gladwin and McMillan, 1989; Agarwal, 1985; Munnik, 1986; Bembridge, 1988; Lele, 1986 and Johnson *et al*, 1987). All along social scientists have tended to avoid issues concerning women *per se* and concentrated on men's activities that were considered worthy of research and women were described in terms of their relationship to those activities (Munnik, 1986:109). The important issues relating to the problems women encounter in their farming activities such as ownership and control of productive resources and land, difficulty in obtaining credit, access to market outlets and other services, have been ignored (Jiggins, 1985:9).

Today, the studies on women in development and agricultural production are no longer single simple issues (Hebert, 1985:3). There is a need for in-depth studies of more practical problems such as involving women in development projects not only as labourers but as planners and implementers; and also involving them in matters that concern decision making. Women have been ignored in such issues when in fact they are and have been an important part of production in most economies (Hebert, 1985:4).

In South Africa, the dual nature of the South African economy is always referred to (Haasbroek, 1990:141; Clark, 1988:374), with advanced market oriented "White" farming coexisting with backward subsistence oriented "Black" farming system (Houghton 1964:45). It is important to realize that "Black" farming is mostly practiced by women and elderly men. Thus low productivity among these group of farmers contribute to low productivity among Black farmers and backwardness of "Black" agriculture as a whole, which eventually will lead to poverty and related issues.

Factors affecting women in agricultural and rural development are not to be ignored, if there is to be progress in developing the rural areas and increasing productivity. As Gladwin and

McMillan (1989:348) have observed, there are just too many women farmers to ignore. This implies that a turnaround in African agricultural production would be impossible without including women as explicit targets of an agricultural development project. "Little progress can be made in rural areas without the full involvement of women" (Bembridge, 1988:150).

In this paper some of the problems women farmers experience which lead to their low productivity, will be outlined and discussed. Suggestions will be made as to how to alleviate those problems.

2. Rural women in agricultural production

Rural women play an important role in agriculture. In Southern Africa because of the migratory system where men have to work in urban areas, the majority of women live and earn livelihoods for themselves and their families in rural areas. They are involved in many activities involving the agricultural processes, in raising of animals and in commercial activities.

In the sample of 61 female farmers taken, 50,52 percent were involved with both crop and animal production activities, while 49,48 farmers specialized in crop production. None of the farmers interviewed specialized in stock farming.

A large proportion of farmers are semi-subsistence (62,93 percent), 29,51 percent farm for subsistence purposes while only 6,56 percent produced mainly for the market.

The contribution of women in agricultural production is not easy to quantify in statistical terms as most of the work done is unpaid and thus 'invisible'. But according to Ordonez and Goldey (1985:7) rural women contributes more than 20 percent to the average family income and sometimes their daily activities involving agriculture and household activities take more than 18 hours a day. In terms of employment, 90 percent of women in rural areas are employed in the agricultural sector (Stoeckel and Sirinema, 1988:38).

3. Demographic information

Some knowledge of personal characteristics of female farmers is important in the analysis of the problems they encounter in production. Few of the most important characteristics will thus be outlined.

3.1 Age

In the sample taken the majority of female farmers, 75,41 percent, are still in the child bearing stage, that is, between the age of 21 and 46 years. This might have a negative impact on productivity as some of their time will be tied down by children. It is interesting to note that the smallest group of female farmers, 1,64 percent, were in the age category of 21-25 years. The reason behind this may be the negative attitude of younger generation on agriculture related activities which are regarded as being inferior (Machethe, 1990:10). Figure 1 indicates other details regarding age distribution.

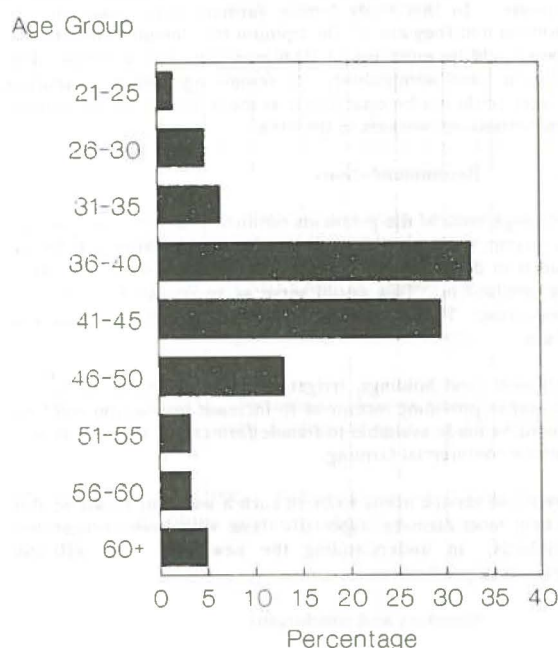


Figure 1: Age distribution

3.2 Marital Status

Majority of women in this sample, 83,61 percent, are married, 13,11 percent widowed and 3,28 percent single.

Table 1: Marital status

| | SINGLE | | MARRIED | | WIDOWED | | TOTAL | |
|--------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-----|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| MAPELA | 0 | 0 | 11 | 73.33 | 4 | 26.67 | 15 | 100 |
| MOLETJIE | 0 | 0 | 1E | 100 | 0 | 0 | 1E | 100 |
| WASH BANK | 2 | 16.67 | 6 | 50.00 | 4 | 33.33 | 12 | 100 |
| PLATKLIP | 0 | 0 | 6 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 100 |
| STEELPADSNEK | 0 | 0 | 6 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 100 |
| TOTAL | 2 | 3.28 | 51 | 83.61 | 8 | 13.11 | 61 | 100 |

It is interesting to note that 83,67 percent of married women indicated that their husbands were not farmers but make all decisions involving farming activities. Most of the husbands 82,93 percent were employed in the urban areas. It was also

indicated that 87,75 percent of the husbands contributed some money towards farming. Exclusion from farm management decision-making by husbands is one other factor which reduces efficiency in farming amongst female farmers.

3.3 Level of Education

Education and training is an important vehicle and strategic support service towards sustained socio-economic development of communities (Meyer, 1990:4). The higher the level of education the more productive individuals become as they can respond positively to new innovations and better methods of production.

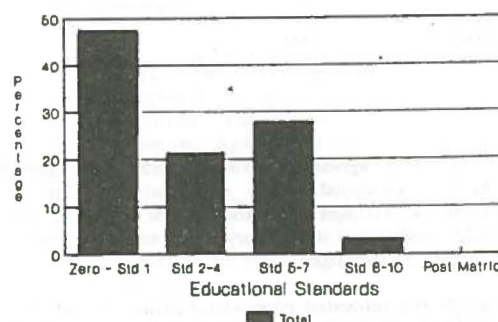


Figure 2: Level of education

Figure 2 indicates that most of the female farmers in the sample, 47,54 percent, have attended school up to Standard 1 while only 3,28 percent attained an educational level of up to Standard 10. This implies that 47,54 percent of these farmers are illiterate. This state of affairs has an adverse effect on productivity.

3.4 Number of children

Children form an integral part of the family in rural areas. In many instances children provided incentive to produce more especially as they provide some of the needed family labour. Evidence shows that child labour is common in most less developed countries. In this sample, on average, each household has approximately five children.

4. Some major factors affecting productivity

4.1 Shortage of land and irrigation water

Land is a major factor of production in agriculture especially in agrarian societies. Shortage of land is regarded as one limiting factor to increased production (Ghatak & Ingersent, 1984:7). In this study, female farmers identified the size of their land holdings to be a limiting factor to increased production because they are too small. Coupled with inadequate supply of irrigation water, it is not possible to farm on a commercial basis. Table 2 indicates farm sizes according to locality.

According to Stoeckel and Sirinema (1988:34) acquisition of enough land is expected to provide greater opportunities for female farmers to actively participate in agricultural production and thus increase productivity and their incomes.

4.2 Ownership, Control and access to land

The size of land holdings is not the only limiting factor for female farmers but also ownership, control and access to land. In South Africa, access and ownership of land are crucial issues for the Black people. These issues are more serious among female farmers who can not own land because they are Black

and can not have access to communally owned land because they are women. In African cultures, a woman is a minor. She cannot own land or property or means of production no matter how much she has invested in them (Gumedre, 1985:21). Women rely on lands allocated to their husbands or male relatives for their farming activities. Another alternative is to hire some plots which turn to be risky as the landlord can withdraw tenancy anytime he wishes.

Table 2: Farm sizes

| Locality | Average Farm Size | Average No. Farms |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| MAPELA | 0,1ha | 14 47 |
| MOLETJIE | 1,5ha | 1 |
| WASHBANK | 1,7ha | 1 |
| PLATKLIP | 1,5ha | 1 |
| STEELPADSNEK | 1,75ha | 2 |

Access to cultivable agricultural land, according to Agarwal (1988:533) can take varied forms: individual ownership; individual ownership through inheritance, gift or self-acquisition, joint family ownership, usufructory right to communal or private land and tenancy right.

In this sample the cultivated plots were mainly rented 60,66 percent, 31,14 percent were communally owned and allotted by chiefs and 8,2 percent were inherited. Most farmers preferred a system of freehold ownership (67,21) as compared to 3,28 percent who still prefer a communal ownership system.

4.3 Limited control and decision-making over productive resources

Just as women cannot own land and property, they also have limited control over productive resources and products they produce. Decisions on production and farming activities are made and controlled mainly by men.

The study shows that in crop production men control resources and sale of products in 59,02 percent of the cases, and in stock farming, 63,26 percent of the cases. Limited control and decision-making over productive resources is a disincentive to farmers trying to increase production. In some cases men sell the produce and the proceeds are used for personal gratification, for example to purchase beer.

4.4 Unavailability of market outlets and credit

Availability of market outlets is crucial to the success of commercial farming. In this study, farmers produce cash crops such as tomatoes and beans. Crops are marketed locally to people and traders.

The main limiting factor in crop production is unavailability of reliable markets and long distances to the market. The average distance to the nearest market, for example a cooperative, is about 30 km. Most farmers resort to selling privately to local people and are greatly discouraged by distant markets to produce commercially.

Credit is also not easy to obtain. As female farmers do not own the land they cultivate, and do not own any property, they are unable to obtain credit from commercial banks. Even in the case where a woman might have some sort of collateral, her husband's consent is still required by banks. This is not easy for female farmers as in most cases their husbands would not be residing at their homes.

4.5 Lack of management ability

Managerial inability is one of the factors which cause problems in agricultural production. Although the female farmers indicated management inadequacy as one of the major constraints to increased production, 73,77 percent of these farmers have no other assistance in running their farms. Only 26,23 percent of these farmers have assistance in management from their husbands.

The other factor which contribute to management inadequacy is low standard of education female farmers attain. One possible solution to alleviate this problem could be the provision of qualified extension officers. This area has been neglected despite the widespread dependence of traditional production systems upon female labour. According to Daniel *et al*, (1984:11) very little extension effort or addition to infrastructure has been specifically directed towards women. Part of the problem mentioned is due to the lack of female extension workers. In this study female farmers have indicated this problem and they are of the opinion that female extension officers could be more useful than men extension workers. The efficiency and acceptability of female agricultural extension worker could not be established as there are no female agricultural extension workers in the area.

5. Recommendations

Although most of the problems outlined could be solved over a long-term, there is an urgent need for female farmers to be included in decision-making regarding production activities they are involved in. This would serve as an incentive to increase production. Farmers should be treated as farmers irrespective of sex.

Sufficient land holdings, irrigation water and markets are important in providing incentives to increase production and thus should be made available to female farmers, as they are important for commercial farming.

Extension service needs to be in such a way that it can be able to help most farmers, especially those with lower educational standards, in understanding the new and more efficient methods of production.

6. Summary and conclusions

Women in rural areas of less developed countries are the main people involved in the production of food and other agricultural products. In their production process they are faced with a number of problems which tend to be constraints towards production.

The majority of female farmers are married and on average have five children. Their husbands work in urban areas and through remittance help in financing many family activities.

The majority of these farmers have attained a low level of education and are neglected in extension thus limiting their managerial abilities. Men who are normally not available to physically take part in production, make decisions and direct productive resources. Control of productive resources and decision-making by men only retard progress of female farmers.

The system of land ownership is communal, allocated by chiefs to men, but more of the cultivated plots were rented. Most farmers prefer a system of freehold ownership.

Major problems female farmers experience in their production activities can be summarized as follows:-

- insufficient land holdings and irrigation water

- lack of markets and unavailability of credit
- lack of control and decision-making on production resources
- lack of managerial know-how and inadequate extension services

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