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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The important role played by women and the potential to fulfil an even greater role, has been overlooked to a large extent in South Africa. Although there are numerous organisations and projects aimed at development at rural and community level - from development in small scale family enterprises to larger commercial enterprises to professional and leadership positions - very little attention has been payed to the role of the woman and the enhancement thereof. An awareness of the importance of development of women has started to surface, and more is been done to accommodate women and raise them to the level they deserve. Women's perception of themselves are changing, and they are venturing beyond traditional female boundaries. They must however be afforded the chance to develop and have equal access to opportunities at all levels in the South African society.

Samevatting
Die rol van vroue in landelike- en gemeenskapsontwikkeling in Suid-Afrika

Die belangrike rol wat vroue speel, sowel as die potensiaal om selfs 'n groter rol te speel, is in die verlede tot 'n groot mate in Suid-Afrika oor die hoof gesien. Alhoewel daar 'n magdom organisasies en projekte is wat gemik is op die ontwikkeling op landelike en gemeenskapsvlak - van die ontwikkeling van kleinskaalfamiliebedrywe tot groter kommersiële bedrywe tot professionele en leierskapposisies - is baie min aandag gegee aan die rol en die ontwikkeling van die vrou. 'n Bewustheid van die belangrikheid om vroue te ontwikkel, het na vore begin kom en meer word gedoen om vroue te akkommodeer en hulle op te hef tot die vlak wat hulle verdien. Vroue se persepsie van hulself is besig om te verander, en hulle beweeg nou buite die tradisionele grense vir vroue. Hulle moet egter die kans gegun word om te ontwikkel en gelyke toegang te hê tot geleenthede op alle vlakke van die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing.

1. Introduction

A surprising similarity exists between issues concerning the role of women in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. In South Africa, studies and discussions on the role of women have in the past neglected the integration of women in the mainstream of development. It is only in recent years that an integrated approach has been followed. Chen (1990) says: "The challenge for the 1990's is not only to mainstream women into all development programs, but also to introduce the gender variable in all development planning".

Although agriculture plays the most important part in rural and community development, it is important to broaden the vision to look at the total picture. The issues regarding rural and community development are just as relevant when one analyses the role of the woman as a worker on a commercial enterprise or as a professional or in a managerial position, as it is for a small scale subsistence case. All these different groups play a crucial part in community development, and no one must be seen in isolation if success is being sought.

2. Small scale family enterprises

About 46% of South Africa's population is considered to be non-urban and must make a living from primary agriculture. This is approximately 16 million people of whom about 6 million live on commercial farms. The rest, about 10 million, are in some way or another dependent on small scale family enterprises. The importance of agriculture currently dominates employment opportunities in rural areas and will continue to do so for many years to come. An estimated 90% of women in rural areas are employed in the agricultural sector. Like elsewhere in Africa, agriculture is traditionally regarded as the work of women in tribal areas. Contrary to this, very few women of European origin fulfil this responsibility. Traditionally the majority only take care of running the household, while this is only one of the responsibilities of women in tribal areas. In fact, several studies have confirmed this. Murphy (1991), in a study among Zulu women, says they perform a multitude of tasks with little or no assistance from men. This includes farming and household tasks. In fact, one of the most sensitive issues in development in Southern Africa is that most women in rural areas have been deserted by their men who go to metropolitan areas to earn more. The women are left on their own to cope with their farming activities. Tshatsinde (1990), in a survey among rural women in Lebowa where no development work has yet been done, found that 84% of married women indicated that farming was their responsibility.

Many development projects investigated by government or quasi-government organisations in South Africa, have for this reason originally overlooked the important role played by women, especially in agriculture. Moody (1988) states that in many Southern African areas male extension officers have focused their attention to males, leaving home economists to concentrate on women. Where extension officers have begun to work with women in rural areas, confusion as to the role of home economists has been the result.

Whether the process whereby women receive the recognition they deserve, has occurred slower in South Africa than elsewhere, is debatable. Some people have definite views on this. Murphy (1991) says that while the central role of women in the Third World rural areas has begun to be recognised elsewhere, it has received little attention in South Africa. The low priority allocated to rural women's issues, she states, has for one reason been the result of South Africa's lack of contact with First World countries that have acted in sponsorship and advisory roles. During the last decade both the UN and ILO have spon-

sored research and programs focusing on rural women throughout the world, but hardly any contact exists with South Africa.

From an academic/research point of view, this is certainly true. South Africans have not been able to travel frequently in recent years and were often not welcomed or received little attention for political reasons. Foreign organisations and visitors often avoided South Africa completely. Hopefully this is no longer the case. The conference on women, entitled "Women and Gender in Southern Africa" held in South Africa in January 1991, serves as an indicator that the country is catching up in this field. On the other hand, definite progress has been made on a practical level, i.e. with the implementation of development projects, generally speaking and specifically with relation to women. All of this has been done without international aid and assistance, as illustrated in the following example:

> In 1985 the Phokoane Farmers Support Program was started. The objective of the project was to increase maize production among subsistence farmers, most of them being women. Profits, however, were earmarked for the tribe rather than individual farmers. To make matters worse, the community had no say as the then Lebowa Agricultural Company gave the directives with an unpopular top down approach. Anger ran so high that the project was doomed to fail. Fortunately, the approach was changed. Ardendorf, the project leader, was quoted as saying "we worked on the principle of identifying needs and finding ways to meet them. The crucial thing is to allow the women themselves to decide what they want and how to get it". He also highlighted the voluntary participation. The project turned out to be so successful that the women, representing about 1 200 families of whom most also happened to be illiterate, also challenged prejudice by producing yields which almost matched those of commercial white farmers. (Finance Week, 1991).

It is also encouraging to note that in farmer settlement schemes in the national states, both women and men are considered as potential commercial farmers and allocated land (Moody, 1988). Farmer settlement schemes and small farmer support programs have not discriminated against female farmers and in theory they have equal access to production inputs. In Kangwane, 80 out of 123 farmers settled as risk taking entrepreneurs on the Tonga Rice Project, are women.

It can be said that the constraints under which female farmers have to operate, as well as their multiple roles in the community, are nowadays recognised in all development projects. Addressing these aspects is unfortunately not always possible. Limited financial resources are probably the main reason. There are some areas in South Africa where no development work has been done as yet, while in others only the most essential needs can be addressed. Many papers have therefore been published and more will follow, pointing out these constraints. It is therefore important that the emphasis should continue to fall on voluntary and "self-help" projects where, from a financial point of view, more can be accomplished with limited resources. In addition, and even more important, is the fact that it forces the project to be structured according to the needs of the community as identified by themselves. The bigger the financial investment is from outside the community, the more strings are attached and the less say the community has on how the money is to be spent.

As far as non-agricultural employment opportunities are concerned, relatively little attention has been given in the search for ways and means of enhancing the development of agriculture in rural areas. Small business development programs tend to focus on enterprises in urban areas or non-formal settlements around or near them (Moody, 1991). While this is certainly the case, based on the small number of research papers that deal with non-agricultural opportunities, it is also true that there is in fact very little opportunity. It is much easier to create new employment opportunities in agriculture and related industries. The distance which such small scale rural industries are often removed from consumer markets, the lack of suitable transport, the need for more intensive training and education programs, etc., all make it more cost effective to concentrate on agriculture.

Nevertheless, whether it is agricultural or non-agricultural projects that are being considered, information shows that all different options should be continued to be explored. Structural problems rather than social constraints seem to prevent more progress in this field. Bembridge (1988) says that 97% of peasant women in Transkei are satisfied to remain in the rural areas. Most are of the opinion that what they have, is better than what they might end up with elsewhere. Furthermore, most of them are keen to better their positions. This is confirmed by the fact that 87% of wives say that they would be prepared to attend evening classes.

It is important that women's perceptions of themselves, especially at this level, are changing as they take initiative and venture beyond the milieu to which they have been traditionally confined (Mfono, 1990). Such ventures encounter mixed reaction from society. This is especially true in South Africa where tradition and modernisation maintain an uneasy coexistence. In the words of Bembridge, "rural development is much more than an economic and technological process, it is equally, and simultaneously, a continuing social process that entails rural transformation".

3. Women as workers on large commercial enterprises

From a rural development point of view it is often forgotten that an estimated 6 million people are living and working on commercial farming enterprises in South Africa. This at least was the case in the past. Many of them are women. Concern over low productivity in agriculture and levels of poverty amongst farm labourers in certain farming communities have led to an increasing focus on communities and women in such environments. Through organisations such as the Rural Foundation, Boskop and many committed NGO's, especially community projects on commercial farms and in rural communities are gaining momentum. The main thrust of such projects has been towards social upliftment. Child care and training projects have been particularly successful.

The lack of attention paid to agricultural workers is also confirmed by others. McLachlan (1988) writes that landless agricultural workers are often the poorest of the poor. They have in the past faced several problems, including possible exploitation by employers. Also, in recent discussions held between the Secretariat of the Economic Community of Southern Africa (SECOSAF) and Ciskei, Ciskei specifically asked that in rural development it be recognised that all members of the community are not necessarily small farmers. Some who are associated with the community, are employed as labourers, seasonal workers, etc. (SECOSAF, 1990).

Women are often employed as seasonal labourers, while men usually qualify for permanent positions. This means that women seldom have an equal opportunity to earn an equal income. Seasonal workers in South Africa, like probably most places in the world, are paid less than permanent employees. It has therefore been suggested that these women need the protection of a minimum wage and alternative opportunities, which would remove income discrimination against women. Unfortunately, in a country such as South Africa which has an over supply of labour but a shortage of capital, the issue regarding minimum wages involves too many other factors. Based only on the advantage it will bring to women, it is not likely that it will be implemented.

As part of the process of addressing the needs of farm workers, some commercial enterprises have encouraged farm workers to elect worker committees, or have created "share holding" schemes where workers can obtain a financial stake. Worker committees have the authority to discuss problems, including social problems, with management. However, worker committees are often all male or male dominated. Moody (1988) confirms this.

Labour unions can make a difference for female workers in South Africa if they function correctly. Currently, three unrelated issues have prevented this avenue from being explored successfully. Firstly, most labour unions in South Africa are male dominated. Although it might be within their power, it is highly unlikely that women will receive the special attention they need or deserve. Secondly, labour unions in South Africa are highly politicised because of the country's political history. Improving the status of women is not likely to be a high priority on its political agenda. Lastly, agricultural labour unions are still prohibited by law in South Africa.

Women living and working on commercial farms, find themselves in an extremely difficult position to improve their status. In some ways they are worse off than their counterparts who are engaged in subsistence farming. On commercial farms management has the right to appoint men in permanent positions, as they do. It is much more difficult to create equal opportunities for women on such farms. In the case of development projects, public opinion plays an important part in changing development policies because public money is used to fund most of these projects. This is not the case in commercial farming where most farms are privately owned and operated. Often such farms do not even allow extension officers and home economists from outside to do research on the farm.

The socio-economic structure and traditional values that exist in communities, unfortunately support the *status quo*. In a recent survey done by Qualitative Consultancy (1990) on behalf of the Department of Health and Population Development, they discovered the following: In rural, semi-rural and urban areas, most men and women interviewed, expressed a positive feeling towards women working. The only disagreement concerned the place of work. The majority of rural males felt that their women were better off working nearer to home or not working at all, so that they could always be close by when the children needed them. Another reason was that they could still perform household chores. The survey did not say what the women wanted! Because of this situation, it is also not surprising that an organisation such as Boskop Training Centre, notwithstanding the excellent work they do, makes very little contribution towards equality of gender. Boskop's objective is the development of black farm workers. Special attention is also given to the training of women in basic health care and family planning with the objective of improving the quality of life for farm workers and communities. Training in household and other domestic tasks are also provided on an intensive basis.

Notwithstanding Boskop's recognition of the importance of women in the development process, it appears that they believe that women would not be interested in being trained as agricultural workers, equal to men. It must be added that Boskop in no way stops or discourages women to attend these courses. However, because most workers who enrol for courses are sent and paid for by commercial farming enterprises, women are effectively blocked from being trained in agriculture.

There is one more organisation which has come to play an important part, given the existing situation in South Africa. It is called Food Gardens Unlimited. This company has recognised the position where many rural women are largely excluded from agricultural production and being assigned household duties. Food Gardens was established 13 years ago with the objective of encouraging mostly black workers to supplement their nutritional intake by growing vegetables. Their techniques are taught by 35 welfare organisations as well as state departments, regional services councils, municipalities and private firms. A recent survey revealed that food gardens have also been established at 450 schools, 155 clinics and 93 hospitals (Southern Africa Today, 1990). The private sector can be very dynamic and efficient. Once they realise that there are potential benefits in adopting new policies and values, they can bring about these changes much faster than other sectors of the economy. Commercial farming enterprises in Southern Africa are only now starting to recognise the important role of women. Organisations such as Boskop, the Rural Foundation, and others, can and should play a more important role in the future.

4. Women as professionals

It is generally agreed that not only need the special role of women be recognised when providing development aid in rural communities, but it is also necessary for women to have ample opportunity to be trained and appointed in professional capacities. This includes both positions where they can either get directly involved with development projects, such as extension and social workers, or working in a professional capacity in the community, such as typists, teachers, medical personnel, etc.

Fortunately, the special role of women, also in this capacity, has not been ignored in South Africa. In 1985, after the United Nations decade on women, Sharpe (1985) wrote that more use should be made of female agricultural extension officers and that the training they receive, should have a different focus to satisfy the needs of the female farmers. Sharpe was concerned at the time that only 3 agricultural extension colleges catered for women. All South African agricultural colleges now allow women. The six agricultural colleges that mainly train students who wish to engage in commercial farming practices, have a limited number of female students. Numbers vary from 2,2% to 7,2% and are growing. The rest (also six), who place more emphasis on small scale agriculture, surprisingly have a large percentage of female students. Numbers vary between 100% at Stompi Seleka agricultural college to zero at Madsivandile. As a combined total, these six colleges have 32,7% female students (Department of Agriculture, 1991).

It appears as though very few black women in rural areas are currently employed in some or other professional capacity. Qualitative Consultancy (1990) found that most women in rural areas make and sell craftwork, plant and sell vegetables, do dressmaking, etc. Women in peri-urban areas tend to travel to the nearby towns to do domestic work, hawk, etc. It is only when you move into the urban areas that women are usually better educated and therefore tend to have better paying jobs. The main positions being held by them are typists, clerks and secretaries, sales persons, qualified factory workers, hairdressers and dressmakers. Why this imbalance exists, is not clear, but Hulley (1990) is of the opinion that 80% of women's development programs are focused on the urban areas, which partly explains it.

It does, however, seem as though the position is changing, albeit slowly. In a survey done recently, the four major agricultural universities indicated that their female student numbers are increasing. In some areas such as food science at the University of Stellenbosch, female students as a percentage of the total, are 52%. On average, female students enroled for the basic agricultural and related degrees, now make up about 20% of the total numbers. The University of Pretoria takes the lead with the highest percentage of female students enroled for the B.Sc. Degree in Agriculture, namely 27%. It is also encouraging that these universities are of the opinion that most students remain in the field of agriculture. Significant is the fact that female students as a percentage of the total differs between the universities. (Universities of Natal, Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Orange Free State; 1991).

Unfortunately, statistics on which professional positions are held by women in rural areas, are not available. Erwee (1990) however says that at Anglo American, the largest corporation

in South Africa, 29% of the workforce at head office are women. However, only 7,7% of middle management are women. At Standard Bank 13,2% of managers are women and at Southern Life, an insurance corporation, women make up half of all employees, 47% of middle management, but only 7% of executive positions. Statistics therefore vary considerably between companies, occupations and regions. It is clear that professional women are still disproportionably represented in South Africa. However, it appears as though it does not necessarily differ from the rest of the world if we, for example, consider the statistics quoted on the U.S. Congress and Corporations.

South Africa is in great need of information on professional women employed in rural areas. Only then can we truly analyse their positions and determine what has to be done to improve their status. There should be no doubt that professional women can play an important role in development projects, even if they only serve as an example of what can be done.

5. Women in leadership and management

From what has been said this far, the concept of a national organisation for women is supported. This is necessary because only an organisation which understands women and the socio-economic disadvantages that they have to overcome, could represent them effectively. Worldwide much has been written on this subject, the way in which such an organisation should be structured, and the activities it should get involved with. South Africa is no exception. There is a definite need to co-ordinate and promote the role of women in the South African society. A national organisation with enough influence can make a major contribution. Kabeer (1991) confirms that "the lack of fit between the sectoral thinking of planners and the intersectoral spread of women's activities, is partly responsible for the failures of many projects which claim to address women's needs". She continues to say that even when planners are aware of aspects of women's subordination, they find it politically safer and more expedient to focus on those needs which will not threaten men's power and privileges.

McLachlan (1988) is of the opinion that provisions should be made for women in leadership positions from village level to head office. Leadership training should be provided when necessary and a commitment to women should be stated explicitly in policy documents. It is time to move beyond rhetoric about "integrating women into development". Recognition of women's central role in rural development should be evident in policy, budget allocations, staffing and programs.

According to Savone (1990) government must also take special measures intended to improve women's conditions and ensure their rights. In order to achieve this objective, she says it is necessary to evaluate a women's contribution to economic development. Because of the large number of non-income earning tasks that are done by women, their real contribution is underestimated.

Some progress have nonetheless been made. In 1984 South Africa published government legislation that cleared the way for women to be treated fully equal in the eyes of the law. Some of the most important clauses include (Matrimonial Property Act, 1984):

- "The marital power which a husband has under the common law over the person and property of his wife, is hereby abolished in respect of new marriages".
- "The effect of the abolition of the marital power is to do away with the restrictions which the marital power places on the capacity of a wife to contract and to litigate".
- "A wife in a marriage in community of property has the same powers ... as those which a husband has".

Unfortunately a major problem that still exists in rural communities, is that many women are still unaware of their rights. They accept the old traditional customs, often to their disadvantage.

The South African Department of Development Aid has a special section concentrating only on women. It consists of home economists and extension officers. Their objective is to give guidance and support to women's extension services in the different self-governing and trust areas. This includes training on request.

Although their list of courses is comprehensive and includes all different aspects of rural and community development, it appears as though no training in agricultural production techniques is provided. One can only ask whether or not they have recognised the role of women in agricultural production, or are they of the opinion that they should be trained as housewives. Other objectives include information supply, research and liaison with other women's organisations and extension services. The last two objectives are encouraging.

The Rural Foundation was founded in 1982. Their objective is: The involvement of organised agriculture and the private and public sectors in a program to improve the quality of life and the living standards of South African rural communities. The program is based on voluntary participation. The Rural Foundation's activities keep growing at a rate of about 10% per annum. In 1990 3 877 farms participated representing 81 000 workers or 267 000 people. During the same period the Rural Foundation employed 194 full time staff members of which 127 were based at Community Development Associations (Rural Foundation, 1990). Ironic, however, is that notwithstanding the high priority the Rural Foundation gives to rural women and the role they play in community development, the top management positions of the Foundation are all filled by males. Almost all of their programs are aimed at community development and are in some way or another structured around the woman and the influence she can exercise on the family.

Black women's organisations have played an important role in the South African society in recent years. However, most of them are highly politicised. Probably the best known is the Federation of South African Women, with the ANC Women's League as its biggest affiliate. Mrs Winnie Mandela last year drew considerable attention when she predicted that equality of the sexes would be "highly improbable" under an ANC government (Pretoria News, 1990). In April 1991 the ANC Women's League held its first national conference in the new South Africa. A 30% quota for women on the National Executive Committee of the ANC was proposed. This led to one of the hottest and most controversial debates later in July during the ANC's national conference. The proposal was rejected. Commenting afterwards, the ANC spokesperson said "there was a feeling that if you commit yourself to a percentage, it can be very inflexible. If you commit yourself to a principle, you can find more appropriate ways of implementing it". Nevertheless, 9 of the 50 directly elected seats on the ANC's national executive committee are held by women (Weekly Mail, 1991).

6. Conclusion

The role of women in rural and community development in South Africa had been neglected in the past. Fortunately, South Africa has entered a phase where this has not only been recognised, but a serious attempt is being made to correct this position. The problem however lies in a lack of co-ordination that exists between the different organisations involved. The result is that most organisations still follow an individual approach whereby they interpret the role of women to the extent that it suits their own organisational structure, objectives and methods. Some organisations therefore might recognise the role of women through policy decisions taken by management but might be weak in implementing these policies on all levels to the satisfaction of the women involved - the typical top down

approach. Others again might be largely successful with their policies at workers level but lack the recognition of the role of women in their leadership positions.

A national womens' association could make a difference. If such an association approaches an organisation with the objective of making a meaningful contribution, the possiblity of having some success could be considered realistic. Also, in the field of collecting and disseminating information and pointing out irregularities through organised campaigns a national womens' association could make a significant contribution to improving the position of women.

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