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Report of a Seminar

Women and Agricultural Technology: Relevance for Research

Volume 1 – Analyses and Conclusions

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Women and Agricultural Technology: Relevance for Research

Volume 1 – Analyses and Conclusions

Report from the CGIAR Inter-Center Seminar
on Women and Agricultural Technology

Bellagio, Italy, 25 to 29 March 1985

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1133, Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036, USA

International Service for National Agricultural Research
P.O. Box 93375, The Hague 2509 AJ, Netherlands

Panel on the Characteristics of Women as Users of Technology

1. Introduction to the Panel (Dr. Joyce Moock)

This panel focuses on the question, "How much do we really know about the special characteristics of women users of agricultural research?" Background materials were prepared by Dr. Laurian Unnevehr, of IRRI, for South and Southeast Asia; Shubh Kumar, of IFPRI, for Africa; and Jacqueline Ashby, of IFDC, stationed at CIAT, for Latin America.

Preparation for the panel took place in two stages. First, each reviewer was asked to draft an analytical synthesis on regional gender issues of direct relevance to agricultural research.

The papers were to provide a review of key documents regarding:

- decision-making and labor allocation issues in small-family production units;
- examples of technical and policy research which attempt to incorporate the needs of particular user groups;
- examples of negative impacts of new technology - where such impacts could be directly traced to faulty assumptions about the characteristics of user groups.

In general, the purpose of the reviews was to identify what kind of knowledge regarding household processes is necessary in order to develop technology and policy which make sense in the changing local context.

Second, in November 1984, the panelists met in Washington with several regional specialists to review the drafts.¹ These people were asked to a) comment on the outline of the drafts, b) identify additional data sets or studies, and c) help refine the conceptual approach.

These points emerged from the meeting:

- a) Because of women's household responsibilities and the particular nature of their access to and control over resources, their motivations and capacities to engage in certain agricultural activities may be different from that of men.
- b) We also know that at lower socio-economic levels, women's income-earning abilities are closely related to the well-being of the household and the children's welfare.

¹See list in Appendix 2.

- c) The data base is amazingly poor. Examples are so location-specific that generalizations are difficult. Case material is often static. Farming systems, surveys, and policy work have yet to get into these issues in depth.
- d) We need more evidence to show where knowledge of local systems actually made a difference in productivity and income-generation over time.
- e) We need to better understand the relationship between gender as an important category in itself and gender set within a socio-economic class context.
- f) We need to understand more about social trade-offs - where one group benefits at the expense of another.
- g) The panel was urged to stress the importance of gender as a way of highlighting deeper questions about the significance of the user perspective, where this makes sense in agricultural research.

2. Conclusions from the Regional Reviews (Dr. Jacqueline Ashby)

Women form distinctive special user groups or beneficiary groups for agricultural technology research and development in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Although cultural, economic, and institutional aspects of women's circumstances in relation to agricultural production differ widely from region to region, there are certain commonalities highlighted by the three regional papers. Women, as farm managers and potential users of new technology, face special constraints in access to production inputs that are related to their unique responsibilities in child care, household production, and consumption. Labor bottlenecks imposed by women's time constraints, caused by their multiple work responsibilities, may be particularly important factors determining the acceptability of technology. This consideration is especially relevant for Africa, where women are often primarily responsible for smallholder foodcrop production. In Asia and Latin America, technical choice on certain types of small-farm enterprise may also be heavily determined by the work load of women.

Technical innovation which affects labor demand is also likely to have different effects on women than men who are landless laborers when there is a sexual division of field labor operations, as emphasized particularly in the case of rice cultivation in Asia. That landless laboring women provide a major component of the income for the poorest households in Asia is quite well documented. Technology which affects employment in operations performed by women will, in this case, have the greatest impact on the welfare of landless households. In Africa and Latin America, female labor appears to be more generally unpaid and active in semi-subsistence production. The indirect effects of changed demand for female labor on household food availability, quality and stability of supply appear to be more critical, especially in the African case, than direct effects of female employment on household income.

Women as farmers are also influential in the allocation of resources for agricultural production: they often control certain inputs, they manage

certain production processes, and they may control the disposition of output. This appears to be especially relevant in certain African small-holder systems, where women have separate responsibilities from men for food production and even the feeding and support of children. However, the influence of women in farm decision-making is widely noted, though less visible, in Asia and Latin America. The importance of distinguishing women as a special user group in the context of farm decision-making is that women typically face different incentive structures from men because they have different work responsibilities, and access to and control over different resources. Hence female farmers' preferences in terms of acceptable technology may be quite distinct from those of male farmers.

While the regional papers illustrate that there are some generalizable features of women's participation in agriculture that support the contention that women form special user or beneficiary groups, the empirical evidence is extremely varied in quality. In the African and Latin American cases, in particular, there appears to be substantial intra-regional variability and location specificity in the different roles that men and women perform in agriculture. In view of this, the papers emphasize the importance of integrating methods for improving understanding of how women influence choice of food production technology into programs for social science research or multidisciplinary on-farm research already existing at the international centers.

