TRIBUTE

Gender Concerns in Rice Agriculture

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M. S. Swaminathan became the Director-General of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in 1982. His commitment to the welfare of farmers' and the uplift of the poor – especially to women who work in agriculture – led him to initiate yet another "revolution" in 1983. This was to seek to change the status of women in agriculture, and to meet the criticism that the Green Revolution had neglected women.

In 1982, MSS convened an international conference on women in rice farming, involving 78 biological scientists, social scientists, and policymakers from 27 countries, to discuss a range of issues. The first set of issues concerned the important role of women in rice farming, a role often unrecognised and underestimated. The second concerned the extent to which women had benefited from the introduction of new rice technology, which included new rice varieties and improved rice production practices. The third concerned the benefits women could reap from emerging technologies, and how women's roles in technology development and transfer might be enhanced. The assembled biophysical scientists, agricultural engineers, and social scientists were encouraged to work together to ensure that women in rice farming became potential beneficiaries of rice research and technology development.

Women in Rice Farming (IRRI 1985), the book that emerged from the conference, highlighted women's contributions to rice farming and rice technologies in South-East and South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. After the conference, and based on the suggestions of IRRI scientists, an inventory of technologies for women in rice farming systems was compiled.

One of the recommendations of the conference was that all International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs) review the role of women in agriculture and in technology

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generation and transfer. Another recommendation was that the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) add the following point to the terms of reference for programme reviews of all International Agricultural Research Centres:

> Examine the research and training programmes of the institute in relation to their potential impact on women-specific occupations with a view to diversifying employment opportunities, generating additional income, and reducing drudgery.

The conference also recommended that IRRI organise a network of collaborative research-and-action projects on women in rice farming systems.

Identifying Gender Issues and Involving Women in Research

MSS's efforts led to the development of the Women in Rice Farming Systems (WIRFS) Network in 1984. The WIRFS network was anchored under the Asian Rice Farming Systems Network (ARFSN) led by the IRRI. The WIRFS network gave special attention to training biological scientists and social scientists on how to identify gender issues and involve women in the research process. At different ARFSN sites, women farmers were involved in problem-identification, research design, testing, evaluation and monitoring, and impact assessment with respect to rice and rice-related technologies. Such technologies included lighter equipment that would reduce women's drudgery in processing rice, such as portable rice dehullers and portable rice flour mills. Other areas included seed management and the production of short duration and stress tolerant varieties of rice, glutinous rice, mung bean, and cowpea. Home-grown crops and other grasses were introduced as animal feed to improve the quantity and quality of large and small livestock. Organising women's groups to manage these technologies was another task. These experiences led to more training and planning workshops, using case studies to encourage more centres to address gender concerns in their programmes.

To improve the livelihoods of rice-farming communities, Swaminathan also initiated the "Prosperity Through Rice" project at the IRRI experimental farm to demonstrate the possibilities for rice farmers to improve their incomes through rice-based farming systems. The areas covered included crop-livestock systems, using rice biomass and rice by-products, deploying small machinery, and producing other crops and vegetables in homesteads.

According to a review by Poats (1990), the impressive record of WIRFS at the IRRI was not replicated at the other CGIAR centres. It was the IRRI that developed a clear programme on gender issues and a policy statement on research, training and affirmative action. The policy states that

> IRRI will continue to promote the integration of women's concerns into its research projects and in joint research with national research systems (NARS). Specifically, inclusion of gender analysis explicitly recognises the contributions of men and women to rice and rice-related activities. Technologies that reduce the burden of rural women without displacing their income-generating capacity will be accorded priority. IRRI will also intensify efforts to recruit qualified women scientists for its own research programs and encourage NARS to expand the number of female scientists in national rice and extension programmes.

This strategy statement was revolutionary for its time. Women, once taken for granted, were given recognition (Feldstein and Poats, 1990).

The Positive Impact of Using Gender Analysis

Based on the recommendations by Feldstein and Poats, the Gender Analysis Programme (GAP) of the CGIAR brought out a publication titled "From Field to Lab and Back." It was distributed during the International Centres' Week (ICS) in Washington. This was the second in a series of case studies that demonstrated the positive impact of using gender analysis by including women's knowledge and interest in agricultural research. Each study was based on work done by scientists from an International Agricultural Research Centre in collaboration with a national programme, covering a total of 23 national research institutions and three non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in nine countries. The impact of the publication made the work of WIRFS work highly visible not only in the CGIAR but also within the IRRI. The foreword to the publication states:

Sceptical scientists at IRRI who earlier saw such a focus on men and women farmers as the "work of NARS (national agricultural research systems)" [and of] little value to their own work, have turned around on the issue. They are seeing the benefit of good gender analysis – for IRRI's work and in their own collaboration with national scientists – for maximising their scientific productivity. The scientists associated with the WIRFS network went one step further than the use of gender analysis *per se*. They took the insights gained from using gender analysis to target opportunities specifically related to women's work, enhancing their productivity and reducing drudgery. In each case, the whole family benefited,…[showing that] well-targeted technology improvements can have a significant impact on the lives of income-poor people. These improvements are not measured in hectares of increased yield (though that is already shown) but in incremental changes which move farmers from a meagre subsistence, barely getting by, to a level allowing investment choices by men and women for the future improvement of themselves, their children and their community (CGIAR, 1995)

After returning to India, Professor MSS continued to carry the torch for women's enablement within agricultural research and development. The growing concern that income-poor women farmers in India were lagging behind in the

modernisation process led the IRRI and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) to jointly organise an international conference from November 29 to December 4, 1988 in New Delhi on "Appropriate Technologies for Farm Women: Future Strategies and Linkages with Development Systems." The importance of this conference was underscored by the presence of Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. Nearly 500 participants from India and other countries, including representatives from the WIRFS network, participated in the conference.

Two major recommendations were made by the conference. The first was that women's technology needs be addressed through farming systems research conducted by agricultural research and extension institutions. The second was that the link between the Extension Department of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the WIRFS network in the IRRI be strengthened. A noteworthy outcome of the conference was the founding of the International Federation for Women in Agriculture (IFWA), with M. S. Swaminathan as Chair.

Participatory and Community-participatory Approaches for Women

In 1992, the IRRI and ICAR began to implement the recommendations made at the Delhi conference. They conducted several training activities on how to address gender issues in rice-based farming systems research. The Central Institute for Women in Agriculture (ICAR-CIWA) was established under the ICAR as an autonomous organisation under the Department of Agricultural Research and Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Government of India. Strong collaboration between IRRI, ICAR and ICAR-CIWA has been developed through the years, especially in stress-prone rice environments in eastern India. Women are now being empowered with technical knowledge in rice varietal improvement, cropping systems, and seed management by involving them through participatory and community-participatory approaches, including Participatory Varietal Selection (PVS). To quote MSS:

> While there are many efforts in developing and testing technologies for women farmers, it is important to recognise that science is not a magic wand with which sex inequalities in workload and economic returns can be made to vanish. This should be emphasised clearly; otherwise, false hopes will be aroused about the capacity of science and technology to remove deep-seated social maladies.
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> In the ultimate analysis, it is only the concerned commitment and concerted action of agricultural research systems and policymakers that…can impart a meaningful women users' perspective to research priorities and strategies. The greatest challenge before research and development institutions lies in motivating scientists and technologists to undergo a process of "listening and learning" through collaboration with poor women while developing their research priorities and strategies. (Swaminathan 1983)

Influence on Personal and Professional Growth

MSS had a great influence in my professional career, particularly when he was Director General of IRRI. As a young Filipino researcher working under the Agricultural Economics Division and Asian Rice Farming Systems, I was privileged to have worked closely with him. He opened the doors for young Filipino researchers. For example, he chose me to represent IRRI at an international conference on Women in Rice Farming Systems at a time when Filipino personnel who were recruited as local and not international staff were not allowed to represent IRRI at international conferences. He lifted restrictions on international travel, participation in international conferences to present research papers, receiving and accepting invitations to IRRI's executive dining room and guest house events, for promotions and so on, and thus opened the doors for us young Filipino professionals. In later years, I became the coordinator/leader of the ARFSN and the WIRFS network.

Through the years, I became involved in incorporating gender concerns in research projects coordinated by the IRRI in eastern India. After the completion of a Ph. D in Social Ecology, I was hired as the Socioeconomic Gender Specialist at the IRRI. I continued to serve the MSS legacy, that is, to integrate gender issues in agricultural research and technology development, until I retired from the IRRI in 2013, and later, as an adviser with the Philippine Council of Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources and Research for Development (PCARRD).

MSS was a man of vision and wisdom – and of compassion and humility. He wrote personal letters of appreciation to us junior staff members. He had a fantastic memory and could remember the first names of almost all who worked at IRRI, including the non-research staff. He stepped out of the confines of his office and visited farms and research sites in the Philippines without fanfare. On these visits, he spoke directly to farm women, asking them about their situation, and about their technology needs in rice production and post-harvest livelihood opportunities.

In the journey of my life, MSS led me on an untrodden path towards fulfilling a mission. His legacy will live on.