

FAOPAN

39

P181

(CE)

LIB

WFD/81
~~INF~~
81

Women, food chains and agrarian reform



WORLD FOOD DAY
16 October

467388

WOMEN, FOOD CHAINS
AND AGRARIAN REFORM

Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

FOREWORD

Development planning can bring unplanned, even contradictory, results. In this essay *Women, Food Chains and Agrarian Reform*, Ingrid Palmer probes behind some paradoxes brought by modernization - such as why nutrition may deteriorate when incomes rise. She shows that only in examining women's needs and roles can we discern the real effects of development and their causes. Taking the food chain, a model that shows that people need food to get energy to produce food, Ms. Palmer demonstrates that women's weak position weakens the chain for everyone. Agrarian reform programmes could strengthen the women link, empowering them and creating healthier agriculture.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is publishing this essay for the first World Food Day as a contribution to the dialogue and debate about the causes of hunger. FAO hopes that this, and other essays being issued for World Food Day, will spark discussion.

The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the Organization. Part or all of this paper may be reproduced with attribution to FAO.

WOMEN, FOOD CHAINS AND AGRARIAN REFORM

Ingrid Palmer

Efforts to modernize food production and marketing have not always meant better nutrition for rural families. Part of the explanation for this lies in chronic indebtedness, hazards of crop diseases and pests, increasing landlessness and inadequate wage employment. Yet there are also cases in which the real income of farming families increases while their nutrition, especially that of their children, worsens.

How can this be? An understanding of the roles women play in "food chains" shows how this is possible. Women in developing countries have always played an important economic role, producing food for the family or by working for wages. However, it has often been in areas where women's role in basic food production has been most dominant that mal-nutrition has been most intractable. This has led to recent disquiet about the role of women in development, bringing about demands to promote the integration of women in the economy. Phrasing the question in such terms is misleading, though: it can be argued that women's varied tasks make them more integral to economic life than men.

What is a food chain?

Because it provides energy for work, food takes prime importance among a poor family's total basic requirements. For people with few or no reserve assets, life revolves around daily labour

on owned land or in wage employment in order to have access to sufficient food. Inadequate diets bring on debilitating weakness, making work more arduous and lessening the ability to recuperate economically from prolonged illness. The care with which small-scale farmers set aside food stocks for "lean" months of the year, and the need to increase food consumption during seasons of hard agricultural work show that both farmers and landless people are aware of food as both an input and an output of labouring.

In recognizing this "food chain", at least implicitly, farmers allocate family and hired labour to different crops in order to secure as nearly as possible a year-round food supply. Some crops may be sold; the resulting cash income provides purchasing power for additional or more varied foods. Fewer and fewer families in the world produce all the food they need, but even where food is produced mostly for the market farmers are well aware of food being both a requirement for, and a result of, their livelihoods. For instance, in Java, where as much as 80% of the rice crop is sold, farmers often calculate their total income in terms of rice quantity rather than in cash. Even their government uses rice as a standard -- 240 kilograms of rice per person per year as the income equivalent of the poverty line.

Seasonal variation in the food chain

Landless families face a dangerous weak link in their food chains. In rural areas wage employment can undergo sharp seasonal fluctuations, bringing about periods of serious undernutrition and malnutrition. Farming families, especially those owning very small farms, also suffer from this hazard, although usually

to a lesser extent. Seasonality in body weights, particularly of new-born babies, is well known; even among farming families, women sometimes lose weight during pregnancy. When seasonal demand for labour rises suddenly people may be at their weakest. Whenever farmers can pay hired labourers only after selling the harvest, this seasonal period can be extremely physically taxing. There is some, still inconclusive, evidence that seasonal variations in the food chain cause seasonality in miscarriages, infant mortality, termination of breastfeeding, and even in birth dates. Some demographers have considered the possibility that the seasonal food chain, combined with seasonality of diseases, interrupts the natural reproductive cycle of women in such a way as to accelerate it.

Long-term changes in food chains

Year-to-year changes in rural families' food chains also occur as technology and the market penetration of agriculture offer new commercial opportunities to those owning land and enjoying access to capital or credit. Governments concerned with feeding urban populations, displacing food imports, or desiring national food security -- that is, concerned with the national, aggregate food chain -- have encouraged farmers to increase their output by taking advantage of higher-yielding crop varieties, greater use of artificial fertilizers, and credit and marketing facilities. Sometimes governments use such means to encourage export crops, too. One widespread result has been further differentiation among farming households: smaller scale farmers sell or rent their land to larger farmers, who can take greater advantage of production innovations. Successful farmers enjoy more secure food supplies, if only because their cash income rises. Their concern with the food chain itself may disappear.

Farmers who sell their land, on the other hand, join the ranks of the landless. They come to depend on the rural wage labour market for their livelihoods. For them, getting enough food can become increasingly difficult.

The changing labour market and women ...

Whenever production and technological innovations alter the level of employment, it affects rural women. New technologies, where they are introduced, should reduce women's workload in farming families -- for it is the women who take responsibility for the family chores as well as for part of the food production and marketing. Likewise, job losses for women must be regarded as seriously as job losses for men -- for women in poor families make a significant, and sometimes the major, contribution to the total family income.

In some situations, such as in the northern Indian wheat belt, the demand for male wage labour has risen and with that the wage rate. But in many other areas, while demand for hired labour increases initially, technology and new hiring practices have tended to counter-balance this demand over the long term. In Bangladesh and Indonesia, for example, case studies indicate that women's job opportunities have been most affected.

Various technologies commonly reduce employment, for men or for women, without any initial surge in demand for labour. Men lose jobs when land preparation is done by tractors. Women lose theirs when crop processing is mechanized. Spraying with weedicides -- likely to become widespread -- also affects the traditionally female-typed tasks. Mechanized planters,

a more recent innovation, can be expected to make inroads into another important source of income for landless women.

In Asia

South Asia and southeast Asia, where many people are already landless, suffer the most from a contracting wage labour market. A high population-to-land ratio and very large urban areas create extreme pressure to raise crop yields per unit of land. Great effort has been devoted to intensifying production; the output results have frequently been impressive. In evaluating the distribution of benefits, however, account must be taken of the ways in which access to land and to wage employment varies among families and between men and women. Because of these differentials, food chains change differently depending on the class of someone's family or status within the family.

It is no longer possible to assume that extended families in developing countries provide mutual support. The poorest families tend to be nuclear families, especially where the search for jobs obliges them to move at least once, or even to become itinerant. In addition, an unknown proportion of rural families are women-headed or depend solely on women's and children's earnings. Some researchers suggest that they might constitute as many as one third of the families in some countries.

In Africa

The situation in Africa differs markedly from that typically found in Asia. Although the population-to-land ratio is lower, this comparatively dry continent is less

fertile and presents fewer opportunities for irrigation. As a result, self-provisioning, or subsistence, food agriculture is much more prominent. There has been less extensive promotion of production intensification schemes. At the same time, partly as a legacy of colonial times and partly due to a history of women being responsible for growing food for family requirements, women whose husbands are absent head a significant proportion of farming families. It has been said that women's role in African agriculture has been confined to a pre-capitalist sector, maintaining the family, raising the future labour force, and sheltering the sick and the old. Yet Africa has also been, and is increasingly being used as, a source of agricultural produce for the industrialized countries. Coffee, cotton, groundnuts, and more recently vegetables are grown on large plantations and family farms for export, alongside subsistence food agriculture which, by comparison, has been neglected. The environmental problems involved in raising staple food production contribute to this neglect. Other factors include the way in which agricultural development programmes have ignored women. Finally, raising the output of local supplies of food in Africa means taking stock not only of women's work involvement but of their management and authority over farm resources -- and therefore of what their role should be as land tenure, and land use are reformed.

Women's relation to the land also has implications for the food chain within the household wherever, in the developing world, part of the household's food comes through cash purchases. A brief digression describing women's particular domestic responsibilities and needs will be useful in explaining how.

Particular responsibilities and needs of women in food chains

Women share in or are solely responsible for the cultivation of food crops. They also grind cereal, monitor the foodstore, prepare and cook the food, and sometimes apportion food helpings to family members according to their current energy requirements. Moreover, it falls to women to nurse the sick members of the family. Thus, although both women and men may grow some or all of the family's food requirements, women bear the responsibility of managing the family's nutrition. Because of this, women are more conscious of the food chain itself and pay more attention to maintaining it.

The degree to which women are able to fulfil that responsibility depends on their authority over an adequate amount of the family's total resources of land, produce or cash income. If a woman has little control over the use of land and the final destination of its produce, she is unlikely to have much authority over cash income. Those with less direct responsibility for family welfare may then succumb more readily to the temptations of consumer culture. Women working for wages usually have greater authority over family income than those women who, in practice, work on their husband's farms.

Women need to exercise control over one final resource: their own labour and its allocation. If domestic chores and child care are added to their agricultural work it is easy to see that women have a full workload. Should any change require their greater attention in one sector it might have to be at the expense of their commitment to another. Even when most

of the staple crop is sold women usually work (in addition) on a small vegetable plot for household needs. If they must neglect this plot while working more on commercial crops the family may suffer from new or worse vitamin deficiencies. Child care has always posed acute problems for both landless and farming women. New means of caring for the very young need to be provided, so that their nutritional well-being can help to strengthen food chains in the future. Reports from both Africa and Asia tell of child feeding and general care during the day taking second place while women try to get higher agricultural yields. Encouraging farming families to undertake new production plans makes no sense if those plans silently undermine the nutritional status of the family by obliging women to work longer hours in the fields. Technology must be applied judiciously, in order not to impose additional work on farming women while maintaining sources of wage employment for landless women.

If a food chain study intends to explore more than the ways that cereal quantities flow between classes of family units -- that is, if it is to include the way foods are distributed within the family -- it would be essential for the study to examine women's varied roles in work, management and decision making, especially as they differ from men's.

Women and agrarian reform

Agrarian reform goes beyond land reform, involving the changing of agrarian institutions or the introduction of new ones such as cooperatives which give farmers access to necessary inputs and marketing outlets. The organization of landless labour implies

changing the very basis of the way groups of people interact in an agrarian economy. Land reform itself includes many different components, ranging from a thoroughgoing redistribution of land, to a mere confirmation of tenants' rights, to long-term occupancy and fixed rents.

Land redistribution and the further development of cooperatives' services are the most common elements. These two have most commonly been based on the assumption that the family is the primary, unified production and consumption unit. For legal and administrative convenience one member of the farming family is assumed to be the representative of all of the family's interests. Invariably this person is the male head. Hence land reform has bestowed land title or has confirmed tenancy on him. He joins the cooperative with nominal, and usually effective, authority to decide how much credit to accept, how to allocate farm land among different crops, what production method to adopt, how much of the crop to sell, and how to allocate cash income. It is he who receives production and marketing information on which decisions are based. Women's decision-making powers in turn depend heavily on personal relations between them and men and on men's respect for the expertise of women.

Few people still believe that such a style of agrarian reform has had no deleterious impact on the traditional standing of women in the family -- or on their ability to allocate their labour to different tasks or to allocate its output and cash income. When men are the legal beneficiaries, land reform frequently distorts traditional inheritance practices by giving or strengthening preference for sons. This confers

greater preferential treatment on men in the granting of loans, for example, since land ownership is the normal collateral.

When agrarian reform includes women

In some countries urgent official attention is being paid to giving land title to women because they provide most of the family's food and grow most locally consumed food. Yields of these crops cannot be raised without women being able to raise credit and to purchase new seeds and fertilizers.

The Programme of Action of the FAO World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 1979 urged the promotion of "ownership rights for women, including joint ownership and co-ownership of land in entirety, to give women producers with absentee husbands effective legal rights to take decisions on the land they manage" and measures to "ensure women equitable access to land, livestock and other productive assets". This programme makes the assumption, in principle, that the family is not the primary decision-making unit, and that intra-family economic relations are important. As a result, it has implications for the family's own food chain.

New approaches to women's role in food chains

Widespread concern about the functioning of women's subsistence agriculture in the past is being shown in efforts to reach women with extension services and credit for new inputs, in order to raise yields of vitamin and protein rich foods. It is generally assumed that higher yields bring farmers a surplus they can sell to repay credit. Chicken-raising and vegetable

growing are being encouraged in Bangladesh, and maize and vegetable growing has long been promoted in Kenya, for example. In Upper Volta, the Women's Education Project has, as one of its goals, the promotion of women's collective fields. The land, donated by village elders, is used to produce cash crops as a source of income to women. At the same time, the project is introducing carts and grain mills to relieve women of some of their household-associated tasks. In Java, after years of national effort, rice yields have increased. Attention is now being given to the range of vegetables and fruits in home gardens in which women do much of the work.

Whether these projects intend to raise the output of higher value subsistence crops, or to put more cash income in the hands of women, they all recognize farming women's importance in food chains and for nutrition. But at best these are ameliorative measures. They do not incorporate the concept of women's equal rights with men in land and other agrarian reforms. They have not yet tackled the subject of the relationship of women's control over resources to food chains at the local level.

Moreover, none of them address the question of the nature of year-round sources of food for the landless and the way these are changing through agricultural promotion programmes. Ideally, rural development's major thrust, which must centre on agricultural promotion for years to come, should create more wage employment in the fields and in crop processing. It should also encourage greater demand for services, repair shops and light manufacturing through the circulation of higher income from agriculture.

Actual results have varied according to the distribution of farm size and the agricultural technology introduced. In the poorest areas, where the shortage of land is greatest, it is questionable whether new agricultural technologies have generated more jobs for the landless. There is some evidence that landless women in particular have lost important sources of income. While these rural areas may be exporting larger amounts of food to urban areas and overseas than before, the food chains of the landless class of families have become weaker.

Only the beginning

Partial reform poses many contradictions and raises many questions. If women are to receive title to, and therefore perhaps inherit, mostly small pieces of land for cultivation of "own-consumed" food crops, will they be able to repay credit and buy inputs on the basis of any small amounts they can sell? Are they able to devote sufficient time making these plots profitably higher-yielding without withdrawing their labour from domestic tasks, or from their husbands' (or their own) staple commercial crop?

What if women were to be given equal rights in all land reform so that they could own commercial output of staples jointly with or separately from their husbands? Should they be joint members of a cooperative with their husbands, or members in their own right? If they are to own land separately and join cooperatives individually, how can women exchange labour with their husbands, which is made necessary by the sex-specificity of cultivation tasks? And finally, where women have traditionally been more important than men in growing (that is, providing)

the family's food, should they -- under a sex egalitarian land reform -- set aside part of their land for domestic food production, thereby receiving less net cash income than their husbands? Or should they proceed to join commercial production and then purchase the family's food requirements from their own cash income?

Because women are so much more closely involved in the family's nutrition, it is not at all clear how a sex-based reform of the agrarian structure should be designed, and what women's (and therefore the family's food chain) gains and losses are in different kinds of agrarian reform. Traditional responsibilities of men and women in providing the family's food vary tremendously between areas, as does the proportion of the total agricultural produce that a family retains for own-consumption. Each situation will require its own resolution. At the same time, it is imperative that all of these solutions place a high priority on the needs of women.

IP4260/E/8.81/1/7500

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Via delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome, Italy