



Gender and rice

Recognition of gender roles and the specific needs of both men and women is key to effective and productive rice farming.

Men's and women's roles in rice farming vary considerably from region to region. In general, however, activities related to planting, weeding, harvesting, processing, management and the preservation of seeds are usually the domain of women.

Women's access to agricultural resources, technical knowledge and support services (credit, extension services and training) is more limited than that of men, and this issue needs to be resolved if rice production is to be increased sustainably.

An understanding of gender roles makes it possible to design and adapt new farming technologies that will benefit both men and women in rice producing areas.



THE SITUATION

Rice is one of the world's main staple crops, with nearly 2.5 billion people depending on it as their main food. Hundreds of millions of people spend more than half their incomes on rice to feed their families. At the same time, rice farming is a major source of employment, especially for the poor, and about four-fifths of the world's rice production is grown by small-scale farmers in low-income, developing countries. All over the world, rural women have traditionally played, and continue to play, an important role in both rice production and rice post-harvest activities. In many areas, tasks related to rice planting, weeding, harvesting and processing are the domain of women.

Men and women farmers have different responsibilities in agricultural production systems, including rice farming. These differences in gender roles are not always obvious, but they must be recognized if rice production is to be increased, especially among small-scale farmers. Effective, sustainable rice production that provides food security to all people depends on gender roles being fully understood and considered in policy, planning, research and extension. Gender analysis is therefore an important tool in the development of rice farming. It identifies gender roles and responsibilities, indicates how much time different household members devote to different tasks (and why) and shows how these tasks change according to the season and the time of day.

DIVISION OF LABOUR

Gender roles are partly the result of local ecosystems and farming practices, and can change over time. For example, in Eastern India, while women from the middle and lower castes work not only in their own rice fields but also as wage labourers on other people's farms, upper-

caste women do not usually work in rice farming at all (see Table). However, recent male outmigration for non-farm employment is forcing some women from poorer, upper-caste families to work in their own fields, thus breaking long-standing social norms.

TABLE 1. Labour input in rainfed lowland rice environments, Faizabad District, Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Caste	Family		Hired		Total		Total labour
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Upper caste							
Total labour input*	8.8	0.3	13.7	157.8	22.5	158.1	180.6
Percentage of total labour	4.9	0.2	7.6	87.4	12.5	87.5	100.0
Middle caste							
Total labour input*	31.5	89.8	2.1	83.6	33.7	173.4	207.1
Percentage of total labour	15.2	43.4	1.0	40.4	16.3	83.7	100.0
Lower caste							
Total labour input*	34.5	124.3	5.3	65.3	39.9	189.6	229.5
Percentage of total labour	15.1	54.2	2.3	28.5	17.4	82.6	100.0

* Labour input is measured in person days per hectare.

Source: T. Paris et al. 2000. In Tuong et al. Characterizing and understanding rainfed environments. International Rice Research Institute.



TECHNOLOGY

Technological change can generate major social benefits, but it can also generate significant socio-economic challenges for both men and women. For example, when high-yielding rice was introduced in Asia during the green revolution, rural households had to increase their cash incomes to cover the cost of hybrid rice seed and other inputs. This led to an "urban flight", with men migrating to the cities to earn extra cash while women stayed at home and added the migrating men's farming tasks to their own already heavy workloads.

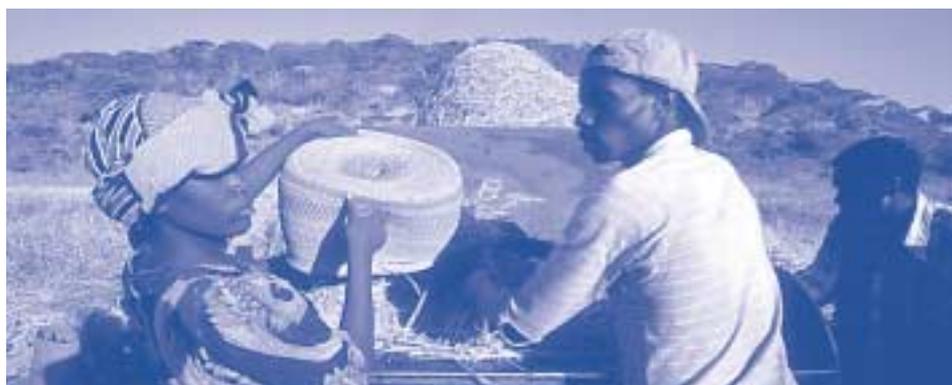
In general, rural women have a pressing need for labour-saving and income-generating technology, as demonstrated by an example from West and Central Africa. Most upland rice farmers in this region are women, who – along with children – carry out most of the labour-intensive land clearing, weeding and harvesting activities. Over recent years, the West Africa Rice Development Association (WARDA) has developed some New Rice for Africa (NERICA) varieties, which could help to reduce the heavy burden on women rice farmers. Not only does NERICA have increased productivity and protein content, but it also requires far less weeding than other varieties.

Research on the gender-related impacts of technological change in all areas of agriculture, particularly in rice, has shown that the successful design and development of new technologies such as improved varieties must take into account the intra-household division of labour, as well as gender differences in preferences, needs and criteria.

ACCESS TO AND CONTROL OF RESOURCES

Studies show that women have even less access than men have to critical productive resources and services, including credit, farm inputs (e.g. seeds, fertilizers, pesticides), marketing facilities, extension and information. Even when national laws give men and women equal rights to own and control land, existing customary laws often prevent women from ever fully owning land. Furthermore, smallholder households, particularly women and other vulnerable groups, may have specific needs and priorities. For example, they may decide to focus on maximizing their livelihoods by concentrating on crop diversification rather than crop intensification, or by selecting crop varieties that require low labour inputs rather than ones that produce high yields.

Real strides in poverty alleviation cannot be achieved unless women are fully included in all the benefits from improved rice-based systems. This requires greater awareness of women's work in rice farming, a corresponding increase in women's access to improved crop production techniques, and equitable national-level land and resource policies that are effectively enforced.



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