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# **Zimbabwe Women: A Neglected Factor in Social Development\***

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## **Introduction**

The role of women in food production for family consumption and for cash, needs to be examined initially in an historical context which determines women's farming practices according to the prevalent legal and socio-economic conditions of Zimbabwe.

The contribution of women in agricultural production has a multiplying effect on the development of women and their emancipation. For, the provision of various inputs that either decrease the workload of women, gives them land rights, access to credit and market facilities or involves them in decision-making and managerial roles at various levels, has an effect of increasing women's awareness about their potential as agents of change. It is also with this perspective that we must discuss the role of women in agriculture as a means to integrating them in national development.

## **Background**

The family was the unit of food production and consumption. Labour was differentiated according to gender. Men tended the cattle, cleared bushes, ploughed, hunted and built homesteads; and joined women in sowing and harvesting. Men controlled and owned the means and instruments of production. On the land issue, according to tradition, the chief was the caretaker and dispenser of land use rights and each adult male or "head of household", had land use rights to a given piece of land which could be subdivided accordingly. Therefore men, as heads of households, had prestige and high status. On the other hand women were and are still in the forefront of food production, preparation and processing; planting, weeding, hoeing, husking, shelling of maize and groundnuts, threshing of millet and the transport of harvested crops to the homestead. Women were also responsible for all the cooking, beer brewing and all the other major

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tasks confined to the “domestic sphere”. Sexual division of labour was not only confined to work but to type of crop produced: groundnuts and rapoko were about the only crop that was traditionally a woman’s from which she could exchange or barter as she wished.

From the foregoing, it will be seen that most of the agricultural surplus was produced by female labour but controlled by men. Thus, according to Ester Boserup (1970), women in Sub-Saharan Africa, which includes Zimbabwe, formed “female farming systems” where women comprise well over half of the agricultural labour force. Whilst women were valued for their agricultural labour power, their work did not confer status on them. Their low socio-economic status was both a reflection and a cause of women’s position in regard to the main means of production. This also influenced their ability to produce and have adequate access to food for consumption or for selling.

The subordinate position of women legally, economically and socially was reinforced during the colonial era. Successive land tenure acts liberally apportioned good agricultural land of large acreage to white settlers and for mining purposes with little regard for existing African land rights. With many African males alienated from their land, and the demand for wage labour increasing in the urban areas, mining towns and commercial farms, many “heads of household” exchanged their labour for meagre wages. Women were left as *de facto* household heads with an increase in their work load and responsibilities, because they also had to undertake some of the tasks that were formerly performed by men. Thus capitalist development accentuated the division of labour between men and women. Women were left with more responsibilities and were recognised for their reproductive role for the family.

It is against this background that we now discuss women’s role in agricultural production and food security.

### **Women as Agricultural Producers**

Women were affected by these changes in various ways. The prosperity enjoyed by the peasant farmers of the 19th century was brought to an end by competition from heavily subsidised European farmers, eviction from land compounded by reduction of reserve land (which was mainly on ecological region IV or V, i.e. poor, unfertile and arid regions) increasing number of taxes, rents, dipping and grazing fees. Men increasingly became wage labourers in an effort to supplement whatever little could be eked from their peasant homes. Capitalist development left women with an increased burden of labour and their need for cash made them more dependent upon their spouses. Food security declined as more land was given to the production of cash crops (e.g. cotton, tobacco and

groundnuts). Subsistence farming as then practiced by women, in order to produce sufficient food, required intensive factors of production such as extra labour, fertilisers and farming implements which were not easily available to women because of the low position they occupied in society for procuring or determining inputs.

The limited opportunities for increasing food production by women were further exacerbated by the low value placed on women's domestic role and peasant agriculture by societal norms. Agricultural policies gave financial and technical recognition and assistance to commercial farming and cash production was directed to black men by a male dominated and orientated extension service system to the exclusion of women.

These factors, combined with women's lack of economic and social power, have to a certain extent prevailed. As a result women are a marginal socio-economic group in society, in spite of their particular predominant role in agricultural activities for both family consumption and sale. Any surplus produced is usually used for local exchange and a limited amount reaches the export market, perpetuating women's marginal role in production.

## **Current Situation**

Women by their numerical majority (51 per cent of the total population and about 80 per cent of rural dwellers practising subsistence farming) and their strategic role as the nation's mothers cannot be ignored in national development. Their impact is long overdue.

The general needs of Zimbabwean women in agricultural production has been described in, for example, the "Report on the Situation of Women in Zimbabwe" produced by the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs in co-operation with UNICEF, "We carry a heavy load" produced by the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, and in observations made at various seminars conducted by the Ministries of Agriculture, Community Development and Women's Affairs, Lands Resettlement and Rural Development. As yet no systematic detailed research has been done to study women's agricultural participation rates for use by project planners and designers. However, information gathered in the above attempts have provided planners and policy makers with indicators on women's agricultural needs towards socialist transformation.

Summarised, the reports discovered the following constraints in agricultural activities performed by women. Women have limited opportunities in agricultural production in terms of access to appropriate implements for various agricultural tasks, lack of credit facilities, appropriate technology, dependence on men for agricultural inputs, limited

access to extension services and other services, lack of land rights, marketing facilities and the exclusion of women from decision-making and managerial processes at all levels, all domestic chores are exclusively attended to by women as well as the majority of farming tasks. These factors directly or indirectly contribute to women's impact on producing sufficient food for household consumption or sale. At a policy level, the major share of development resources are allocated to technical agricultural projects for men or for commercial farms. Very few small scale farm projects, such as irrigation schemes, exist for women.

In order to redress this imbalance in the allocation of resources and access to credit and other facilities between men and women, the Government plans to provide "an appropriate framework within which it allocates national level resources to assist development of self-reliant efforts of local authorities and communities in their financing local and community level goods and services" (Government of Zimbabwe, 1982:97). By encouraging communities to participate in the development of "people orientated projects" the government is attempting to redress inequalities that exist between urban and rural communities; men and women. Both sexes are encouraged to participate together in community development projects. This is an effort to engender awareness on equality of both sexes and to minimise the division of labour created by the capitalist colonial system. Women are increasingly encouraged to engage in economies that, at least in part, generate extra cash as well as provide sufficient food for family consumption. How is this intention being effected in order to improve the economic and agricultural role of women?

The Government specially created the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs for the purposes of accelerating and improving the emancipation of women and the development of communities. In pursuit of Government's objectives towards an egalitarian society and the betterment of women's status, the ministry promotes programmes on a self-reliant basis. In the area of agricultural production, because of its scope and nature of operation, the ministry encourages women to identify and undertake agricultural orientated income-generating projects such as fruit and vegetable growing, animal husbandry and the construction of small farms, crop production and the establishment of savings clubs. The latter activity provides women with cash for purchasing inputs such as seeds, fertilisers and hoes for the next ploughing season, whilst on the other hand the Ministry of Agriculture promotes small scale farming and related technical services to rural communities.

The Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rural Development, through their co-operative resettlement programmes, are promoting opportunities for women in terms of providing the necessary infrastructure to increase agricultural productivity, land use rights for women, more knowledge on

other cropping methods with other additional services (rendered by the relevant Ministries) and other agencies. Therefore, land distribution supported with other socio-economic and legal arrangements would not confine women to subsistence production but, with combined occasional small scale cash production, will increase their earning power.

These activities are performed by having "people orientated development and enhancement of self-help and collective self-reliance efforts" (Government of Zimbabwe, 1982:10). In this way it is hoped the Government will be encouraging local authorities and communities to finance community level goods and services so that support of these farming activities will provide adequately nutritious food for the family, increase the purchasing power of families and also generate and strengthen village economies. Hence women's food production role would be improved and they would also be integrated into national development. Local employment opportunities for women would also be enhanced.

To what extent have the desired effects been met? The financial and technical assistance given to the previously mentioned agricultural related activities ranged from \$60 to \$200 for the purchasing of various inputs. About 1 373 agricultural projects have been given some form of assistance by the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs. The larger part of assistance was given in extension services, by male extension workers for Agritex, and training from women extension workers from the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs. Training concentrated on poultry keeping, proper production techniques, the nutritional value of various types of foods produced, methods of preservation and pest control. It has been difficult to quantitatively and qualitatively assess to what extent this support has improved the family's access to adequate food. But the proliferation of viable, agricultural related, income-generating projects may be an indication that food production, notwithstanding the havoc played by drought, has improved. Thus better infrastructure enables women to contribute to an increase in the standard of living in rural communities.

With more effort and support to increase technical and financial assistance from Government and donor agencies, coupled with land use rights for women, and with women encouraged to plan and design projects as beneficiaries, it may be possible to increase food production and security for families. These activities, if given the necessary support and performed collectively, offer a viable means through which resources and services can be delivered to women farmers. It can also help to create employment opportunities for women, designed according to the demands made upon them.

### **Marketing**

Women face multiple problems in attempting to market their produce,

especially perishables such as vegetables and fruits. The problems range from the packaging and preservation of products to unfamiliarity with pricing systems and the non-availability of cheap transport. Penetration to outlets is also confounded by competition from long established producers. On crop marketing, grain marketing cards are still largely given to men. Women need to have more access to these cards and to grain marketing depots.

Furthermore, marketing co-operatives need to be established in conjunction with decentralising food processing facilities to rural areas which would help to lower food prices to the rural poor and provide them with knowledge on pricing policies.

Services aimed at the general development of the rural areas should pay special attention to the needs of women as agricultural producers. Their involvement in local decision making bodies such as water committees and the proposed village development committees would ensure that services aimed at development meet the approval of the people concerned.

#### **Women's participation in village and local level activities.**

Women are not represented in most local level decision making bodies. Although there are more women than men in the rural areas women tend to shy away from public offices. This therefore hampers their inputs in deciding where community services, such as wells, boreholes, grain collection points, etc., should be situated. This results in a proliferation of social services, designed to improve the condition of the community, becoming unhelpful to the vast majority of the population. Women's burden has not lessened significantly with the provision of the various services.

It is only recently that agricultural training colleges have started to enroll women. Reports received indicate that employers are reluctant to take on these women since agriculture has been considered as a male preserve and although women are involved in it they are perceived as labourers rather than as peasant farmers.

Training opportunities have largely been extended to males, and male extension workers relate better to the male members of the community. Women therefore, although they are the ones who need all the technical services offered, find themselves alienated from these.

#### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to present some of the major constraints faced by women in agricultural related activities and the technical, financial and other necessary support; not only to women themselves but to those national machineries or non-governmental organisations that address themselves to identifying and meeting women's needs. With more effort put

into improving women's agricultural role, their integration into national development would also be accelerated.

**Recommendations from this paper are that:**

1. Attempts should be made by government and donor agencies to introduce appropriate and innovative technologies that would decrease the workload of women, combined with necessary child care.
2. Lack of base line data has beset the development of suitable agricultural programmes for women. It is therefore recommended that funds be made available to undertake research which would inform policy makers and planners of the various needs and priorities in agricultural food production for the purposes of household consumption and cash.
3. Extension and training facilities need to be expanded and to include more women as dispensers of knowledge at the grassroots level as they are in a better position to impart information to other women.
4. Easier credit and marketing facilities should be provided and repayment terms that are appropriate to activities, or enterprises, adopted by women accompanied with well tested technical packages and strict supervision of credit.
5. Donor agencies where they support agricultural activities, should insist that women, as the major beneficiaries, are involved in project design and decision-making. Preferably, certain projects should demand the inclusion of women.

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