

# Food Sufficiency in Africa Depends on Women Farmers

By: J. P. Owusu-Ansah

For the first time, an African country is sending a woman cabinet minister to the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS).

IFAS experts say the Sept. 17 visit from Cameroon's Minister for Women's Affairs shows that U.S. and African officials are beginning to realize that Africa won't solve its food problems without solving problems for its women farmers.

"Women in Africa perform 60 to 80 percent of the food farming responsibility, sometimes including initial clearing of the land," said Dr. Doris Tichenor, director of the IFAS home economics department, who recently returned from Cameroon.

Cameroon's Aissatou Yaou is coming to the United States in search of programs which can help women farmers and small agricultural producers in her West African nation.

"Women are Africa's primary food producers. They work 10 to 15 hours a day on farming, marketing, cooking, child-care and other domestic labor, compared to seven to eight hours a day by men," added Dr. Anita

Spring, who directs UF's Women in Agriculture Program.

"African women have been in agriculture all the time. By raising the productivity of their agricultural and domestic labor, women can have more time to participate in the lucrative forms of rural economic activity."

In recent years the government of Cameroon has embarked upon projects that aim at improving the conditions of women food producers in the rural areas.

The University of Florida is part of it through a five-year \$16 million contract between the U.S. Agency for International Development and UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

"A major constraint of women food farmers in Africa is the stereotype that farmers are always men," said Spring, who since 1979, has been involved in agricultural programs in several African countries, including Cameroon.

"Women's contributions have been overlooked because they grow food only to feed the family, not to make  
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profit," Spring said.

"Consequently, men, who grow commercial crops, have a monopoly over technology, economic resources, and family incomes."

Spring said technology available to women farmers is traditional and not very productive. Women do hand-hoeing to produce the family's food, and often provide a surplus for sale in local market's, she said.

To break the chains of forced dependence on backward technologies, rural Africa women would have to earn substantially more money, Spring said.

Tichenor agreed. "To raise women's agricultural productivity, it would be necessary for women to have the right to land ownership.

"Women should have access to credit facilities, fertilizers, pesticides, improved storage, and field-to-house transportation."

Dr. Elizabeth Bolton, a UF home economics specialist coordinating Madame Yaou's visit, said "African leaders must recognize the strengths and needs of the traditional farming systems on which they have so long relied.

"We hope that Madame Yaou's visit would bring home to local and international agricultural experts that the cheapest and most reliable method of increasing domestic food supply is the improvement and expansion of traditional women's sector." ■

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