

Gender issues in food and farming

An overview

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What I'm going to talk about today is about how half the world's population, that is women, erm engage in farming and food systems. But I'm going to talk about that in terms of the relationships between men and women as these are defined and determined by societies. Now this tells us that every society is going to define those in a slightly different way.

Part 1. Who does what in farming?

You can't assume that a farm is just operated by men with some invisible workers somehow helping - that word 'helping' always needs a lot of examination. What does it mean? Are women carrying out particular tasks, are they responsible for particular crops or animals, are they responsible, for example, of keeping the dairy, of making the cheese. Feeding the chickens. It enables us to talk about how are the farm assets shared between men and women, do women have the right to inherit the land, or animals or trees on a farm? It tells us also we need to pay attention to who has the right to take the benefit from the work they do and the knowledge and experience that they contribute. Who controls that?

I'm also going to talk about this in terms of farming systems. Now this directs attention slightly differently to asking for any farm to operate the things that come into the farm and the things that the leave the farm. Things that come into the farm tend to be agrochemicals, or credits or additional farm labour, or resources that are gathered from wild spaces around an agricultural area. The things that leave the farm are things like the crop, of course, or the animal but there also products that are processed within the farm. And all those things that are traded, the goods and services that are traded from the farm. And these things matter because it tells us how the farm actually works as a social and economic organization.

And they have different implications and women. For example, women may be controlling the, the vegetable garden around the immediate home plot. Most of that produce goes directly into serving the food needs of the farm household but some of it might be traded directly or indirectly by the women themselves. Do they have the right to control that money? What do they spend the money on? One of the things, it's a bit of a generalization, that research has shown is that if women are trading agricultural goods in local markets almost all that money is spent directly on the welfare of the household. The crops and animals that men trade, a lot of that leaks out into the wider economy. Some of it into what some might see as wasteful expenditures, like beer drinking, or you could put a kinder interpretation and say that is the kind of way that men need to relate to the wider world in order to maintain the social relationships that keep the farm going.

So there's all this dynamic going on and it's really important that we first of all do research to understand in a specific place how that dynamic works and also then what are we going to do about it.

There is another important part of this preliminary story and that is how do agricultural scientists and how do crop advisers, veterinarians, officers in a credit bank deal with men and women in a farming community? Do men and women have access to these services on equal terms? Are there particular barriers that women tend to experience? And the answer is almost everywhere yes.

Now the tragedy is, and I work in agricultural universities all my life, that many of my male scientific colleagues and men in the international agricultural research organisations, for whatever reason, simply don't get it. Almost all agricultural research, the major staffing is men and in almost all agricultural advisory services whether in the public or the private sector still today are mostly men. There may well be cultural reasons why it's difficult for such men to directly approach women farmers, but frankly these are, there are always locally appropriate ways where such barriers can be overcome.

And still today women's needs on the farm, their priorities, their experiences, the support services, the knowledge that they need to advance are simply not equal to them, open to them in the same way as they are to men. And frankly after spending my entire career together with a huge network around the world of dedicated men and women of providing the research data to show why it matters and providing training, providing analytical and research tools that would enable this to happen without too much effort, it's still mostly doesn't.

And frankly I don't know what more we need to do to make it happen. I have some hope that modern communication technologies, erm, will begin to make a real difference because as women themselves pick up a mobile phone they have access directly now to market information. They have access now also to sources of agricultural knowledge and expertise which can help them identify an insect pest that they might have observed in their crop, or something going wrong with one of their animals. So we can cut out a lot of the intermediaries that might be blocking a better relationship between men and women and the professional community.

Part 2: Why gender discrimination matters

Right, so why does all of this matter? Well, you can say it's obviously of importance to women themselves but I'd like to suggest to you that is of importance to society as a whole. And our whole direction of future development. There are three main reasons

- one is the relationship between gender issues and matters of equality,
- the relationship between gender and issues of poverty and how successful we are and could be in relieving poverty, and
- the third thing is gender issues are intimately related with how well will be able to as different kinds of societies become more resilient in agriculture and food systems in the face of climate change.

Equality

Now in some ways the world has done quite a good job in the sense that in almost all societies now, formal law and national constitutions, as well as increasing areas of international law, recognise men and women as having equal rights as individual persons. Many national constitutions give full equality between men and women in terms of their citizenship rights. The difficulties remained really in areas of local law, local custom, administrative regulations and all the nitty-gritty, of, that really determine the day-to-day life of men and women. And here we have to say that in many farming communities, the traditional and customary expectations of how men and women should behave, as well as traditional law, really constrain women's advancement still today.

And I was fairly, horrified when I moved to the Netherlands to hear a bank official when I asked to open a bank account asked me for my husband's guarantee. This is, of course, some decades ago but I thought that outrageous. So these elements persists unthinkingly in all our societies.

Now why does it a matter? It matters because the typical situation is women on the farm have access to land or animals or to tree stock only because they are the sister of somebody, the daughter of somebody, or the wife of somebody. So all these rights of access and enjoyment of the benefits of those resources are derived from their social status. Now of course when the family is working happily and harmoniously you can say what's the problem, a family is a family unit and we all support each other.

Unfortunately, life doesn't often go on that happy way for everyone. And so you have to ask yourself what happens if somebody is formally divorced? Who has the right to initiate divorce proceedings? Does the woman lose access to the farm? What happens if the man goes off in search of employment because the family can no longer survive on what they're producing on the farm? She's separated, sometimes for years at a time, what are her rights to continue farming? To sign contracts? To sell the produce, to use the produce? The income? Look after the children? What happens if people are never formally married? Does this help or hinder the woman in getting access to services, and access to credit, access to a market.

One of the tragedies of unthinking development and unthinking application of economic theory, is the assumption that agricultural modernisation has to, must inevitably take place, on the basis of giving men, who are presumed to be the head of the household, formal title to farm land and farm assets. Now I can see the logic of that and I'm sure you'll be able to work it out for yourselves. The trouble is, at a stroke, women become more insecure.

There's a huge row in Australia, it's not just a question of poor people in poor countries, er, a few years back when there was a proposal to give men and women from farm families equal rights of inheritance of land. You can see the logic. It might break up the unit, unit of land separated into smaller pieces, which are no longer economically productive, and so on. So these are not easy issues but they're issues that have to be consciously addressed.

What happens if, if women no longer have recognised rights in the land and the farm assets? If formal title of these things is passed in law to men? There is a problem when you come to develop women's enterprises. Many societies women are responsible for

bits of the farm like the dairy, like chickens, like particular tree crops, like particular food crops and to advance they also need access to capital, to credit, to working loans, to storage premises. Well, without the collateral of the land, they have nothing to offer in security when they take a loan.

It's one of the reasons why you see, where women have major tasks in farming, there are many women's groups, savings and credits groups, and the record, the financial record of those groups, can act as a sort of collateral or security for a bank or a microcredit organization. The trouble from women's point of view is, yes, it's a way forward a way out of the dilemma, but it all takes time and as we all know time is the one major constraint facing women and their energy with all the tasks they have to do. There is another part of it too and this takes more into direct confrontation with the, the predominant economic theory governing our world, and that is in capitalist society led by markets, the rewards of development of land, labour and capital go to those who own the assets. Unless governments intervene to redistribute how those assets, how the benefits that result from using those assets, are shared, women are always going to be the losers if they don't have formal ownership. And we see this happening in many parts of the world. And in a way it's a bit of a social tragedy. I think myself of course is much debate about this, there is no inevitability that that's the route we have to follow.

Poverty

The second impact that I want to talk about is the whole area of reducing poverty. Now in some ways there's a good story here. The world has done a very reasonable job in reducing both the percentage and numbers of people who are absolutely poor in cash terms, that is they receive less than one dollar and nowadays because inflation two dollars a day.

That's very good and there has been many strategies developed to achieve that, and of course economic growth, development in general of rural areas, and provision of social services and rising global trade have all made a contribution. But for women there are two investments in particular that have made a huge difference. One is in almost every part of the world investment in good quality family planning and reproductive health services that allow women to choose when they have a child. To carry the child to term and to deliver safely and bring up their children so that they survive and remain healthy.

The second major investment is in education for girls, for women, both formal schooling and vocational training at all stages of life and to every level for which they're capable. Of those two things are really changing women's relationship with poverty and what we can do about it. Many other things though that are happening at the same time because we could relax and say well we've got the problem almost solved, it's a job well done. We just keep on doing what we're doing. But the world doesn't stay still and things are really changing rather fast. One is and most obviously that civil unrest, domestic wars, cross-border turmoil, are hugely destabilising of agriculture and food systems and this particularly affects women and children. I mean there is a real reason why almost all the world's refugee camps are predominantly occupied by women and children. And I'm not for a moment suggesting that their menfolk, who may be actively engaged, in farm, in the fighting or are just trying to survive somewhere else and also very badly affected but it is obvious we can't advance a stable and secure food system in the world unless we deal with those problems too.

Climate change

The other obvious way in which things are changing for both men and women in the relationship between each other is the effects of climate change. Many of the world these already kicking in. Rainfall is becoming a lot less reliable in terms of the quantity or the time or whether it rains there and not here and in terms of also the temperature. This means that habitual ways of farming are becoming a lot more challenging. We don't know what new crops will be needed to cope with a warmer world it. It all takes time to get into production. And in the meantime the real farming families, with real people, who are struggling to cope with something that is unfamiliar to them and beyond their normal range of ability to cope. And we are just beginning to struggle with those issues on the ground and experiment with different ways of trying to help people cope.

Part 3 – Current challenges

Family Structure

The other erm obvious way in which things are changing is what we think about what is a family is also changing very fast. And what we have is women who never married who have children, women who never marry who don't have children women, women who are married without children, women who are divorced and separated, whatever. This means we have many different kinds of households. And people are related to each other, are really trying to find creative new ways to make sense of it all. In parts of Africa, it's really quite common to find what people themselves would regard as the family spread out over three or four different locations. The children may spend their early years with granny on the farm, they may go to the town for secondary education because rural schools are not good at the secondary level, they may spend a time of unemployment back on the farm, they might then go into the city, the big city, whether the father has established a household in order to get his help with looking for employment. For people themselves, this is still counted as a family. The trouble is that our ways of delivering services, our ways of designing housing, cities, everything that makes up the social life, all our economic expectations is running after the facts as these are being created on the ground. And this causes of course a lot of tensions are problems.

Consumption

There's another way in which men and women's relationship in food and farming are changing and that's in our consumption patterns. Even in poor rural economies it's very rare these days to find a household that does not spend at least some cash on purchasing food. Particular times of the year, for particular reasons, particular kinds of products. In the cities, of course, we're almost entirely dependent on finding cash to purchase food. No cash, no food. This is devastating for women who are unemployed and for whom there are no safety nets. It's really not that surprising that in every major city around the world we see the equivalent of food banks, installed originally as an emergency measure, now becoming permanent safety net, but is particularly valuable for women and their children. And we have to think about the implications of that as we go into the future.

There is another aspect of the fact that most of us, even in rural areas, do spend cash on food these days. We're not self-producing, self-provisioning human beings any more. And that is that we notice there is an enormous concentration of control in the

commercial food supply chain. From the, the supply of agrochemicals to producers, through those who control commodity trade, the bulk products rice, wheat, soya bean around the world, into the food retailers and the food processors. And we have to ask the question from men and women's point of view, does this lead to a more food secure world? And if it doesn't, what could we do about it? This is an important sort of the issue because one thing that is changed in my lifetime is, although we've achieved some successes, important successes in reducing the numbers of people who go to bed hungry, we haven't solved the hunger problem. And this is because we still seem reluctant to deal with issues of how do we allocate the food that is available.

The other side of the hunger coin is they are now more people who are overweight and obese in the world than there are who are dying from malnutrition and hunger. It's absurd. It's outrageous but this is what our global food system has produced. And we all have a part in that outcome. The question is, what we going to do about it? It is not an easy discussion. When we enter into dialogue with the big commodity traders, the big food companies, they tend to say well is the consumer's fault and then, of course, particularly women, who are provisioning their, their families, erm, they demand, we simply supply. And very reluctant to take major steps to take what seems to be the necessary action erm to help us all eat more healthily and still at a reasonable price that most people can afford.

There's another part of it. Its normal, it's natural, that as people's incomes increase and men and women are getting a chance to enjoy that, they demand more protein, fish and meat. Trouble is the way we produce these two products, the way we harvest fish from the wild, is not really sustainable. Demands too much fossil fuels. It consumes too much water. And water of good quality is becoming one of the most scarce resources in agriculture. Agriculture is the largest user of water of any industry in the world. And we need to face up with what are we going to do about that. It produces a lot of waste products, which we're not dealing with. So as the world's income increases we really have to think about how much meat and fish are we going to eat. Is there a possibility to restrain demand? Or is this an invasion of the liberty of choice? Some very difficult and profound issues were dealing with.

Population

We also have to recognise something, that very often and I'm sure you'll have seen at yourselves in advertising slogans that we need to double food production to feed the 9 billion people on the world by the middle of this century. I would tell you that I don't think that's the real story about how the global population is changing. The really exciting and interesting fact is that round about the 1980s the structure of the global population began to change. This means that over time, unless things change again in a radical way, two things. One, the numbers will increase for a time because we're starting from such a large base but populations will begin to shrink this century. And in some parts of the world, including Italy, including China, this is already starting to happen, as older populations in the natural course of things die off and very few children are being born. We really haven't thought enough about what are the implications for what kind of food we need if we've got a much older global population. What kind of food needs are they going to have? They're not going to be eating ten pound beef steaks that's for sure. And this will change food consumption and food demand habits too and agricultural production has to follow this, and foresee it. "Erm

we're not doing about this as we're hung up on this mantra, what we have to manage as a world is a bulge rather than an unending catastrophe driven by population growth.

We've really based our successes in agricultural modernisation over the last 40-50 years on helping farmers both men and women, move towards mono crop farming. You have a single crop in a single plot, has grown to best agronomic standards and protected with a whole range of agrochemicals and fed with fertilizer. Now for many women farmers this has proved a really discouraging strategy. Er, first of all they probably find it more difficult than their menfolk to get access to the cash to buy their own fertilizer, to buy their own agrochemicals. The other thing is those agrochemicals are really, er toxic, not just for the insects and the diseases they are trying to control, but for people's health. And it easy for the industry to say well, it's, it's people, it's our fault, farmers are misusing or abusing how they use those chemicals. We have to ask ourselves, first of all what are the consequences and what is the product liability of the chemical companies, but also, if there aren't other options.

Waste

We also have to realise that, goodness me, we waste a lot of food. Now it doesn't matter whether you're looking at a small-scale farming society, or whether you look at London, New York, any other place in the world. Roughly speaking we can say we lose about a third of all food we produce, all the time, every year and we need to do something differently about that. And there is a role here for women too. What can be achieved through recycling technically. What can be achieved through better management. How can commercial services and governments help women to manage food waste, make less of it, use it better and we'll see how far we can get with that in the next few decades.

Part 4. Conclusion

I've talked about a lot of things and perhaps in some cases in a rather superficial way because there's a lot to talk about and learn. I've put a lot of information that will help you follow up on the website. I hope you enjoy working your way through it. The final thing I want to say to you is women are, around the world, in advanced economies, in developing countries, absolutely central to food production. They contribute probably at least a half of all the food that is produced in the world and they are the ones who are managing the food that appears on your plate tonight. How well we look after their concerns and their needs matters to everyone. It really does.