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WOMEN IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT:  
REPORT OF A DISCUSSION GROUP

Working Paper No. 262

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This paper was prepared as the report of a discussion group participating in the Conference on Assembling and Collecting Data on the Participation of Women in Kenyan Society, held at the Nairobi School on August 11 to 15, 1975.

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ABSTRACT

This paper was prepared as the report of a discussion group participating in the Conference on Assembling and Collecting Data on the Participation of Women in Kenyan Society, held at the Nairobi School on August 11 to 15, 1975. It was agreed that the search for improvements in agriculture and in extension to rural women must take into account the complexity of rural society, the diverse activities of rural residents and the variety of their economic and nutritional needs.

The principal concern of the group was to underscore the need for systematic and standardised collection of data which will more genuinely reflect women's participation in the economic activities which are the principal target of rural development. Five priority areas were identified in which the need for greater information on the role of women is especially urgent: accurate representation of the household unit, wage differentials and their consequences for rural incomes, the sociological context of communal labour activities, access to extension and credit, and diversification and upgrading of non-farm activities. Finally, the need for an action-oriented research programme was stressed, in which work is carried out on several levels, coordinated and presented to a wide audience.

WOMEN IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT: REPORT OF A DISCUSSION GROUP

This paper was prepared as the report of a discussion group participating in the Conference on Assembling and Collecting Data on the Participation of Women in Kenyan Society, held at the Nairobi School on August 11 to 15, 1975. Members of the group agreed on the importance of identifying possible improvements in technology and extension services, and in the delivery of these resources to rural woman. While recognising that the de facto decision-makers in a large proportion of rural households are woman, it is also useful to conceive of the farm household, and the various activities of its members - those present and absent - as a system. Within the household, different roles and labour assignments may be allocated on the basis of age and sex, but all of the members' operations remain inter-related.

Rural societies are not homogeneous, but are differentiated along socio-economic lines. Female members of households belonging to different socio-economic strata occupy different roles. They not only have different perceptions of their own positions, but are also differently perceived by members of the societies to which they belong.

The introduction of new techniques or inputs in one sphere, such as the cultivation of maize, should not be viewed in isolation from other activities related to subsistence and nutrition. For example, improved maize yields may lead to a fall-off in the production of other crops, such as sorghum, millets and indigenous vegetables, which previously contributed to the balance of the household diet. Thus increases in "productivity" within the farm household need to be assessed within a wider framework which encompasses its nutritional needs, and the access of its various members to cash incomes. Scepticism is therefore called for concerning suggested innovations which focus exclusively on a single type of agricultural activity and whose proponents predict dramatic improvements in the living standard of rural households.

Further, the design of appropriate services and programmes for women living in the rural areas must not be bound by shopworn stereotypes of economic activities in the countryside. In sense, the term "rural" is itself potentially misleading, because it is often assumed to refer to a static, unchanging mode of behaviour. The control of critical resources on farms in the countryside often rests with adult

males who themselves reside in town.. In areas such as Maragoli in Western Kenya, many families depend on cash remittances from absent members who are in wage employment in order to procure basic food supplies. The field of social relationships relevant to farm management and productivity very often extends into urban centres.

The distinction between "cash" and "subsistence" crops is also largely artificial. Obviously, certain crops linked to industrial processes, such as sugar cane, cotton, tea and coffee, are not subject to domestic consumption, but maize, sorghum and millets, root crops (such as cassava and sweet potatoes) and vegetables cannot always be categorised as being exclusively for consumption or for sale. Close observation reveals that even in many households where the total production of food crops in a given year does not meet consumption needs, certain amounts of maize, millet, etc. are likely to be sold when short-run cash shortages require it. For the most part, it is women who retain control of granaries and food stores, and who allocate and dispose of the amounts produced by the household. Basic needs (such as the purchase of kerosene, salt, soap, etc.) in households which have no other access to cash may constrain a woman to sell off portions of her family's food supply, even against her own better judgement. Many husbands expect their wives to keep the household stocked with such goods, but they do not always provide the cash with which to purchase them. Recognition of constraints such as these on women's marketing strategies makes it impractical to rely on the assumption that only a "surplus" - the amount remaining after all consumption needs have been met - finds its way into the market.

We would like to emphasise that in our view, the rural economy is already a diversified one, and that in particular, women's economic roles represent a cluster of possible activities, not all of which fall within the agricultural sector. We hope to identify some areas of research which are vital if greater diversification is to be promoted, for it is clear that both as producers and as sellers, women's contributions to the rural economy have been poorly understood to date. Debate over policy alternatives has tended either to take these contributions for granted, or to treat women's activities as peripheral to the process of introducing technological innovations and raising productivity. Our primary concern is to underscore the need for systematic and standardised collection of data which will more genuinely reflect women's participation in the very economic activities which are the principal target of rural

development initiatives. The following are the priorities enumerated in our group discussions.

1. Accurate Representation of the Household Unit

There is a need for a much more precise accounting of the tasks which various members of farm households perform, and the decisions they make. In particular, distinctions must be drawn between fact and fiction, between ideology and practice, regarding the sexual division of labour and the relative autonomy of de facto female heads of households where adult males are absent. Topics for investigation include :-

- (a) The allocation of specific tasks (clearing, planting, weeding, harvesting, etc.) among household members;
- (b) Detailed descriptions of how each operation is performed. This should include existing technology, time, budgets, etc., and the means by which techniques are communicated;
- (c) The breakdown of tasks performed according to age and sex of household members, with particular attention to contrasts between ideology and practice;
- (d) Changes in labour allocation related both to out-migration of adult males and the introduction of crops grown exclusively for sale such as tea, coffee and sugar cane;
- (e) Analysis of how such key decisions as seed selection, purchase of inputs, timing of planting, etc. are in fact executed within the farm household;
- (f) The process of managing and allocating farm produce, over which women may have considerable authority, and the constraints on marketing strategies which affect decisions on when and what to sell.

2. Wage Differentials and their Consequences for Rural Incomes

We recognise that existing data on wage differentials based on sex in the agricultural sector are incomplete. A statistical survey of wage rates obtaining both in plantation agriculture and in the smallholder farming sector (where casual labour agreements are the rule), should be correlated with analysis of the allocation and availability of particular kinds of paid labour to men and women. By itself, however, the survey technique will not shed much light on the question of purchasing power. Although wages paid for semi-skilled and unskilled agricultural labour have not remained static, they do not seem to have kept pace with the impact of inflation, which has been felt at the national level, but has in some areas been further compounded by localised shortages of basic foodstuffs. An empirical investigation of levels of real income can only

be undertaken through intensive participant observation in selected communities, with standardised procedures for the collection of core data. The following problems require thorough study:-

- (a) Wage rates obtaining in the plantation and smallholder sectors of agriculture, as related to the actual breakdown of tasks according to sex;
- (b) Collection of household budget data to be matched with information on wage earnings, so as to estimate the rise or fall of real income received from wage labour;
- (c) Seasonality of labour requirements in the production of various crops under differing technological systems;
- (d) Identification of other possible types of productive activity, specifically for women, during seasonal periods of low demand for paid agricultural labour.

3. The Sociological Context of Communal Labour Activities

In many parts of Kenya women's groups provide a critical mechanism for mobilising labour to work on smallholder farms and on self-help Harambee projects. The bases of affiliation to such groups are varied and require detailed study. There are significant regional and ethnic variations within Kenya in the permanence and level of activity of such groups. Circulating communal groups may complete a round of tasks - such as weeding members' maize fields - faster and more efficiently than their individual members would be able to do on their own. The result may be to free the members to perform other kinds of work on their own farms or to engage in cash-earning activities. One might therefore argue that rural women should be actively encouraged to participate in groups of this kind. We are not convinced, however, that the existence of such groups in a given area necessarily reflects a pre-existent egalitarianism in socio-economic relations. Rather, we stress the need for analysis of the key variables which tend to promote communal activity of this kind and to enhance the cohesiveness of women's working groups. Factors such as kinship, common residence, church membership and socio-economic status would appear to be likely bases of affiliation; often, several such factors occur in combination. When we have a better understanding of the contexts in which the more successful groups operate, we may be able to prescribe methods of diversifying their activities, and of stimulating the formation of similar groups in areas where such co-operative endeavours are not yet fully institutionalised. Specifically, research is required on:-

- (a) The functions and tasks performed by various types of

women's groups, with quantitative measurement of work completed and members' time budgets;

- (b) The incentives and rewards of communal participation;
- (c) The sociological basis for permanence and cohesion, to be studied comparatively with data from contrasting rural situations;
- (d) Strategies for using these groups as channels for disseminating scientific and technical information.

4. Access to Extension and Credit

Our group's discussion emphasised that the existing extension services, farmers' training courses and loan and credit programmes have not been able to reach a significant proportion of male farmers in the smallholder sector of agriculture. Thus we do not mean to suggest that substituting women for men in the organisational structure, or creating additional posts for women agents, would solve all the underlying problems in the communication and delivery of these services. Still, we need to explore means of improving the communication of innovations and technical advice to the de facto decision-makers on farms, many of whom are women. Specifically, we recommend study of the following issues:-

- (a) Existing training facilities for women as agricultural agents, and constraints on the posting of women to subsequent employment;
- (b) The historical background of extension activities in different regions of Kenya, with implications for current programmes (in particular, the extent to which receptivity to extension has been conditioned by authoritarian colonial agricultural policies);
- (c) Socio-cultural constraints on the effectiveness of male extension agents in communicating information and advice to female heads of households where husbands are absent in wage employment;
- (d) The design of extension packages which treat the farm household as a coherent whole, and are attentive to cropping and nutritional balances;
- (e) Analysis of legal and procedural barriers to women's eligibility to receive credit (in the form of farm inputs), and to dispose of cash incomes principally earned by themselves (most notably in co-operative societies where their absent husbands may be the "official" members);
- (f) Possible alternatives to existing arrangements wherein the farm household bears corporate liability for loan repayments--including the possibility of removal from the land in cases of default - even though its members do not have equal access to credit facilities;



- (g) Attendance of women at courses at Farmers' Training Centres, constraints which limit their participation and possible changes in the organisation of training to allow more women to take part;
- (h) Evaluation of effectiveness of the training offered at Farmers' Training Centres as compared with informal instruction by relatives and neighbours.

5. Diversification and Upgrading of Non-Farm Activities

It is inappropriate to regard women exclusively as farm labourers; their managerial roles involve the allocation of farm produce for sale in markets. But the informal mechanisms in marketing have not been well documented, and field research has not focussed on the actual operations performed in the pricing and transport of produce marketed by women. Until this kind of data has been produced it will be difficult to develop methods for improving the efficiency of women who function as sellers of produce in rural markets. The following are major research priorities:-

- (a) Detailed recording of the operations, specifically pricing and transport, which women traders perform in bringing produce into the market;
- (b) Analysis of the decision-making process during market days in which individual traders weigh possible price reductions against the option of going home with produce unsold;
- (c) Study of the informal relations between traders and their clienteles, with particular attention to continuities in such relationships over time;
- (d) The development of possible techniques for introducing simple accounting or bookkeeping systems to petty traders in the informal sector;
- (e) Identification of alternative self-employment activities for women during seasons of low labour demand on family farms.

Action-Oriented Research Programme

We believe there is a need for research conducted simultaneously at different levels. The principal advantage of such co-ordinated research will be to generate hypotheses through one procedure which may be tested on another level, and may then improve the design of policies and their implementation. In particular, the following are needed:-

- (1) A thorough search of existing literature and unpublished materials, leading to the preparation of a review article which will assist researchers in defining problems for investigation;

- (2) The collection of statistical data by survey techniques, and the utilization of existing capabilities within government (e.g., the statistical division of the Ministry of Finance and Planning);
- (3) Standardised collection of core data from intensive micro-studies in field situations, with careful selection of comparable sample areas within a common problem orientation.

We want to stress that rural populations, and women in particular, should not be perceived only as the recipients of government programmes, but also as sources of ideas and means of identifying specific needs and development priorities. Existing women's communal labour groups are demonstrably well equipped to articulate such needs: Mabati groups in Kenya's Nyeri District represent an example of such units.

Research findings need to be communicated to different audiences each of whom must be assumed to have different motivations for utilising the results. Of particular importance, the researcher should be prepared to adapt the presentation of his findings to such diverse audiences as senior planning officials, career civil servants posted to the field, local-level extension agents and the many agricultural producers and sellers.