

**RURAL WOMEN, FOOD SECURITY
AND AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES**

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Regardless of the level of development achieved by the respective economies, women play a pivotal role in agriculture and in rural development in most countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Evidently there are serious constraints which militate against the promotion of an effective role for women in development in those societies which were bound by age-old traditions and beliefs. Patriarchal modes and practices motivated by cultures and/or interpretations of religious sanctions and illiteracy hinder women's freedom to opt for various choices to assert greater mobility in social interactions. Resulting from these situations, women's contribution to agriculture and other sectors in the economy remain concealed and unaccounted for in monitoring economic performance measurement. Consequently, they are generally invisible in plans and programmes. They were, in fact, discriminated against by stereotypes which restrict them to a reproductive role, and denied access to resources which could eventually enhance their social and economic contribution to the society.

In terms of the ratio of membership of women in agricultural cooperatives, the percentage is rather low, but they have a strong influence on them – through the heads of the households. Certain obvious barriers restrict their direct and formal entry in agricultural cooperatives. Even in countries like Japan, the ratio of women membership in agricultural cooperative is extremely low. Only very few women serve on the Boards of Directors. Their simple and clear perception is that the administrative and decision-making domain rests with the men and women do not wish to overburden themselves with financial responsibilities in case something goes wrong with the cooperative. They, of course contribute significantly in farm operations. However, the women are very active in Women's Associations of Agricultural Cooperatives which organise their activities around the life and style of farm household members.

Introduction

Regardless of the level of development achieved by the respective economies, women play a pivotal role in agriculture and in rural development in most countries of the Asia-Pacific Region. Evidently there are serious constraints which militate against the promotion of an effective role for women in development in those societies which were bound by age-old traditions and beliefs. Patriarchal modes and practices motivated by cultures and/or interpretations of religious sanctions and illiteracy hinder women's freedom to opt for various choices to assert greater mobility in social interactions. Resulting from these situations, women's contribution to agriculture and other sectors in the economy remain concealed and unaccounted for in monitoring economic performance measurement. Consequently, they are generally invisible in plans and programmes. They were, in fact, discriminated against by stereotypes which restrict them to a reproductive role, and denied access

to resources which could eventually enhance their social and economic contribution to the society.

In developing countries, among the poor, rural women are the poorest and more vulnerable. Empirical evidences suggest that women in rural areas are more adversely affected by poverty than men. The incidence of poverty among rural women is on the rise in most of the developing countries. The issues of gender bias and equity point to the double burden women have to bear - that on being poor and being a woman. Further strategies and programmes for development had largely overlooked the question of gender equity. Projects aiming to reduce poverty view the poor rural women as the recipient of benefits of development, instead of active participant and still poor rural women have the least access to basic needs such as food, health and education.

Hunger and Poverty

Hunger, which usually follows food shortages, is caused by a complex set of events and circumstances [social, economic and political factors] that differ depending on the place and time. Although hunger has been a part of human experience for centuries and a dominant feature of life in many low-income countries, the causes of hunger and starvation are not very well understood. Our understanding of the main causes of hunger and starvation has been hampered by myths and misconceptions about the interplay between hunger and population growth, land use, farm size, technology, trade, environment and other factors.

Poverty cannot be defined simply in terms of lacking access to sufficient food. It is also closely associated with a person's lack of access to productive assets, services and markets. Without access to these, it is unlikely that production and income-earning capacities can be improved on a sustainable basis. Rural poverty is related to food insecurity, access to assets, services and markets: income-earning opportunities; and the organisational and institutional means for achieving those ends.

Throughout the history and in many societies, inequalities of women and men were part and parcel of an accepted male-dominated culture. It is a complex historical process, which requires detailed study before one can conceive of a viable strategy to improve and sustain the status of women in society. One of the basic factors causing unequal share of women in development relates to the division of labour between the sexes. This division of labour has been justified on the basis of the childbearing function of women and this is biologically important for survival. Consequently, distribution of tasks and responsibilities between men and women in a given society has mainly restricted women to the domestic sphere. Mass poverty and general backwardness has further aggravated the inequalities.

While the women's childbearing and child-rearing functions are respected in many countries, there has been very little recognition of women's actual or potential contribution to the economic, social and cultural states. The role of women within the family combined with high level of unemployment and under-employment of the population in general, has led to the unequal state of priority to men in matters of employment. It is understandable that women cannot be expected to join the army, for instance, as foot soldiers but Israel's well-known and rightfully feared *sabrahs* or women commandos have shattered the myth of man's physical superiority and thus priority for most jobs.

Discrimination and Underdevelopment

It is relevant to consider some aspects of the marginalisation of the status of women in the world by having a look at the figures which are based on the documents of the United Nations. Some of the findings are:

- *Unemployment Rate:* Male unemployment rate decreased by 11% from 1984 to 1988 while that of women, unemployment rate increased by 0.5% during the same period;
- *Women in the Informal Sector:* Without legal protection or security, women depend on informal trade for their survival. In Third World countries, a high percentage of food vendors were women: in Nigeria 94%, Thailand 80%, 63% in the Philippines;
- *Inequality in Pay:* All over the world women earn only two-thirds of men's pay and earn less than three-quarters of the wages of men doing similar jobs. Women form a third of the world's official labour force, but are concentrated in the lowest-paid jobs and are more vulnerable to unemployment than men;
- *Domestic Work:* Women do almost all the world's domestic work and coupled with their additional work in the productive spheres - this means most women work a double day. Unpaid domestic work is regarded as women's work. Though it is vital work, it is invisible work, unpaid, undervalued and unrecognised. Yet, the women's contribution to society in this regard is enormous;
- *Agriculture:* Women grow about half of the world's food, but own hardly any land, have difficulty in obtaining credit and are overlooked by agricultural advisors and projects. In Africa, three-quarters of the agricultural work is done by women while in Asia, Latin America and the Middle-East, women comprise half of the agricultural labour force;
- *Health:* Women provide more health care than all health services combined and have been major beneficiaries of a new global shift in priorities towards prevention of disease and promotion of good health;
- *Education:* Women continue to outnumber men among the world's illiterates by about 3:2 ratio, but school enrollment boom is closing the education gap between boys and girls;
- *Political Affairs:* Due to poorer education, lack of confidence and greater workload, women are still under-represented in the decision-making bodies of their countries.

The effects of the long-term cumulative process of discrimination against women have been accentuated by underdevelopment. Graphically, while women represent nearly 50% of the world's adult population and one-third of the total labour force, they labour nearly two-thirds of the total working hours but receive only one-tenth of world income and own less than one per cent of property. The story of overworked women in the rural areas of the developing and underdeveloped countries of the world is too well known. The type of agricultural activities generally expected of women is highly labour-intensive and the rural women generally do not enjoy the benefits of new technologies. Their wages are generally less because it is assumed that the efficiency of women's labour is poor compared to that of men. Regarding ownership of land, women do not enjoy equal rights, particularly in the developing countries where most of the production, processing, storage and preparation of food is carried out by the women. These account for 50% of the total labour required for food production. Many of these tasks are performed by children, especially the girls. Besides helping the menfolk in many farm operations, women have to shoulder the

entire responsibilities for household chores. Bringing water from far-off wells and rivers and gathering fuel wood from forests are also part of their daily duties. Such enormous waste of human energy is unnecessary in this technological age.

Gender Division of Labour in Agriculture

The particular tasks done on farms by men and women have certain common patterns. In general, men undertake the heavy physical labour of land preparation and jobs which are specific to distant locations, such as livestock herding, while women carry out the repetitious, time-consuming tasks like weeding and those which are located close to home, such as care of the kitchen garden. In most cultures the application of pesticides is considered a male task, as women are aware of the danger to their unborn children of exposure to chemicals. Women do a major part of the planting and weeding of crops. Care of livestock is shared, with men looking after the larger animals and women the smaller ones. Marketing is often seen as a female task, although men are most likely to negotiate the sale of crops. Some jobs are gender neutral. The introduction of a new tool may cause a particular job to be reassigned to the opposite sex and men tend to assume tasks that become mechanised.

The impact on women of the modernisation of agriculture is both complex and contradictory. Women have often been excluded from agrarian reform and training programmes in new agricultural methods. Where both men and women have equal access to modern methods and inputs there is no evidence that either sex is more efficient than the other. Technological changes in post-harvest processing may even deprive women of a traditional income-earning task.

Women and Food Security Issues

Not only do women produce and process agricultural products but they are also responsible for much of the trade in these and other goods in many parts of the third world. In many parts of the world, women continue to play an important role as rural information sources and providers of food to urban areas. This may involve food from the sea as well as from the land. Although women rarely work as fisherpeople they are often involved in net-making and the preparation and sale of the catch.

Women's roles and status all over the world are generally determined by social institutions and norms, religious ideologies, eco-systems and by class positions. The Indian social systems exhibit such grave disparities. Indian women are not a homogeneous group. Their traditional roles are not identical in all strata of society. Norms and taboos governing their roles and behaviours within and outside the family, the structure of family organisations and social practices and the positions accorded to women in a community differ considerably across regions, cultures and levels of socio-economic development.

It is needless to emphasise on the significant contribution of women to agricultural production and household food security. In the process of production, handling and preparation of food, women play a multiple role throughout the sequence. They are said to be "feeding the world". Do women really feed the world? Let us consider the evidence. On a global scale, women produce more than half of all the food that is grown. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, they produce up to 80% of basic foodstuffs. In Asia, they provide from 50 to 90% of the labour for rice cultivation. And in Southeast Asia and the Pacific as well as Latin America, women's home

gardens represent some of the most complex agricultural systems known. In countries in transition, the percentage of rural women working in agriculture ranges from about a third in Bosnia and Herzegovina to more than half in Poland. Across much of the developing world, rural women provide most of the labour for farming, from soil preparation to harvest. After the harvest, they are almost entirely responsible for operations such as storage, handling, stocking, marketing and processing.

Women in rural areas generally bear primary responsibility for the nutrition of their children, from gestation through weaning and throughout the critical period of growth. In addition, they are the principal food producers and preparers for the rest of the family.

Despite their contributions to food security, women tend to be invisible actors in development. All too often, their work is not recorded in statistics or mentioned in reports. As a result, their contribution is poorly understood and often underestimated. There are many reasons for this. Work in the household is often considered to be part of a woman's duties as wife and mother, rather than an occupation to be accounted for in both the household and the national economy. Outside the household, a great deal of rural women labour - whether regular or seasonal - goes unpaid and is, therefore, rarely taken into account in official statistics.

In most countries, women do not own the land they cultivate. Discriminatory laws and practices for inheritance of and access and ownership to land are still widespread. Land that women do own tends to consist of smaller, less valuable plots that are also frequently overlooked in statistics. Furthermore, women are usually responsible for the food crops destined for immediate consumption by the household, that is, for subsistence crops rather than cash crops. Also, when data is collected for national statistics, gender is often ignored or the data is biased in the sense that it is collected only from males, who are assumed to be the heads of households.

These handicaps have contributed to an increasing "feminisation" of poverty. Since the 1970s, the number of women living below the poverty line has increased by 50%, in comparison with 30% for their male counterparts. Women may feed the world today, but, given this formidable lists of obstacles placed in their path, will they be able to produce the additional food needed for a world population expected to grow by three billion in 2030?

During the FAO-sponsored World Food summit of 1996, world leaders from 186 countries adopted the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and a Plan of Action. These international agreements specified that the role of women in agriculture and food security must be emphasised, in order to create the enabling political, social and economic environment required for the eradication of hunger and poverty.

Under Commitment-I of the World Food Summit Plan of Action agenda, governments committed themselves to:

- Support and implement commitments made at the 4th World Conference on Women that a gender perspective is mainstreamed in all policies;
- Promote women's full and equal participation in the economy...including secure and equal access to and control over credit, land and water;

- Ensure that institutions provide equal access for women;
- Provide equal gender opportunities for education and training in food production, processing and marketing;
- Tailor extension and technical services to women producers and increase the number of women advisors and agents;
- Improve the collection, dissemination and use of gender-disaggregated data [which distinguishes between males and females];
- Focus research efforts on the division of labour and on income access and control within the household; and
- Gather information on women's traditional knowledge and skills in agriculture, fisheries, forestry and natural resources management.

FAO's Plan of Action for Women in Development [1996-2001] ensures that gender issues are considered in its development work. Objectives include giving women equal access to and control of land and other productive resources, increasing their participation in decision-making and policy-making, reducing the workloads of women and enhancing their opportunities for paid employment and income.

Gender Equality and Sharing of Opportunities

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognised several dimensions of human rights for all people. Some are tangible and quantifiable, such as access to education, health and a decent standard of living and ability to take part in the government of the country. Others are intangible, such as freedom, dignity, and security of person and participation in the cultural life of the community.

The goals of gender equality differ from one country to another, depending on the social, cultural and economic contexts. So, in the struggle for equality, different countries may set different priorities, ranging from more education for girls, to better maternal health, to equal pay for equal work, to more seats in parliament, to removal of discrimination in employment, to protection against violence in the home, to changes in family law, to having men take more responsibility for family life.

Equality is not a technocratic goal – it is a wholesale political commitment. Achieving it requires a long-term process in which all cultural, social, political and economic norms undergo fundamental change. The UNDP Human Development Report-1995 outlines a vision for the 21st century that should build a world order that:

- Embraces full equality of opportunity between women and men as a fundamental concept;
- Eliminates the prevailing disparities between men and women and creates an enabling environment for the full flowering of the productive and creative potential of both sexes;
- Promotes more sharing of work and experience between women and men in the workplace as well as in the household;
- Regarding women as essential agents of change and development and opens many more doors to women to participate more equally in economic and political opportunities;

- Values the work and contribution of women in all fields on par with those of men, solely on merit, without making any distinction;
- Puts people – both women and men – clearly at the centre of all development processes.

The UNDP Report-1995 also states that the GDI [Gender-related Development Index] ranking can be different in different situations, as is shown by the following conclusions of a recent survey:

- No society treats its women as well as its men. Substantial progress on gender equality has been made in only a few societies;
- Gender equality does not depend on the income level of a society. What it requires is a firm political commitment, not enormous financial wealth;
- Significant progress has been achieved over the past two decades, though there is still a long way to go. Not a single country has slipped back in the march towards greater gender equality at higher levels of capabilities, though the pace of progress has been extremely uneven and slow.

Much progress remains to be made in gender equality in almost every country. And in equality of choice in economic and political participation, industrial countries are not necessarily taking the lead. The areas showing the least progress are parliamentary representation and percentage share of administrators and managers. The clear policy message from this simple exercise is this: "In most countries, industrial or developing, women are not yet allowed into the corridors of economic and political power. In exercising real power or decision-making authority, women are a distinct minority throughout the world."

Women in Agriculture

Women play an indispensable role in farming and in improving the quality of life in rural areas. However, their contributions often remain concealed due to some social barriers and gender bias. Even government programmes often fail to focus on women in agriculture. This undermines the potential benefits from programmes, especially those related to food production, household income improvements, nutrition, literacy, poverty alleviation and population control. Equitable access for rural women to educational facilities would certainly improve their performance and liberate them from their marginalised status in the society. Other areas where women's potential could be effectively harnessed are agricultural extension, farming systems development, land reform and rural welfare. Landmark improvements have been recorded in such cases as the extension of institutional credit and domestic water supplies where women's potential have been consciously tapped.

Socio-economic goals of productivity, equity and environment stability are closely woven around the agriculture sector policies and new dimensions in programmes implemented are already emerging as new values. Regardless of the level of development achieved by the respective economies, women play a pivotal role in agriculture and in rural development in most countries of the Asia-Pacific Region. Asia-Pacific region had witnessed spectacular development in crop yields which even surpassed the population growth rate in the past decade. However, pockets of hunger remain when landless or small farm rural population lack economic access to food because of a lack of remunerative non-farm employment in rural areas, where

80% of Asia-Pacific's 400 million poor live. It has also been suggested that with the acceleration of crop-diversification programmes and the transformation of agriculture to commercial production levels, women's lot had been even further worsened by the addition of new burdens which they have to shoulder in order to realise profits in farm operations.

Rural women who are obliged to attend to all the household chores, children's welfare, nutrition and family cohesion along with farm work, are desperately driven to adopt a survival strategy to save the family food security from total collapse. Rural poverty has increased in the region particularly for farmers as priority has been accorded to the industrial and service sectors: this is both the cause and an effect of rural-urban migration leading to the "feminisation of farming". Thus the numbers and the proportion of rural women among the absolutely poor and destitute, currently around 60%, is expected to increase to 65 to 70% by the year 2000.

In spite of social, political and economic constraints, women farmers have proved extremely resourceful and hardworking in their attempt to ensure household food security. Social constraints place barriers around their access to scientific and technological information. Lack of collateral denies them access to agricultural credit. Culture or traditions accord membership of cooperatives only to heads of households – usually a man. Many rural women, even in highly mechanised farming systems such as the Republic of Korea and Japan would have agriculture for work in other sectors if choices were available.

After some decades of development, global problems and issues concerning environment, women in development, and poverty have reappeared. All these have emerged in rural communities and threatening their sustainability. Rural communities with norms developed for managing resources are important for the stability of community life. Gender-oriented rural development programmes which focus on role of women to guarantee the stability of life provide a sound basis for integrated development of the quality of life.

In progressive economies like Japan, rural women have shown anxieties over several concerns affecting their livelihood. Some of the priority items include measures for success in agricultural enterprises, expansion of periodic farming resulting in reduced holidays, the need to reduce agricultural work, changes in awareness of rural societies and reduction in the work connected with caring for elderly people. In order to redress these problems, five tasks have been identified for promotion which will result in making rural living more pleasant and comfortable. These tasks include:

- i. Creating awareness of changes and measures pursued to change the status of women by their active participation in agricultural and fisheries cooperatives;
- ii. Improving working conditions and environment;
- iii. Appreciating the positive aspects of living in rural areas and creating a conducive environment which will contribute towards better rural life;
- iv. Acquiring skills to diversify areas of involvement by women supporting women in entrepreneurial roles; and
- v. Adopt a structured approach to execute the vision to improve rural conditions.

Rural Women in Agricultural Cooperatives

Women are represented in various forms and in various types of cooperatives in the Region. In most of the South-Asian countries women membership in mixed membership cooperatives is generally lower as compared with those from other countries in the Region. In societies where culture restricts women's membership in cooperatives, women-only cooperatives proliferate. It is in women-only cooperatives that women feel freer and less restricted in their participation in cooperatives. In countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, women comprise just 7.5% as compared with men (92.5%) of the total membership. In Malaysia it is around 30.6%. In many of the Asian countries women's membership is low [ranging from 2 to 10.5%] in agricultural cooperatives. This reflects the age-old stereotype that men are the farmers and not the women, and the title of the farm property should be in the name of the man. This situation automatically prohibits women to be the members. Out of a total of 450,000 cooperatives with a total membership of 204.5 million in India, there were 8,171 women-only cooperatives with a total membership of 693,000. It is also known that the women-only cooperatives e.g., cooperative banks, consumer stores, fruits and vegetable vendors, have done exceedingly well and provided a whole range of services to their members. In India, with a view to involve women in the process of decision-making in local self-government bodies including cooperatives, a 33% representation has been instituted and in a number of states all boards of directors have women serving on them. There has also been a discussion to have a similar representation in state and national legislatures as well.

The highest number of women in cooperatives in the Region comes from the credit and consumer sectors. In Japan the membership of women in agricultural cooperatives and in decision-making organs is low. No discriminatory provisions preventing women's participation in agricultural cooperatives are contained in the Agricultural Cooperative Law nor in the bylaws of the agricultural cooperatives. In the majority of the bylaws, membership is based either on land ownership or work on the farm for more than 90 days a year. Despite this, women membership has not increased mainly due to the fact that most cooperatives have a membership policy that allows only one member per household, based on the idea that a household is the minimum unit for production. In addition, it is customary that women follow their husbands in the village life and decision-making. Women themselves do not want to cause troubles by challenging such a tradition. Therefore, men became the majority of directors and delegates and women quietly accepted the situation. However, the concept of plural membership from households is being encouraged.

There are still some prevailing laws which place barriers for women's participation in agricultural cooperatives and/or farmers' associations, like land ownership and head of the household. In many societies the very women who need to organise to cooperate and prosper, lack the time for participation due to multiple work demands. Cooperatives being people-centered movement had recognised these limitations place on women by the society and economic institutions. Experiments made in different parts of the world clearly indicate that women's participation in cooperatives and other local government bodies not only provides them an opportunity to articulate their problems but it also helps them to be an active partner in decision-making process.

The relationship between women and their cooperatives in the context of gender integration can be summarised as under:

- A cooperative being a social development agency should play an active role in advocating for gender equality;
- Since women have been active in development work, they should play central role in development;
- The cooperative can be a venue to improve women's social status and economic conditions; and
- thus, cooperatives should promote women's empowerment by integrating gender concerns and formulating a strategy that would address gender issues.

In terms of the ratio of membership of women in agricultural cooperatives, the percentage is rather low, but they have a strong influence on them – through the heads of the household. Certain obvious barriers restrict their direct and formal entry in agricultural cooperatives. Agricultural cooperatives, in present times, everywhere have come under dark clouds due to heavy competitions and pressures of open market economy systems. They are now expected to meet the challenges which they had never anticipated before. Their business methods remain traditional and they expect government support in the form of protection and subsidies. These are no longer available and will not be available in the near future. In several countries, agricultural cooperatives have either folded up or are under massive reorganisation. The challenges faced by agricultural cooperatives can be enumerated as under:

- Need to improve professional management skills of those who provide advisory or guidance services to cooperatives and of the managers and some key members of primary level cooperatives;
- Establishment of a marketing intelligence system within the Cooperative Movement to enable the farmer-producers follow market trends and plan their production and marketing strategies;
- Assured supply of farm inputs [quality seeds, chemical fertiliser, farm chemicals, credit and extension services];
- Establishment of business federations through cooperative clusters to undertake primary agro-processing marketing of local products and to cover financial requirements;
- Be aware of quality controls and standardisation of farm products to be able to compete effectively in the open market;
- Participate in efforts to conserve natural resources which directly and indirectly, influence farm production and rural employment;
- Need for providing information to the farmers and farmers' organisations on the implications of restructuring, globalisation and WTO agreements.

Constraints faced by Rural Farm Women

Based on the experiences of farm extension workers, field advisors and rural farm women in the Asia-Pacific Region, the following are the general constraints faced by them:

- High illiteracy rates and poor living conditions among rural women;

- Lack of leadership and inadequate participation in the organisational and economic affairs of their agricultural cooperatives;
- Absence of property inheritance rights, restriction on acquiring membership of agricultural cooperatives consequently being deprived of farm credit etc.;
- Inadequate health care services in rural areas;
- Inadequate water supply for household and farm operations;
- Lack of appropriate agricultural technology aimed at reducing the physical burden of farm women;
- Inadequate access to credit and agricultural inputs and other services;
- Lack of female farm extension workers;
- Lack of marketing facilities and opportunities;
- Traditional, religious, social and cultural obstacles;
- Less participation in decision-making – even within the household;
- Male migration/urban drift which increases pressure on women;
- Lack of opportunities to improve socio-economic status of farm women;
- Lack of skills and attitudes in leadership and management development; and
- Lack of secretariat supporting functions for women’s organisations and allocation of funds for them in cooperative organisations.

Facilitation Role of the ICA and its Development Partners

Since the establishment of the ICA Regional Office in New Delhi in 1960, efforts have consistently been made to initiate and promote programmes aimed at emancipation of women and their involvement in the organisational and business activities of cooperatives. This has been done through a long chain of seminars, discussions, conferences and technical assistance programmes which have been carried out with the collaboration of its Member-Organisations and development partners. In the agricultural cooperatives sector some of the most recent initiatives have been as follows:

- A series of technical meetings and conferences were held which had taken note of the recommendations of UN and other international conferences and initiatives on women in cooperative development;
- A series of specialised training courses for rural women leaders in agricultural cooperatives, on a yearly basis, with the financial support of the Government of Japan and in collaboration with the JA-Zenchu and the IDACA;
- Three top level Asian and African Conferences on Farm Women Leaders in Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives during 1997 and 1998 [one more conference is planned in 1999] in collaboration with the JA-Zenchu, AARRO and the IDACA and with the full technical support of the Government of Japan in the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries-MAFF;

- Development of training manuals and other supporting materials for the use of women leaders to develop women's associations and help increase women's participation in agricultural cooperatives.

Issues Involved

In the background of the above discussion and in view of the constraints faced by women with regard to their participation in agricultural cooperatives, the following issues need to be tackled by the concerned authorities and cooperative institutions:

- Identification of an appropriate mechanism which could provide development opportunities to women in rural areas;
- Encouraging cooperatives to have special programmes and tasks for women to perform in the organisational and business affairs. It has been observed that in many of the countries of the Region more women are being taken in to undertake administrative and functional activities – they make very good, reliable and honest cashiers, sales girls, inventory controllers, secretaries, public relations officers and member contact persons;
- Review, revision and reformation of cooperative legislation and government policies which facilitate and encourage women to become members of cooperatives and participate in decision-making processes. Cooperative institutions and their federations may take the lead on their own to institute programmes for the participation of women in cooperatives. Voluntary initiatives by cooperatives themselves do not necessarily to be qualified by government approvals. Cooperatives should lobby with their governments to replace or suitably amend the restrictive laws;
- Accord due credibility to the achievements of women in agricultural cooperative development through publicity, exchange of visits, participation in meetings and conferences. Women need a platform through which they could justify their participation in cooperative action;
- Replication of successful experiences. The work done by the Women's Associations of Japanese agricultural cooperatives and Han Groups has produced good results for the community and business of their cooperatives. Such experiences need a thorough study. They have a lot of good things to offer;
- Development of Plans of Action at all levels. Women's cooperative organisations at primary levels should try to federate themselves into higher federations or association so that their 'bargaining power' is strengthened. The cooperatives and women's associations should develop realistic plans of action to be followed for three-five years;
- Cooperatives to initiate education, training and extension programmes for women through vocational and literacy programmes [these also include home improvement activities e.g., cooking classes, handcrafts, social interactions, environment related activities etc.];
- Creating conditions for women to market their products through outlets established by agricultural cooperatives. [Agricultural cooperatives in Japan set apart a space in their shopping areas exclusively for the Women's Associations and even for the individual farmers to sell their products, including organising Morning Markets etc.].

Conclusion

Women have been the focus of attention of all international and national development programmes. Efforts have been directed at empowering them in all fields of activity. Special programmes have been instituted to improve their social

and economic status through provision of education, employment, health-care and involvement in social and economic institutions, including cooperatives. Cooperative institutions and especially the agricultural cooperatives are the agencies which hold enormous potential for the development of women, and more particularly the rural women. Rural women are actively involved in the process of food production, processing and marketing. They often lack the legal status which prohibits them to have access to credit, education and technology. Cooperative institutions can help accelerate the process of development and participation of women in their organisational and business activities. Institutions like the International Cooperative Alliance [ICA] and the Institute for the Development of Agricultural Cooperation in Asia-Japan [IDACA] together with the support of other international organisations and national level institutions can develop and sponsor programmes which are aimed at improving the lot of rural women. In the past some efforts have been made through which member-organisations, cooperative and agricultural departments all over Asia and Africa have been requested to make special programmes for rural women and set aside budgets for their implementation. In some cases some good responses have been received.

While it is generally agreed that education is central to women's development the participation of girls in the national educational system continues to lag well behind that of boys at every level. Among the factors that are believed to contribute to this gap are women's self-perpetuating negative social status, economic constraints and male-oriented biases in the design and delivery of primary and secondary education. These limitations have meant that millions of women have not received formal education and that millions more are deprived of the opportunity for more than token participation. Women, however, retain a strong orientation to self-help and group cooperation. They look to their own resources and to other women when faced with a problem of opportunity. This perhaps is the key factor on which women's development programme could be developed. This is their greatest asset. They have kept folk art, family bonds, religious traditions, cultural heritage alive, thriving and vibrant. They have played significant role in food security efforts and rural and small industrial sectors.

*Paper produced for presentation and to serve as a theme paper
at the 4th Asian-African International Conference on
Women in Agricultural Cooperatives in Asia and Africa
organised jointly by the ICA, AARRO, JA-Zenchu and IDACA
at Tokyo, Japan. August 24-29 1999*

**DP-MSW
June04,99**

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WHAT WAS WRONG WITH PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY?

Some of the reasons for failures in the past were:

- a low level of participation by the poor. Rural poor are often denied a voice in the formulation and even in the execution of a poverty programme;
- Programmes have tended to rely on grants and subsidies as the main tools for serving the poor;
- Too little attention has been given to strengthening the negotiating capacities of the poor, to enhancing their power to participate meaningfully in policy formulation and in the marketplace;
- Most poverty alleviation programmes have had a single vector of intervention and have failed to confront the multi-dimensionality of poverty. Priorities usually have been set from 'the outside', thus being supply-driven rather than demand-driven and unable to respond to the particular needs and potentials of the poor.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Poverty alleviation is facilitated by:

- Increased access to productive assets for the poor such as land and water, credit and education, extension and public health services;
- The active participation of the poor and their representative bodies in decision-making. They must be provided with an enabling environment that encourages collective self-help action, personal investments and accumulation. Programmes need to be designed on a demand-driven basis rather than be imposed from the outside;
- Government institutions and the incentives that make them accountable to the general public should be reformed. They must become more responsive to the needs of the poor. Decentralisation and privatisation of government services and administration can assist in that process, and the NGO and private sectors have a crucial role to play. Transaction costs must be kept low;
- The building of sustainable capacities for poverty alleviation requires a well-defined and long-term development approach.