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RURAL DEVELOPMENT:
RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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Rural Development:

Recognizing the Role of Women

The topics of "Rural Development" and "The Changing Status of women" have attracted increasing attention from those concerned with economic development and social change in developing countries. To their mutual disadvantage, however, the topics have received little joint study. This research gap appears the result both of the different impetuses contributing to the study of each subject and the different academic disciplines being attracted to research in each area. Consequently, the topics have been approached by persons with little interest in or knowledge of what was being done in the other field or how it might relate to their own.

In the case of rural development, agronomists and agricultural economists probably performed most of the basic research and have done most of the project planning. Initially these experts tended to focus on individual agricultural projects as a means of increasing farm production. But, as agriculturalists became increasingly aware that farm productivity is a function of many elements including the rural transportation, distribution, and educations systems, attention shifted from agricultural projects to larger integrated schemes of rural development. These rural development programs are designed to respond to the totality of rural needs.

Recently, the rural developers have received moral and financial support from leading spokesmen on economic development such as Robert McNamara and Mahbubul Haq, who have urged that development programs be directed toward humanity's poorest 40 percent. Most of these 40 percent live in rural areas. Even more recently, the crushing need to increase world food production has focused attention on the countryside and the ability of rural institutions to support increased productivity.

Research done on the status of women in developing countries has come from entirely different sources. Early research was not conducted by economists but by anthropologists who were interested in the functioning of family systems in developing societies. Anthropologists were followed by demographers and others concerned with soaring population growth rates in developing countries. These later specialists have concentrated on establishing links between changes in the status and roles of women and changes in the birth rates. To the extent that the economic role of women in developing countries has been examined, it has been limited to a consideration of how economic roles may or may not have an impact on fertility. (Ester Boserup's Women's Role and Economic Development and studies on West African market women are the only published exceptions to this point known to the writer.)

Thus, despite the fact that significant portions of rural production is apparently accomplished by women and despite the fact that more than half the women in the developing world live in rural areas, those studying rural development have generally ignored the role of women and those concerned with the status of women have omitted consideration of the productive role of women in rural society.

Although the subject of rural development and the role of women still awaits systematic study, the work already done on rural development and women separately suggests a few caveats that may be immediately useful:

1. Rural development, defined as raising productivity in the countryside and changing rural institutions to meet this goal, probably requires the active participation of all members of rural society. Women, as well as men, must be full participants in the effort.

2. Planners of rural development projects should examine the roles of men and women in the agricultural production, processing and distribution systems to determine who does what and how. Only then can useful plans be made for effective projects. The state of knowledge on this topic is such that a good place to begin in such an examination would be with the conducting of time studies in representative rural areas.

3. Women, as well as men, will have to be involved in the planning and administration of these projects if costly mistakes are to be avoided. Most theoretical discussions on rural development have recognized the essentiality of involving the intended beneficiaries of these projects in the planning and administration of the effort. It follows that if women are an important part of the rural production process, they must also be involved in the project planning and administration. Whether women are integrated into existing administrative structures, such as extension services, or are served by parallel but separate organizations is not the critical issue. What is important is that rural development projects deal with the actual roles women play in the production process and not the assumed roles of women.

The relatively short list of references below indicates both the limited research conducted in this field and a limited search for references. Obviously a number of general works on rural development are helpful, but so few have specified the role of women in rural development or have gathered data about work performed by men and women that they are not helpful to the narrower concern of what women are doing in production in rural areas. The important task of gathering that baseline data remains to be done.

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