

FROM RECOMMENDATION DOMAINS TO INTRA-HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS AND BACK:
ATTEMPTS AT BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP

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INTRODUCTION

One of the concepts to emerge with the Farming Systems(FS) approach to agricultural research and extension is that of the recommendation domain (RD). Defined as "a group of roughly homogeneous farmers with similar circumstances for whom we can make more or less the same recommendation" (Byerlee, et al., 1980), the underlying assumption is that farmers of households within the same RD will have similar responses to proposed technology (Snaner, et al., 1982: 44). RDs are intended to focus the research process and expedite dissemination of the recommended technology thereby facilitating the extension phase.

The debate continues in the farming systems literature and among farming systems practitioners about both the more relevant criteria and the preferred timetable to identify and elaborate recommendation domains. The position of those of us who maintain that the early delineation of RDs precludes considerations that are not readily evident or initially salient (Cornick and Alberti, 1985) is countered by others who maintain that the early identification of RDs permits their progressive refinement (Franzel, 1984). Still others (Norman and Baker, 1984) point out that in the last analysis both the target groups identified and the nature of the technology recommended tend to reflect the expertise of the the team members in a particular Farming Systems Research(FSR) project.

In this paper I take the position that, first, RDs sensitive to gender issues are difficult to develop due to scant documentation of women's participation in agricultural and farm-related activities in local areas,

and, second, if developed, difficult to implement due to several features common to many FSR projects. Indeed, it seems to me that the greater the pressure for prompt elaboration of RDs, the greater is the likelihood that women's roles, as well as their concerns within the FSR context, will be overlooked because of insufficient time to draw them out. The long term solution to satisfactorily address gender issues in FS, however, lies less in attempts to develop appropriate RDs and more in efforts to revise the FSR framework so that gender issues are deliberately and self-consciously entertained unless excluded. Until these changes occur, several key questions are proposed to assist FSR practitioners in assessing what gender related issues are potentially relevant in a particular FSR site and whether they can be addressed feasibly within the existing project framework.

OBSTACLES TO DEVELOPING GENDER SENSITIVE RECOMMENDATION DOMAINS

Among the more common techniques suggested for the initial stages of problem diagnosis leading to the formation of recommendation domains are reviews of secondary data, informal interviews with persons such as local officials, residents, and extension workers, and an exploratory survey of farmers sometimes combined with or followed by a formal survey (Harrington and Tripp, 1984; Shaner, et al., 1982). The obstacles to uncovering the extent of women's involvement in the total or select phases of a farming system imbedded in each of these techniques is discussed briefly.

LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUES

Secondary Data Reviews

Much of the literature on women in agriculture published within the last ten years underscores the extent to which the involvement and contributions of women in this area have been underrepresented (Deere and Leon, 1981; Lewis, 1981). Nevertheless, secondary sources such as census data and local agricultural reports that continue to ignore or underestimate female contributions abound. When FSR staff consult these materials they are likely to accept the data as factual unless they are aware of the possibility that female participation in agriculture may be masked or otherwise distorted. Only when sensitive to this bias may they be persuaded to seek additional corroboration before dismissing gender as a potentially relevant variable.

Informal Interviews and Exploratory Surveys

Local officials and extension agents can often provide extensive site-specific information that a FSR staff member would be hard-pressed to otherwise obtain so efficiently. For information on female involvement in agriculture, however, this is less likely the case for several reasons. First, cultural values may intervene. When female agricultural activity is associated with poverty, not only are male officials unlikely to discuss such activity on the part of female members in their own household, but they may well be reluctant to discuss such activity on the part of female residents in general presuming that it would reflect negatively on the socioeconomic status of the community.

Assuming that these local officials and extension agents are almost

exclusively male, attempts to adjust for these gender-related "blind-spots" by speaking with their wives or other female household members may not yield substantially different results (Alberti, 1980). To the extent that these women partake of the elevated social status of their households, they are unlikely to make "public" their own involvement in farm-related tasks or imply difficult socioeconomic conditions within the community by referring to such activity on the part of other women unless it is to demean them.

Second, it has been found that male farmers routinely underestimate the degree and undervalue the importance of female involvement in farm-related activities in which they too participate (Bourque and Warren, 1981; Deere and Leon, 1981; Alberti, in process), and to ignore or be unaware of the extent of female involvement in farming activities that they do not share in. Hence asking male farmers about the participation of females in agriculture will not necessarily elicit accurate information.

Finally we must consider the reluctance of the national male FSR staff members, especially if they are from the local area, to ask questions that are deemed "inappropriate" by local standards. Moreover, cultural norms may restrict male field staff members' access to women for interviews. As yet another possibility, male FSR staff members may resist interviewing women because of their own attitudes about female participation in agriculture.

Formal Surveys

The advantages and limitations of formal surveys have been widely discussed. Within the farming systems literature Chambers (1980, 1983, 1984) is perhaps their most outspoken and graphic critic as he conjures up

visions of "30 pages of questionnaire ... which if asked are never coded, or if coded never punched, or if punched never processed ... examined ... or analyzed..." that a number of us have also seen (1980: 4).

Vis-a-vis women's involvement in agriculture there are two points I would raise about formal surveys. The first is that preparing a questionnaire assumes that we know what we need to know and how to ask it. While this ought eventually to be the case, for surveys conducted during the initial stages of project development this is not always true for women's issues precisely as a consequence of some of the limitations just discussed. Secondly, many formal surveys are designed to be administered to either the male or female head of household, but not both. Generally, the household member available when the interviewer arrives responds. However, the survey form frequently lacks an item to indicate who was actually interviewed and whether that person was male or female. Hence, even if relevant questions about women's involvement in agriculture and farm-related activities are included, it is impossible to disaggregate male and female responses and analyze them for consistency and comparability.

LOCATING WOMEN IN THE FARMING SYSTEMS CONTEXT

Given these constraints, we turn to the issue: What site-specific information might be readily available that would expedite developing recommendation domains sensitive to gender differences? By "readily available" I refer to information that could be elicited over a few days through informal conversation with local residents, teachers, and other persons working in the area, as Rapid Rural Appraisal procedures recommend

(Chambers 1980; Beebe, 1985), in conjunction with a field trip around the project area. The field trip is essential to provide visual information to accompany verbal accounts. Lines of inquiry otherwise not considered may be opened when the information from these two sources does not concur.

The information obtained from responses to the following questions ought to enable FSR practitioners to contextualize the situation of women in the FSR setting in broad strokes. At the same time, it would facilitate a quick assessment of whether the FSR project, as it exists or could feasibly be modified, can viably address the gender issues relevant to that site. Where addressing those issues is possible, this would then ideally be followed by collecting the kind of information needed to inform analyses of intra-household dynamics in FSR (Flora, n.d.; Feldstein, 1985).

What are the Local Cultural Norms Regarding Female Agricultural Activity?
Is More than One Culture Represented in the Project Area?

In many parts of Latin America, particularly indigenous regions of the Andes, women work side by side with men in the fields. In other areas such as Honduras women are seldom seen working in the fields beneath the direct rays of the sun and may well be embarrassed if they are. Asian women such as those from Bangladesh are rarely field workers while many of their Indian counterparts assume the major role in most if not all phases of rice production.

The differences referred to here are largely the result of cultural variations whose dominant mode of expression may be religious or ethnic, or some combination of the two. What is important is that when we know that a certain portion or subportion of the population of an area shares a

particular cultural orientation, we are also in a position to make certain assumptions about the kinds of roles women are likely to assume within an agricultural setting and how forthcoming information about those roles is likely to be. For example, if visible productive activity on the part of women is highly circumscribed, we can expect that even when women do engage in such endeavors, they will be extremely difficult to document.

When more than one cultural group is represented in an area additional factors may come to bear on the situation. Is one group dominant and the other subordinate? Is the participation of women in agricultural and farm related tasks the same for both groups? Are the norms regarding such involvement the same? If the norms vary, which norms do agricultural extensionists and field workers represent?

In culturally complex settings it is important to specify the cultural group or groups to which a recommendation domain applies. This should help clarify and explain what would otherwise be unanticipated responses to a recommended technology. Factors that might be involved include differential access to extra-household labor by ethnic group, or different production objectives despite use of the same traditional technologies.

Does Women's Participation in Agriculture Vary by Social Class? If so, in What Ways?

There is an ever-growing consensus that the way households, and the women within those households, participate in the farming system is highly contingent on social class. Women from land poor households who engage in farming tasks tend to work longer hours at those tasks and generate proportionately lower returns than other women. Oftentimes they are the

women who have been left behind while their male partners migrate in search wage employment. Women from landless households are clearly the most vulnerable as they are increasingly dependent on an ever more tenuous agricultural wage labor market that relegates them to more restricted and marginal employment opportunities even as it expands commercially (Hart, 1978; Stoier, 1977; Sen, 1985; Stolcke, n.d.; Young, 1985; Horn, et al., 1984; Chaney and Lewis, 1980).

While these trends may be widespread they are not universal. Knowing whether they are valid for a particular setting should give us some clue of how candid men, or women, or both are likely to be about female involvement in agricultural and farm-related activities.

Do Women Specialize in Food Production and Subsistence Agriculture?

Despite broad variations in patterns, the preeminent role of women in in the production of food for home consumption appears to cross continental bounds (Chaney and Lewis, 1980).

In Latin America the evidence is widespread that the majority of women who directly engage in agricultural production at the household level do so primarily with basic crops intended for home consumption though they may also market small portions of those crops. If the household also raises a cash crop, it is likely to be under the care of the male head of household, even when women contribute labor to its cultivation. The more the household's agricultural activities are commercially oriented, the less is the likelihood that the women of the household will be directly involved in agricultural production. However, when laborers are present, women of the household are usually expected to provide the support services surrounding

food preparation, and are occasionally called upon for managerial activities (Deere and Leon, 1981; Bourque and Warren, 1981; Alberti, in process).

In Asia the scenario is distinct. Despite broad variations in the extent of women's direct involvement in rice-based agricultural economies due to ethnic and religious differences, women are always involved in the processing of rice and frequently bear major responsibility for its transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. When the household's access to rice fields is insufficient to meet its own consumption needs, women as well as men are likely to seek work as agricultural laborers with rice as the preferred medium of payment. Participation in the harvest of kin and neighbors, if not the planting as well, is another strategy geared to insure a ration of rice (Hart, 1978; Sen, 1985; Dey, 1985). In each instance the overarching objective is to obtain food that can be immediately used by the household.

In contrast with rice cultivating areas, using the Philippines as an example, the cultivation of cash crops such as coconut and tobacco and commercial varieties of root crops such as cassava and camote is dominated by men. Root crops grown for home use, however, are often under the immediate control of women (Cornick and Alberti, 1985).

Until recently, the situation in Africa presented what had probably been the most consistent association between crops and gender. Even now, food crops are grown almost exclusively by women, though some women, particularly those near urban areas, have begun to cultivate cash crops as well (Ferguson and Horn, 1985: 3). In contrast, men continue to concentrate their efforts in cash crop production.

Getting a sense of the pattern that predominates for a given FSR project should help us to identify the crops and animals that women tend to work with as well as to assess the FSR project's capabilities in those areas.

UTILIZING THE INFORMATION WITHIN A FARMING SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK

Having asked the questions, we now turn to how we may fruitfully use the information obtained.

First, the knowledge gained should enable us to better identify the variables that are particularly relevant vis-a-vis women in farming systems in the project area. Second, it can provide us with guidelines to estimate the validity of the information and data that does exist. Third, it highlights the kind of information that is available while giving some indication of what is lacking. This should help us to assess what additional information is needed and to appraise how sensitive its collection may be.

For example, the knowledge that there are two ethnic groups within the FSR project bounds should immediately prompt us to question whether their attitudes toward agriculture, and women's involvement in agriculture, are the same. If they differ we should be attuned to the importance of systematically distinguishing responses by ethnic group.

The denial of female involvement in agriculture by government and local officials may be better understood once we know that women engage in agricultural activities only under conditions of poverty. This knowledge in turn ought to suggest that we need to exercise caution to elicit the desired information while avoiding offending the persons questioned.

The shortcoming of these illustrations is that real life situations

rarely fall into compartments that vary so neatly along a single dimension. Rather, multiple variables combine and fuse, whether systematically or erratically, resulting in ever more complex relationships. Their salience is heightened as they interact with some of the more common features of farming systems projects. Let us examine some of these characteristics and the way they interact with gender concerns.

FARMING SYSTEMS CONSTRAINTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER ISSUES

Site selection for farming systems projects often results from political and economic decisions that occur outside project bounds (Shaner, et al., 1982; Harrington and Tripp, 1984). Marginal areas are less likely to be selected. Not only do they tend to lack political leverage, but projects in such areas are more prone to failure due to the restricted access to resources of their residents. Women who engage in agricultural and farm-related activities, however, are frequently concentrated among the resource poor who are commonly located in more marginal areas.

Despite occasional efforts to the contrary farming systems projects are frequently commodity-oriented either as the result of project mandate, or team member expertise, or a combination of these factors (Norman and Baker, 1984). But a commodity orientation is frequently aligned with a commercial orientation. As has been discussed, however, women are more likely to cultivate food crops with a view to household consumption. Hence, when a FSR project has a commodity orientation it may implicitly ignore women by excluding the crop, or crop focus, of most concern to them.

Lastly, FSR projects tend to adapt already existing technology, or shelf technology, to a particular situation, rather than to develop new

technology for a specific situation. They justify their approach on the basis of insufficient resources and a time frame inadequate to allow for additional research. However, existing technologies have tended to be capital intensive, and until recently, to give demonstrated results only when adopted as an entire package, rather than in steps over time. Hence, to the extent that women who engage in agricultural and farm related activities are concentrated among the resource poor, they may be unable to adopt the new technology because of insufficient cash resources. Or if they have the resources, they may be unwilling to adopt the new technology because it is inappropriate to their goals when they are subsistence rather than commercially oriented.

To paraphrase Chambers, then, these factors interlock (1980: 3). Nor does the conflict end there. As Harrington and Tripp remind us: "Domains are formed so that researchers can effectively deal with the majority of farmers in a particular area" (1984: 14). However, the only majority that women tend to constitute as household level agriculturalists is that of the rural poor. Nevertheless, even among them, some women are partnered, others single, some the only farmer in the household, and still others only sources of labor. Though women who directly engage in farming and farm-related activities are unlikely to be wealthy, it is likely that there is considerable variation in their access to resources, even among those broadly label as "poor".

Women in agriculture tend to share a disadvantaged position in male-oriented agricultural research and development programs. The way they experience that disadvantage, however, is mediated by their culture, resources, and civil status, and, hence, varies. It is difficult for

recommendation domains that depend on homogeneous circumstances in key variables to locate issues that relate to "women" equally despite their diversity, for, indeed, there are few. What a true incorporation of gender issues in farming systems implies is a revision of the farming systems unit of analysis from the household to the male and female household heads within the farming systems household for the stages of problem diagnosis and design. The information thus provided would enable the farming systems practitioners to make conscious though difficult choices about where the FSR resources will be channelled knowing full well and in advance whether and how those choices are likely to differentially affect men and women.

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