

B A S I S



■ Broadening Access and Strengthening  
Input Market Systems

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Report on

**“Women Farmers: Enhancing Rights and Productivity”**

**Bonn, Germany, August 26-27, 1999**

(International conference on women’s rural development issues, organized by the Center for Development Research (ZEF), Tufts University, and the University of Hohenheim)

by

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## I. Overview

The conference took place over two days and consisted of three plenary sessions, two working-group sessions and a final round-table discussion.

Please see the conference agenda (faxed to BASIS CRSP on 9/10/99) for further details. All papers submitted to the conference are posted on the Worldwide Web in full text at <<http://www.zef.de>>.

Participants came from Africa, India, China, Central America, South East Asia, the Mid-East, Western Europe and the United States. Participants included policy-makers (the vice-president of Uganda, Wandira Kazibwe, gave the opening keynote speech), representatives from international NGO's (the UN, the FAO, and the World Bank), consultants and academics.

Central themes throughout the conference included: women's access to productive resources such as land, capital, and training; effects of women's access to productive resources on child nutrition and distribution of household income; the effects of male migration on rural women's role in production; successful approaches to grass-roots organization of women in rural areas; and possible national and international actions that can be taken to enhance rural women's rights and productivity.

## II. Issues discussed

Specific examples of discussions in the plenary sessions and working groups include:

(1) Whether rural women stand to gain or lose from the transition from collective to private farming and land tenure. In the working group in which I presented our paper, participants raised issues about the unique losses women may experience in this transition, including rights to land (when, for example, new "private" holdings are issued in the name of the head of the household only), kindergarten and day care for children, and other social supports such as medical care that were provided through subsidies on the former collective and state farms in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

Another issue raised at this working group, and in the plenary sessions, is whether increasing women's formal ownership rights to land is likely to make real changes in intra-household distribution of income and expenditures, and relative labor contributions by family members. Conference participants broadly acknowledged the need for further research on issues regarding farm reorganization, land tenure and women's rights.

(2) Whether emphasis on micro-credit (and other "micro") programs by international donors are effective tools for serving the needs of rural women. Some argued that these programs are effective, not just toward increasing access of rural women to much-needed capital, but also toward facilitating grass-roots organization among women in rural communities to address broader social problems. In Madhya Pradesh,

India, for example, women organizing around micro-credit funds have been able to pool their interest income to leverage funds for child education past the eighth-grade level. On the other hand, some participants believe that a “micro” approach is not sufficient nor effective toward addressing the breadth and depth of problems facing rural women and only serve to divert focus among national policy makers and international donors away from more difficult issues.

(3) Whether the Panchayat Law in India could be replicated in other settings in the developing world increase participation of rural women at various levels of government. The Panchayat Law in India created a local level government for the first time (prior to the passage of the law there were only federal and state levels of government), and required that one-third of the seats (both for members and chairpersons) at the new Panchayat levels (district, block and village-level Panchayats were established) must be reserved for women. Seventy percent of the women who are now members of the Panchayats are from agricultural households; their representation on the local governing bodies is widely expected to increase the government’s ability and willingness to address rural women’s needs.

(4) The barriers to women’s access to agricultural (labor-saving) technologies, and whether agricultural and other extension agencies could become more effective in reducing these barriers. Barriers to adoption of such technologies include:

- inadequate access to production resources (including land, livestock, credit, and labor<sup>1</sup>);
- lack of access to technology (or appropriate training to use technology);
- institutional constraints, such as laws (including both civil law and customary and religious laws which are often more enforced than civil law at the grass-roots level); and
- cultural constraints (see note 1, for example), which are often underestimated by policy-developing agencies.

Agricultural extension services in developing countries have seldom been efficient in addressing the needs of agricultural women. In many cases agricultural extension has actually furthered intra-household disparities between women’s and men’s access to production resources through devising programs tailored to increasing the efficiency of traditionally male labor (such as machine operation).

Two extension programs in Africa have achieved success in targeting rural women’s needs, thereby also enhancing household nutrition. In both cases, extension services worked closely with rural women in local communities to determine their needs for successful value-added technology. In one case, extension agents helped to introduce a type of solar fruit-dryer that greatly increased the nutritional impact of fruit-harvests, in that the fruit could now be dried in a sanitary way to be consumed by the household throughout the year. In another case, extension agents helped to introduce

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<sup>1</sup> In Ethiopia, for example, women have “equal” access to usufruct land rights, but in many instances must lease out their land to men in exchange for plowing, which is considered a male-only activity.

a type of orange-meat sweet potato with a much greater nutritional value than white-meat sweet potatoes to women in rural communities in Africa, where sweet-potato farming is traditionally viewed as “women’s” work. Women were thereby able to increase the nutritional value of their sweet potato crops, which benefited both them and their children. Lessons from these projects are written up in detail in papers (published on the Web, see above) by Generose Mulokozi from Tanzania (for the solar fruit drying project) and Mary Oyunga from Kenya (for the sweet potato project).

### III. Conclusion.

The conference provided much information on the primary challenges facing rural women in developing countries. I encourage anyone who is interested to consult the Website noted above for further information on any of the issues discussed in the many papers that were presented and discussed.