Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center **Aquaculture Department**

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The African experience: A case in point: A difficult environment for rural women

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The African experience: a case in point

The burdens and constraints affecting women in Africa cut across national boundaries. The poor quality of life suffered by many rural women in Lesotho and Ghana, Africa, cannot be any worse than in many other countries.

According to the 1984 population census of Ghana, 35% of all households are now headed by women. The number of women farmers has increased at a faster rate than that of men. With cocoa and other cash crops replacing food production as the main activities, many Ghanaian men migrate to other areas to set up their own cocoa farms or to work as laborers, or to urban centers in search of cash and jobs.

In Lesotho, the statistics show that about three-fourths of households are headed by males, but in practice up to75% of households in some areas are effectively headed by women, again due to male migration to South Africa and to other parts of Lesotho for work. This means that the agricultural work is left to women and children, and this has serious implications for food production.

Women become exclusively responsible for the daily subsistence needs of their families. They have to increase their workload and take over many roles and responsibilities that are typically male, without having the same access to resources.

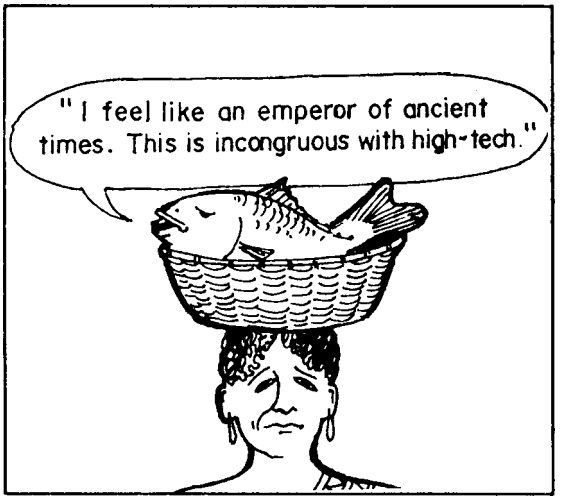
Women are seldom direct beneficiaries of resources such as land, agricultural inputs, training and extension. Lack of credit is often cited by women as the most severe constraint to increasing their production and income. Traditional cultural values often prohibit women from seeking credit.

Limitations also frequently apply elsewhere. Technologies for increasing women's productivity and reducing their household and agricultural labor have not been adopted and made widely available to most women. Nor have technological packages and research adequately taken into account the women farmers.

Rural women in both Lesotho and Ghana do hard manual work using traditional implements and methods. Their days are often long and arduous. Cooking, collecting fuelwood, and fetching water are the most time-consuming domestic chores. In addition, women care for the children, the sick, and the elderly.

In Ghana, women not only work on the family farm, they also farm their own piece of land which is usually farther from the village and has less fertile soil. For these women farmers, a major task is transporting produce from the farm to market, usually by "headloading" for many miles. The average weight of a headload is about 30 kilograms.

☞ *page 18*



With the CDA, easy does it!

Mandated to implement the CCP is the Cooperative Development Authority (CDA) which took over the functions of the defunct Bureau of Cooperatives Development. The CDA is the government agency in charge of the registration and regulation of cooperatives.

Easy does it! Fifteen members can start it. The CCP empowers cooperatives to:

- Encourage thrift among the members;
- Generate funds and extend credit to the members for productive and provident purposes;
- Encourage among members systematic production and marketing;
- Provide goods and services to the members;
- Develop the expertise and skills of the members;
- Acquire lands and provide housing benefits for the members;
- Ensure against losses of the members;
- Promote and advance the economic, social and educational status of the members;
- Establish, own, lease or operate cooperative banks, cooperative wholesale and retail complexes, insurance enterprises, agricultural and industrial processing facilities, and public markets;
- Coordinate and facilitate the activities of cooperatives; and
- Undertake any and all other activities for the effective and efficient implementation of the provisions of this Code.

The African experience...*from page 10*

Hired labor is used by women farmers in Ghana mainly for land clearing and weeding; it is expensive and difficult to come by.

Women in Lesotho also find it costly to hire labor; remittances are generally too small to cover the cost when there are competing claims on them. For much of the busiest agricultural period, majority of the labor force will be women.

Lack of work animals, particularly oxen for plowing, is a major problem for women farmers. Women do not have the right to sell farm crops despite the labor they have put into producing them. Women bear the brunt of farm management, but they do not have the right to choose which crops to grow.

Despite women's labor on the farm, domestic responsibilities, and contribution to household income, expenditure decisions are dominated by men.

The pattern of migrant male labor, the harshness of subsistence conditions, and the legal, cultural and social disadvantages of women lead to enormous strains on marriages. Marital instability, desertion, and family break-up are becoming all too common, further pushing women towards severe poverty.

Source: **The State of World Rural Poverty.** 1992. International Fund for Agricultural Development. New York University Press, N.Y.