

RURAL WOMEN AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN ZAMBIA:

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH ON DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

*The Zambian Association for Research and Development (ZARD)**

**This paper results from the collective efforts of the following ZARD Members: Bonnie B. Keller and Sara H. Longwe, Editors, who contributed sections along with Muyunda S. Chilwesa, Esther Kanduza, Josina N. Kaunda, Winifred N. Ndulo and Mercy Siame.*

Étant consciente du besoin de comprendre la situation socio-économique des femmes relatif au processus du développement, l'Association zambienne pour la recherche et le développement (Zambia Association for Research and Development), un organisme non-gouvernemental, a comme priorité le développement de la recherche sur les besoins des femmes en Zambie. Après avoir déterminé l'état actuel de la recherche sur les questions d'intérêt aux femmes, le ZARD a conclu qu'un domaine important nécessitant une étude approfondie est celui de l'accès inégal aux facteurs de production agricole pour les femmes de milieu rural. Cet article souligne le besoin de former des projets de développement agricole sensibles aux besoins des femmes – qui sont responsables pour la majorité de la production de la nourriture en Zambie contemporaine.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD PRODUCTION

Zambia is basically an agricultural country, despite the fact that agriculture in the past has played a relatively minor role in the economy, which has been dominated by the mining of copper and other minerals. Agriculture accounts for about 17 percent of the GNP, but contributes only about 1 percent to the country's foreign exchange earnings. Since 1975 Zambia has experienced economic and social problems, including depressed copper prices; inadequate agricultural production; natural tragedies such as droughts and floods; a high rate of population growth; rural-urban migration; and general inflation. The govern-

ment has made it clear that the country's salvation lies in the people producing more food for local consumption and other agricultural produce for export to earn foreign exchange.

In the early 1940s, 85 percent of the Zambian population lived in the rural areas; today rural dwellers account for about 60 percent of the population. The main reason for this shift in population is the exodus of male adults and youths from rural areas. The 1980 Census shows that of a total of 3 million women in the country, 67 percent live in the rural areas. These women are engaged primarily in agricultural production activities.

Much of the women's agricultural activity includes food production at the subsistence level. This has been women's traditional economic role. In Zambia, the main staple food crops grown are maize, finger millet, sorghum, bulrush millet (all cereals) and cassava (root crop) which are grown in different parts of the country. In addition, there are many different kinds of relish crops.

Before the colonial period, which was characterised by the migration of male adults and youth to the urban areas, women worked in partnership with men. The women used their children as a source of additional labour. In practice there was always division of labour between the sexes. For example, the men felled trees and cleared the land, while women prepared the fields for planting; did the weeding; took care of the crops, harvesting, storing of crops (usually in barns built by men); preserved the food and prepared the meals for the family.

Once the men and youth migrated to the towns and to commercial farms in search of employment, the women took over all types of work in food production. Today, as a result, women's labour input in subsistence production is much greater than that of men (a recent survey report calculates that rural women perform 80 percent of total farm work). Wherever

possible they use additional labour provided by their remaining children and relatives. In areas where the *chitemene* (system/shifting) agriculture is practised, it was often difficult for women to do the felling of trees to prepare the fields; as a result, they then tended to work the same piece of land repeatedly. Such lands became infertile, resulting in lowered food yields. The women were then unable to feed their families well: malnutrition, starvation and illness inevitably followed. Similarly, around the large lakes such as Lake Mweru fishing had been done by men. When the women were then left alone to do all the work of food production in the fields, the domestic chores (including searching for water and firewood), childcare and fishing, the fish catch dropped; in some cases this led to diets poor in fish protein and other nutrients, ultimately resulting in malnutrition in both mothers and children.

Women are commonly blamed for their children's malnutrition and illness and accused of ignorance of good ways of looking after their children. In the past when surplus food was produced, the woman could store it, or give it away to neighbours who had no food, or exchange it for cash or other articles; nowadays she finds herself with less food or entirely without it. While this situation may be precipitated by sudden visits of extended family members who may come to stay for long periods who must be fed, the basic cause is women's inability to produce sufficient food because of inadequate and unequal access to the necessary means of production. Under such circumstances she might decide to go to commercial farmers to do piecework – to sell her labour for cash to meet the family needs and other necessities.

WOMEN IN CASH CROP PRODUCTION

Women are not only responsible for the

bulk of food production; they are also involved in cash crop production. Cash crops commonly produced (which are nationally priced and marketed) are maize, rice, cotton, groundnuts and cassava, etc. Crops such as sweet potatoes, beans, vegetables and sugarcane can be sold informally for cash. However, the disappointing fact is that, in most cases, women contribute labour to cash crops produced by men, but do not benefit: women typically may not have a say in the sale of the crop nor in the use of the proceeds from such sales.

Women cash crop producers work against heavy odds compared to men because they are discriminated against in access to land, credit and extension services. Because women do not always easily get access to these prerequisites to successful cash crop production, they do not always do well in their farming. It is quite possible that the participation of women in cash crop production may lead to the reduction or collapse of their important role as food producers. More research is urgently required to find out how women's involvement in cash crop production affects their food production, nutritional status and their health and that of their families.

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

The situation of rural women in Zambia is relatively very poor. In general terms rural women are the most neglected and disadvantaged group within the rural population; female-headed households are the poorest. The economic contribution of rural women is "invisible" because it is not reflected in the national statistics. It has been estimated that about 30 – 40 percent of rural households are headed by women. The increased migration of males, the high divorce rates, separations and widowhood have resulted in this high proportion.

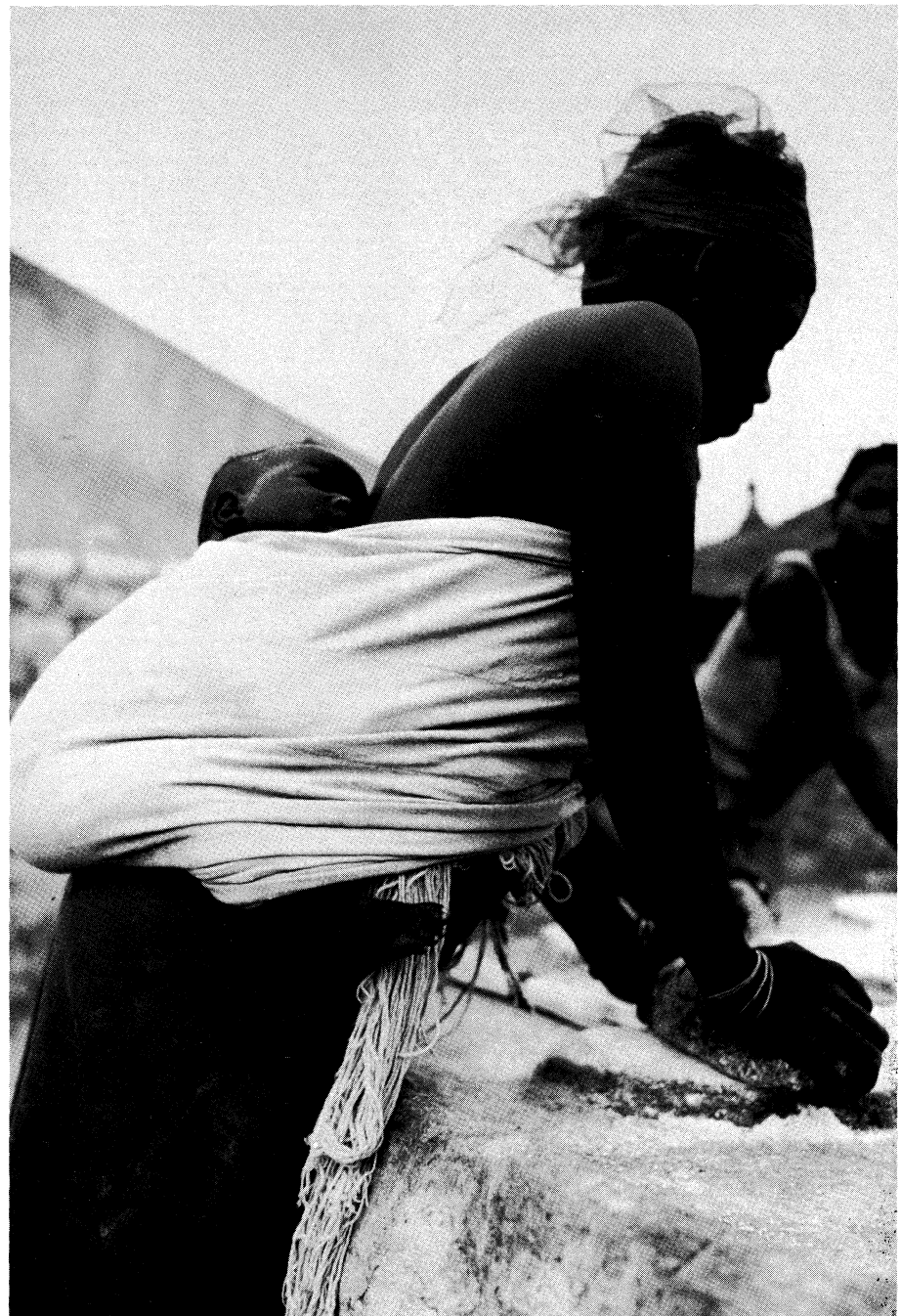
Almost all these women are not educated and therefore lack some skills that are essential for farming activities. As is the case with married women, there are a number of constraining factors that have contributed to the impoverishment of female-headed households. These include unequal access to land, labour, agricultural inputs, extension services, skills and technology.

Labour is a very critical issue for female-headed households because these women do all the work by themselves. As food producers, women depend on their own

labour, that of their own children and occasionally that of their relatives. Sometimes they hire labour but most single women cannot afford to do so. Because of this labour constraint, such women can not utilise their land to the full for food production or cash crop production to generate income. There is always very little to be harvested in such households. Women heads of households are further disadvantaged because they often do not have land rights. Rights to the use of land vary according to specific bodies of customary law. However, in general, women obtain access to land through their husbands or male kin. In the event of divorce,

or death, women often have no further rights to the land. Access to land may be obtained through their male relatives such as uncles, nephews, etc. Even then, this may not be very certain and does not often give the women complete security to use of land.

Female-headed households are therefore, disadvantaged in that they fail to sufficiently provide for their families. Their nutritional status – particularly that of children – is very poor and infant mortality is quite high. In order to supplement their meagre earnings, these women are forced to resort to beer brewing and sale of food by the road sides;



Village woman grinding millet in Upper Volta

Credit: UN Photo 152831/Kay Muldoon

these activities are counter productive because they increase women's work load and bring little income in return. Faced by the ever-increasing cost of living, life is indeed a continuing struggle for simple survival. Because policy-makers often are not convinced that female household heads are discriminated against, more action-oriented research is necessary in order to make visible the situation of such disadvantaged women.

ACCESS TO THE FACTORS OF PRODUCTION

Rural women are being prevented from contributing to the development process by their lack of access to the factors of production, skills, technologies, labour, capital, and land. It is important to consider this topic in order to identify the priority areas of research needed for women to investigate and understand their present position in the rural economy, and to take effective action to improve their status.

Education and Training

Recent Ministry of Education figures (Ministry of Education, *Educational Statistics*, 1980) show that on the whole, fewer women actually get formal schooling or training as compared to men. This means that a great proportion of female school leavers enter adult life without having been trained in various essential required skills for full participation in the development process. There is need to examine the factors that contribute to this high attrition rate of girls, some of which have been presumed to include:

- domestic pressures after school hours;
- early marriages;
- expulsion due to pregnancy;
- sex-stereotyped curriculum;
- competition for school places;
- the various ways the school acts to push girls out.

Furthermore, the training of school-leavers and non-school leavers also shows that men receive more training than women. In the agricultural extension service and other related training, for example, although the majority of farmers are women, there are more male extension officers than female; rural farm training centres also enrol more male farmers than female farmers. This means that women are being excluded from access to essential techniques for improving their

productivity. The majority of rural women are illiterate and so cannot inform themselves from the pamphlets which are occasionally distributed by extension workers.

Technology

By comparison with men, women have a limited access to the modern, or even intermediate technology which provides labour-saving devices, and could enable women to work more efficiently and become more productive. For her production the woman relies mainly on traditional tools such as the axe, the hoe, and her own hands; very few of the much talked about 'modern' technologies reach her. Where 'appropriate' technology is designed for rural women, it is typically directed at her domestic work rather than her production. What is the point of designing a 'perfect' stove for a rural woman when she cannot produce enough household food to warrant the use of the stove?

The extension workers, who are predominantly men, do not regard women as part of their clientele. The target of the extension service is the male farmer rather than the female farmer, and the emergent farmer rather than the subsistence farmer. The woman is denied access, then, to both the technology and the technological skills to improve her productivity. Extension services seem to assume that the male farmer will be the 'go-between' between the extension worker and the woman. This assumption is largely wrong: husbands and wives cultivate separate fields and different crops (cash crops by men and subsistence crops by women); most of the information provided by extension workers does not relate to subsistence production; about one-third of rural households are female-headed, so these households have nobody to play the role of the 'go-between' for them.

It is not uncommon for extension workers to hold short seminars or demonstrations on various issues concerning production, but to exclude women from these activities at all stages (planning, execution and evaluation). Even ox-ploughing demonstrations often exclude women, even though this technology is an old tradition in some parts of Zambia.

The limited access to modern technology is part of the vicious circle of limited access to the other factors of production. In particular, the lack of access to credit means that the woman producer is

not likely to be able to afford any capital-intensive machinery: she remains with labour-intensive methods which are often back-breaking and inefficient. Because of her low productivity, she is in a poor position to accumulate the cash surplus which would be needed to buy even such simple examples of intermediate technology as maize shellers or ox ploughs.

There is an urgent need for action-oriented and participatory research in order to:

- establish the need of rural women for improved technology in subsistence food production;
- establish effective extension services for women food producers;
- involve women food producers in the design and trial of experimental intermediate technologies;
- investigate alternative methods of introducing new skills and new technologies amongst women food producers;
- investigate the extent to which modern technologies are misused by men or diverted to men, instead of being given to the women that need them;
- assess the effects of the exclusion of women from much of the present potential benefit of extension services;
- understand the male control over modern technology as part of the overall patriarchal system of control, and therefore to understand access to technology as part of the larger process of liberation;
- develop ways that women can work together collectively to share the benefits of modern technology and develop their own appropriate technologies.

Labour

With respect to labour, the question is not whether a woman can find employment, but whether a woman has *access to labour* for her own productive activities. This question may be divided into two separate questions: whether the woman has access to her own labour and whether she has access to the labour of others.

Rural women typically are required by their husbands to work with them on the production of cash crops – but the husbands are not obliged to assist wives on their fields growing food crops for household use. At the family level, the

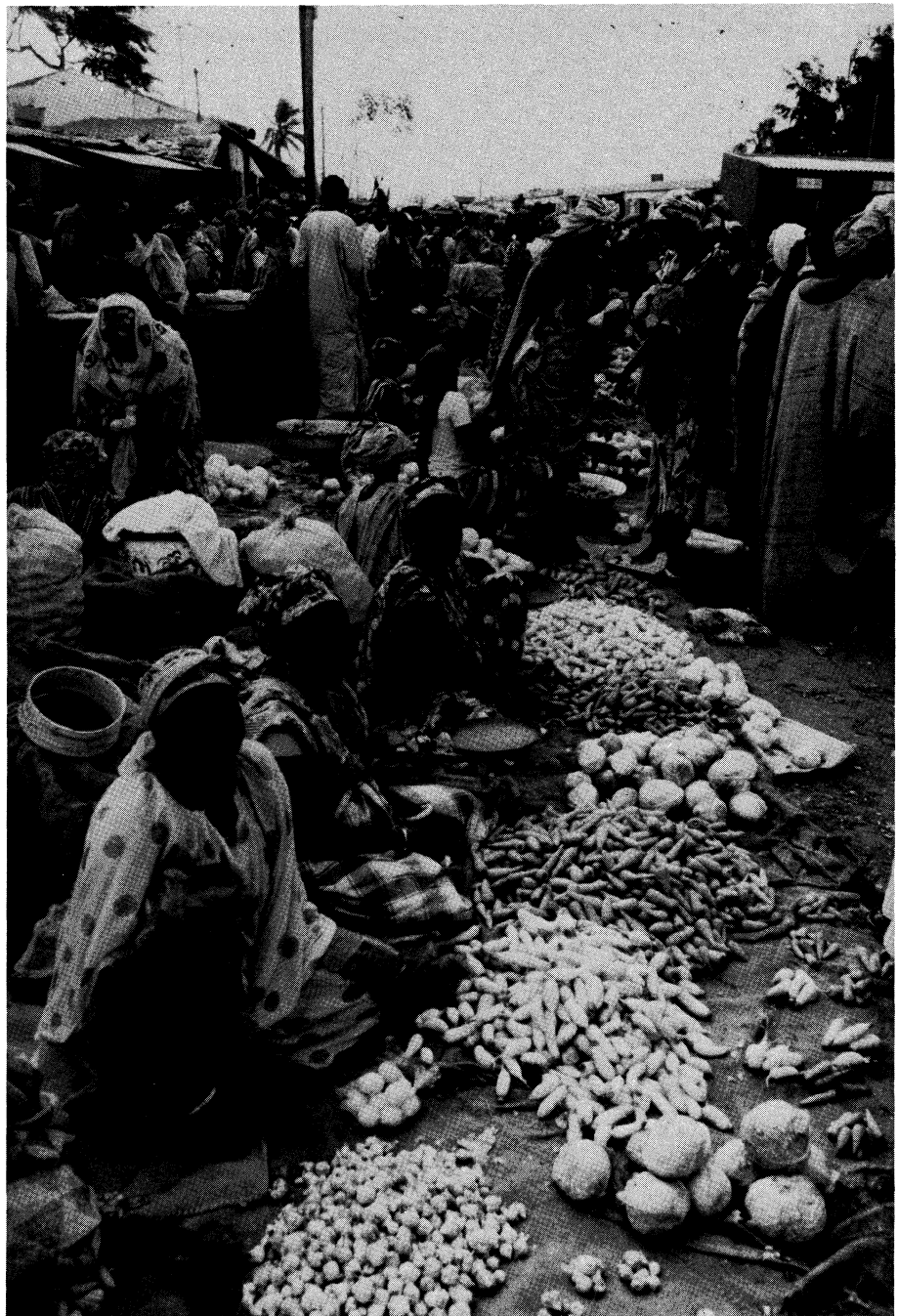
woman typically has limited access to her own labour and to the labour of other members of the family. In effect, the wife contributes her unpaid labour to the production of the cash crop, from which she may never receive her share of the value, and this limits the amount of her own labour power which she can give to her own productive enterprise. The amount of labour she can give to her own production is further limited by the amount of time she spends on social reproduction: the constant work of maintaining the home and doing the domestic chores.

In this situation, it is of course rare for a woman to get access to labour from outside the family, by hiring wage labour. Such labour can only be hired when a cash crop is being grown and when the production is fairly large-scale: such an enterprise is typically in the hands of men. The usual situation of the rural women is that she can only gain some access to her own labour by working very long hours, since most of her work is concerned with providing unpaid labour for household upkeep and as a contribution to the production of (the husband's) cash crop.

Research needs to be done on the extent of the exploitation of the labour of rural women. Action is needed to investigate and introduce ways in which the family can operate so as to *share* the labour and benefits more equally, and ways in which women can get together for collective production to which they contribute their labour to their own enterprise and from which they get the benefit.

Capital

Since rural women are mostly engaged in subsistence production, they are faced with the difficulty of earning income or saving what little they manage to earn. Credit suppliers, such as the Agricultural Finance Company and other commercial finance institutions, are reluctant to lend capital to women engaged in such subsistence production; without access to credit women cannot move into the cash economy and accumulate their own savings. Such negative attitudes to the credit worthiness of women are also held by the Ministry of Cooperatives, in spite of its supposed interest in small-scale farmers: its policy on giving individual cooperatives and primary societies freedom to set up their own by-laws has allowed discrimination against women to prevail. Most cooperatives allow one



Outdoor market in Senegal

Credit: UN Photo 153772/John Isaac

person only per household to become a member, through whom the rest of the household should have access to the benefits. However, in practice, the male heads of households become members of the cooperative and their wives do not benefit.

There are few women in the cooperative movement either as members or primary society officials. Therefore one of the main efforts to assist small-scale farmers excludes women. Research is required to investigate the adverse effects of such practices on economic activities carried out by women. Research is also needed to investigate the extent to which

capital, in the hands of men, has become a means for the exploitation of the cheap labour of women, who contribute to a surplus they cannot control or use. Through research we could discover the ways women can organise to gain control over the fruits of their labour, and so accumulate capital themselves.

Land

The notion of private property is relatively new to Zambia. In pre-colonial times property such as land was communally held, and generally there was no accumulation of capital by the individual.

Insofar as private property existed in the modern sense, the individual 'owned' only personal goods such as clothes, pots and implements. Women had full access to land for household production through either marriages or kinsmen. The penetration of cash economy during colonialism resulted in land acquiring a new connotation and value. The introduction of cash crops to male farmers meant that the value of land increased and rights to land became privatised. Men became 'owners' of land and women did not. Women's access to land became increasingly dependent on their ties to men, especially to husbands. Today women use their land rights in order to grow foodcrops and typically cannot claim access to customarily held land in their own right for cash crop production. Where the process of privatisation of land involves formal title deeds, these are taken up by men and rarely by women.

It is very necessary for women to carry out research on access to land because without land the rural women's economic productivity is limited. Some of the questions the research might attempt to tackle, would include the following:

- To what extent is women's production restricted by their limited access to land?
- To what extent is women's access to land limited by the absence of male labour in rural areas, for land clearing and general infrastructural development?
- To what extent are female-headed households further impoverished by their limited access to land?
- To what extent are women confined to subsistence agriculture within the peasant economy? To what extent has the cash crop economy reduced the amount of land available to women for subsistence agriculture, and thereby reduced women's access to land?
- How can women organise co-operatively and collectively to gain increased access to land?

Rural women in Zambia require a great deal of assistance in identifying the problems which adversely affect their productivity, and in finding possible solutions by initially looking at the following questions:

- To what extent can research be action-oriented towards finding ways of increasing women's access to the factors of production?
- How can women come to realise

that their disadvantage derives from a system which discriminates against them, in giving them limited access to the factors of production? What forms of mobilization will bring home to women the consciousness that such discrimination is part of a system which need not be accepted?

- To what extent can women's unequal access to the factors of production be understood as a development of capitalist production? Was there also unequal access in pre-capitalist African society?
- How can ordinary rural women organise themselves to participate in the research participation, to investigate the obstacles to economic process, and demand an equal share on the basis of their understanding of the obstacles to their progress?

INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

As a result of the UN focus on women's development, Zambian women's problems with regard to full integration in the development process have received some attention by governmental and non-governmental agencies, resulting in increasing numbers of projects for women. It is clear, however, that these projects, which have largely taken the form of special, small-scale development projects for women, have not resulted in their needs and interests being incorporated into the nation's planning process or in important national development programmes. The first (1966-1970) and second (1972-1976) National Development Plans do not mention women's problems, and the Third National Development Plan (1979-1983) contains only three paragraphs on women's clubs in the section on community development.

This latter development plan was produced during the UN Decade for Women, and one would have hoped for it to address women's needs more than it did. However, there is evidence that this omission has been belatedly recognised: a document reviewing the current situation of Zambian women and describing projects now being carried out to address their needs has been prepared at the National Commission for Development Planning (UNDP). This document will be included as a separate chapter on women in the Fourth National Development Plan

and will include recommendations to improve women's access to factors of production and to opportunities.

Women's development has received so much attention during the decade that a post of National Coordinator of Women's Projects at the NCDP was created. Although the small staff in this unit is able to make some impact by contributing to the Fourth National Development Plan, much of its present efforts go into implementing 'special projects' for women.

Special women's projects have a colonial history in Zambia. The women's club approach was influenced by the imported foreign culture of the colonial masters, where the woman's role was primarily that of home-maker. While men's labour was utilised on the mines and settler commercial farms, the productive skills of women were not developed. Instead, they were organised into clubs and taught skills such as sewing, knitting, crocheting, cooking, child-care, etc. to make them better home-makers. This emphasis on improving women's domestic skills for household use continues to the present.

The UN Decade for Women initiative has, however, drawn to the attention of some relevant departments of government and local district councils the bias of an emphasis on home economics instruction for women. Emphasis has now shifted to teaching skills through which women can generate income. As a result, many skills training and small income generating projects have been started. One such club is the George Weaving Group in Lusaka, sponsored by the Young Christian Women's Association (YWCA). The tendency in this approach is, however, to assume that women's most basic need is always for income; usually, no research is carried out to establish women's *own* priorities and needs. Some participants in these income generating projects may have benefited to a great extent, but the majority of poor women, rural and urban, have other important basic needs which the current focus is overlooking. There is no doubt, therefore, that there is a great need to carry out preliminary surveys to establish the needs and priorities of women *before* any development project is introduced. This approach will ensure maximum benefit to the aid recipients from all the project inputs and will accelerate development. Research should include preliminary surveys before the projects begin; ongoing and follow-up evaluation should take place to assess the impact on the

recipients and to make any necessary adjustments.

Skills training has become a common approach to income generation for women. Skills training – in sewing, for example – is given through women's clubs and homecraft courses offered by churches, local district councils, etc. A number of agencies also run skills training courses for out-of-school youths, almost invariably carpentry for males and sewing and tailoring for females. These courses are based on the assumption that women are responsible for the family's clothing as part of their domestic role, and hence can learn to develop and use this skill in a more productive way. The skills training is more acceptable as it does not conflict with their primary domestic role. Apart from a few agricultural production courses for youths of both sexes and skills training in cottage industries such as soap-making, candle making and production of edible oils, the predominant focus of skills training for women is on textile production.

Most graduates of skills courses hope to find employment in small clothing factories or with small male-owned establishments in the informal sector. This is seen as an opportunity, because the majority of tailoring courses do not include training that would help the graduates to form production units or obtain credit individually in order to buy their own sewing machines. However, it is reported that not many graduates find employment; for the few who do, the minimum wage is not enforced and long working hours for low wages under bad working conditions are common. In spite of this, many skills training courses continue to turn out women whose chances of finding adequately paid employment are slim. This is even more the case for rural women. From this we can conclude that it is necessary to carry out surveys to establish the needs of women before programmes are offered and to identify alternative skills other than sewing.

Production units are few in Zambia, but women's clubs are numerous. The num-

bers who participate in women's clubs are not known, but it is believed that slightly better off women, usually married, are more able to afford the luxury of time off from child care, domestic and agricultural duties. Female household heads, young mothers and the rural poor in general are difficult to reach and are consequently likely to be left out from club activities. These clubs have been found useful to development agencies for meeting women's needs because they are an 'acceptable' women's activity as far as men are concerned: they offer agencies a forum for providing women with income generating opportunities that would not threaten husbands. Besides, most organisations do not have the staff, time or policy to work within a local rural community to motivate women outside of a club framework, to define their own needs themselves and to develop more relevant projects.

The majority of rural women in Zambia are engaged in agricultural production, and there are a few special projects to



Detail from a poster for an agricultural exhibition held during the End of Decade Conference

Credit: American Cultural Center

assist some of them to improve and increase their farm production and generate incomes. All of these projects have been initiated through foreign development assistance to Zambia and are dependent on donor finance of revolving credit funds against which women can obtain small seasonal loans to purchase inputs. Since such projects are new and recently introduced, and some have been adversely affected by the recent years of drought, it is not yet known whether they will be able to become autonomous, will successfully generate incomes for members, or will be worthwhile to rural women. Nor is it known whether this club approach will incorporate more women, since very few are able to participate at present.

In addition to women's clubs, their participation in development through the cooperative movement is beginning to increase. As with women's clubs, this usually takes the form of 'women's only' groups being organised within the larger context of a registered primary society. The development agencies working in the cooperative movement follow the general national policy which assumes that women are free to participate equally with men in any opportunities offered. As noted earlier, this ignores the fact that women in Zambia have unequal access to the basic factors of production and are thus less able than men to participate in national development programmes. It is also believed that if women are not represented in large numbers in cooperatives, a 'women's only' approach is, therefore, justified. The national policy of integrating women in development has been side-tracked into a 'special projects' approach largely because gender inequalities have not been recognised or tackled.

Foreign donors of development aid to Zambia, including UN agencies like FAO, ILO, UNDP, bilateral donors – particularly the Scandinavian countries and the Dutch and foreign NGOs, such as volunteer organisations – are not in a position to restructure basic Zambian institutions so that women's interests are more effectively represented. The safer and easier thing for them to do is to design and implement 'special projects'. These unfortunately do not challenge basic structural inequalities nor do they reach the large majority of needy rural women. Some local NGOs have also taken up the challenge of assisting women, but they too are not in a position to correct gender inequalities, and like the other agencies have also taken the 'special project' approach.

Although rural women's development has received some attention during the decade, it is very clear that these 'special projects' have not resulted in integration of women into the overall economy of Zambia as the UN initiative originally proposed. It is important therefore, that research is carried out to provide conclusive data on gender inequalities on access to the basic factors of production so that women's interests will be incorporated into the planning process. Otherwise women will continue to be excluded from national development programmes and 'special projects' tokenism will continue to prevail.

RESEARCH ON RURAL WOMEN

Zambia does not yet have a national action-oriented research programme relevant to improving the situation of rural women. The current situation is one of fragmented efforts, with academics producing studies which are not seen or read by relevant government officials and with a multitude of development agencies, all doing their own thing in relative ignorance of the results of surveys or evaluations of other women's projects relevant to their own. The conclusions of several recent research studies indicate that the needs of the poorest rural women in Zambia are not being met, in spite of the well-intentioned efforts of agencies as a direct result of the UN Decade for Women. At present Zambian women themselves have almost no opportunity to influence the design and implementation of rural or agricultural development projects, whether as target groups or as researchers.

Recognising the need to understand the socio-economic situation of women in relation to the development process, the Zambia Association for Research and Development, a non-governmental organisation, has given the highest priority to fostering research on Zambian women's needs and priorities. As a first step, ZARD has produced an annotated bibliography of research on Zambian women which includes analytical, topical essays in order to ascertain the existing state of knowledge.¹ As a result of this bibliographic exercise, ZARD has concluded that one of the important areas which has been insufficiently documented is rural women's current unequal access to factors of production in agriculture. Thus, the concluding essay in the bibliography draws attention to this and

other priority areas for further research. Agricultural development projects which are not based upon a sound appraisal of the target group's access to these factors of production will be unlikely to be successful in improving the situation of the poorest Zambia's female subsistence producers.

In order to publicise the necessity of integrating research into development projects for women, ZARD has distributed the bibliography widely to all relevant agencies and departments of government. This alone, of course, will not necessarily result in positive actions being taken. However, it will help to sensitize relevant officials to the need to consider women's interests in development planning and project implementation and to provoke a greater awareness of the importance of research in developmental issues concerning women than is currently the case.

We conclude, therefore, that research should:

- be action-oriented and include women both as researchers and as participating members of the target population;
- be based on needs assessment;
- include baseline surveys monitoring and evaluation studies;
- be statistically disaggregated by sex;
- make rural women's economic contribution visible and highly valued; and
- result in women becoming more conscientised to recognise discrimination and inequality and to reject this.

¹*An Annotated Bibliography of Research on Zambian Women* (Box 37836, Lusaka: ZARD, 1985).

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