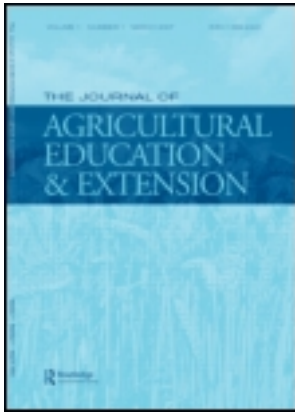


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The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/raee20>

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Published online: 11 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Professor Tahseen Jafry Guest Editor & Rasheed Sulaiman V Guest Editor (2013) Gender Inequality and Agricultural Extension, The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension, 19:5, 433-436

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1389224X.2013.824166>

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EDITORIAL

Gender Inequality and Agricultural Extension

This special issue of the *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension* focuses on the issue of gender inequality and agricultural extension. Agriculture in developing countries provides some of the world's most marginalised and vulnerable communities not only with their main source of food, but a means to create livelihoods and generate income. These communities, which are generally made up of small-scale subsistence farmers, now face added pressures brought about by climate change and a shifting global economy. The need for agricultural growth is more pressing than ever. Recent data from the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO 2011) show that 43% of the agricultural workforce in developing countries is made up of women. This ranges from approximately 20% in Latin America to approximately 50% in Asia and Africa. However, despite carrying out a significant number of activities related to agriculture, including crop production and livestock rearing as well as being engaged as wage labourers and in small-scale income-generating activities, rural women rarely have their voices heard, and their productive potential remains low (World Bank, FAO and IFAD 2008).

With advances in agricultural science, technology and development, why is this problem of gender inequality so persistent in the agricultural sector? Traditionally agricultural production has been supported by a policy of subsidised inputs which has benefitted large farmers and an extension system that is male-dominated and male farmer focussed, thereby rarely reaching women farmers with new information, knowledge or technology. In addition to these are the deeply rooted social and cultural constraints that women face which manifest themselves in a number of ways. For instance, property and land rights issues in many countries leave women farmers without ownership and control over productive assets, leaving them marginalised and discentivised. Another major constraint is women's lack of access to education in general and in training (for example, in relation to knowledge on food production), which effectively leaves them disempowered, unable to make decisions and articulate their needs and aspirations. Gender inequality thus has significant impacts not only on the agricultural economy vis-à-vis lack of productivity but also on family livelihoods vis-à-vis health and nutrition.

There is now a growing realisation that tackling gender inequality and the various barriers that rural women face will result in increased efficiency and productivity in the agricultural sector, which in turn will contribute to agricultural growth, poverty reduction, better nutrition and food security (World Bank 2007; Christoplos 2010; World Bank, FAO and IFAD 2008; FAO 2011). Agricultural extension and rural advisory services play an important role in transferring knowledge of new approaches and technologies to farmers. However, these services tend to engage more with male

farmers, and there is little evidence that the needs and requirements of women farmers are being met.

Some countries have made efforts to increase the number of women extension workers and also ensure a quota for women in extension programmes (mainly training and demonstration). Recent years have witnessed increasing interest in exploring the role of gender in agricultural value chains (Coles and Mitchell 2011; USAID 2009). Most countries have a national gender policy and efforts are being made currently to mainstream gender through enacting appropriate policies and developing relevant programmes for women. However there is not enough research on understanding the special needs of and support required by rural women, designing relevant programmes for them or testing and evaluating new models for improving the livelihoods of women engaged in agriculture.

Given the recognition of the critical link between the improved capacity of women as agricultural producers and the reduction in rural poverty and food insecurity, national governments and the donor community need to find, as matter of urgency, better ways to support rural women through extension and advisory services. This means an overhaul of current systems in order to overcome gender bias and provide an equitable form of extension provision.

Given this backdrop, this special edition aims to provide a critical view of different issues affecting rural women's access to knowledge and services, highlighting the relevance of a wide range of different approaches to address gender inequality in extension provision and suggesting new directions and focus for future research efforts.

The articles in this special issue

The five articles in this issue consider diverse aspects of gender and agricultural extension, focusing on experiences from two regions, Asia and Africa. The authors, who draw on their extensive knowledge and experiences of research on gender and extension, address different aspects related to gender and extension, such as gender differences in technology adoption (Ragassa et al.), designing gender-sensitive and demand-led programmes for women (Jafry and Sulaiman), farm mechanisation and women (Alex), child labour, especially the issue of girl children (Murray) and exploring gender in the innovation process (Kingiri).

The article by Ragassa et al. clearly reveals the gender dimension of access to extension services by women in Ethiopia and confirms past studies indicating that male farmers are more likely than female farmers to have access to or be visited by extension personnel. Of significance is the urgent need to identify and implement other suitable means of getting the right information to women, and eliminate gender bias in access to productive resources and inputs. What is important is not the number of visits made by extension staff, but the quality of service being delivered, which, along with access to radios, has been highlighted as having a major impact on crop productivity levels.

The article by Jafry and Sulaiman analyses the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches to reaching women employed by extension services and articulates the need for a better approach to develop demand-led and gender-sensitive programmes for reaching rural women. The article points to the mismatch between the types of support rural women receive and what they really want. Demand-led rather than

input- and supply-driven programmes, and focussing on the aspirations and desires of women, are crucial. Moreover, women need an integrated set of supports and services that include credit, information, technical and business skills and market facilitation. The article presents the results of pilot-testing a new consultative process for designing programmes for women in India. The authors argue that such an approach that builds on a database with information on the current livelihoods and aspirations of women can potentially be used for identifying the best possible interventions for sustainable income generation among women.

In his article, Alex analyses the importance of organisational innovations, particularly at the local level, to address the livelihood challenges faced by women. His case study on women and farm mechanisation in South India clearly illustrates how integrated efforts by different sets of stakeholders (financial, technical, business) are important for sustaining and expanding such organisational innovations. The case also highlights the need to understand the complementary roles that can be played by different institutions in identifying better livelihood options and the challenges in bringing together different organisations with conflicting objectives and divergent interests. The article concludes that scaling up such initiatives warrants substantial local ingenuity.

In her article on child labour, Murray focuses on issues associated with children working in the agricultural sector and especially with regard to female children. Worldwide, a combination of labour constraints and traditional agricultural practices requires that many children work in agriculture. However, child labour in agriculture has huge implications for the health and nutrition of children and the provision of their education, especially for girls. Based on empirical research in Ethiopia, Murray argues that this issue of child labour is “unknown” to agricultural extensionists and is not yet sufficiently defined as “a problem” or connected to the wider context of improving agricultural production and food security. The article argues that extensionists are an important stakeholder group for addressing child labour in agriculture. Beyond transferring technologies and information to farmers, extensionists should discuss the benefits of education for future farmers, as well as highlight the current hazards of agricultural work for boys and girls.

The article by Kingiri explores the role of gender in the process of agricultural innovation. She emphasises the need to move away from gender analysis to gender learning and the importance of understanding the institutional environment in which rural extension services play a role, if we are to see changes in the way programmes are designed, delivered and implemented for women. Understanding and strengthening the wider dimensions of the innovation capacity through which gender can be addressed is highlighted as a direction in which we need to turn if we are to better address gender concerns in agriculture through extension provision. In other words the article calls for empowerment of the system rather than merely focussing on empowerment of women.

Cross-cutting observations

The articles in this special issue discuss different aspects of gender and agricultural extension, allowing for a number of cross-cutting observations.

Closing the gender gap in agriculture (improving productivity through better access to resources and services) requires finding and developing innovative

approaches at both the institutional level and local level, bringing together key stakeholders to address the needs of rural women and their families. There is a need to shift the emphasis from traditional approaches to dealing with the issue, such as gender analysis of farming and dissemination of information and training to women, to provision of a wider range of demand-led supports and services. The issue of child labour is another important aspect that needs to be dealt with by extension as it has long-term adverse impacts on the health and education of children.

It is clear that women need a broader set of demand-led supports and services in addition to technical information. There is a desperate need for integration, coordination and convergence of efforts by different stakeholders at all levels for the provision of technical, managerial, organisational and entrepreneurial support to women. This is possible only through building collaborations and partnerships among a wide range of organisations. Facilitating this will require understanding the institutional and policy environment and strengthening of the capacity for innovation in the system so that it can provide meaningful support to rural women in their communities.

Outlook

The aim of this special issue is to highlight the need to tackle gender inequality in the agricultural sector via the provision of agricultural extension systems. The articles in this issue emphasise the need for an overhaul of current systems of extension provision to become more demand-led and gender sensitive. In this context, the authors provide a rich and diverse range of views, opinions, approaches and challenges for the future. We hope this special issue inspires future research into some of the issues discussed here so that it provides policy and practical guidance on reaching rural communities effectively through extension and advisory support.

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