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## **Women's Role in Agriculture and Gender Issues in Syria**

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## **Women's Role in Agriculture and Gender Issues in Rural Syria**

Syrian rural women play a significant role in agriculture and in poverty alleviation. Rural women do most of the farm work-planting, weeding and harvesting crops, as well as tending livestock, they also spend long hours performing farm and household chores like collecting firewood, preparing meals and caring for children. Nevertheless, rural women can't access many productive resources and capital assets, and they can't control over those resources and benefits due to traditional role of gender that lead to exist substantial gaps among men and women, especially that related to economic, educational, health and other services.

Despite of efforts made since seventies to develop women and to integrate them into comprehensive development process, traditional thoughts prevailed still excess educational effects towards women education and economic, social, and political empowerment. In addition, the social standard prevailed still view that the essential role of women is tight to household matter (parity, children rearing, domestic tasks...). It has been started since last decade to linkage between women empowerment and gender concept to show the relationship between women and development, so that many opportunities such education, training, primary health care service, and income generating activities have been provided. In addition, women have been involved in setting policies and contributed in development process.

In the early seventieths, women had already been granted equal rights under the Syrian constitutions, especially with regard to education, employment, social security and welfare services. In fact, national plans and development strategies had not yet fully recognized the real contribution of women to the economy. However, in addition to the lack of institutional support for rural women, only a very small number of projects and programs were designed to target rural women. Consequently, most organizations and institutions dealing with rural women had no/or very few women employed at the policy-making level and very few women professionals existed to promote the cause of rural women. Indicators such as illiteracy, deteriorating health conditions, and the increase of female-headed households, as well as the lack of women's access to economic structures and productive processes (credit, land, education, technology, information, training, etc.), reflect the extent to which rural women in the early ninetieths have still been neglected in the development efforts

Syrian legislation roots an important principle, gender equity, which have full citizenship rights, although, there are some existing laws differentiate between duties and rights by gender, especially, law of personal status and labor law.

### **Women's Role in the Economy**

Women's participation rate in labor force (+15 years) has increased from 18.3% in 2000 to 20.1% in 2005. Also, women's engagement in the economic activities rate has increased from 12% to 13.3% in the same period. However, most statistics don't consider the economical value of women's work at home and household, which has created a big gap in computing female's economic activity rate. In addition, the majority of women is classified as inactive economically and that it is attributed of being housewives whose rate stand at 64% ( 62% in urban and 66% in rural areas).

Moreover, several policies and procedures have been adopted in order to give women opportunities to manage their own enterprises. Although women worker's rate has increased, they didn't occupy leadership position sufficiently.

## **Women's Role in Agriculture**

Rural areas in Syria suffer from very high male temporary and permanent urban-to-rural migration; women farmers have increasingly found themselves becoming major contributors to the agricultural labor force, the majority of who work for very long hours all year long as unpaid family's labor. Therefore, female's labor rate comprises 81% of total female labor, so that female workers percentage increased in agriculture from 28.4% in 1994 to 58.1% in 2002. Moreover, rural women contribute to 70% of agricultural activities (weeding, harvesting, grading, sorting, and others that require much more of bear, patient, and trouble), whereas, women's role is decreasing in marketing process (only 0.5% of cases). In addition to their tasks, they are responsible completely for livestock caring except grazing, which is male task by 37%.

## **Women's access to the pentagon assets**

Sustainable Livelihood Approach was adopted to assess women access to the capital assets, and that approach was recommended and adopted by the Department For International Development (DFID) that help in defining individual ability to access to the productive resources. Those five capitals are:

1. Human capital: the status of individual
2. Financial capital: stocks of money, savings, pensions
3. Social Capital: the cohesiveness of people and societies
4. Physical capital: local infrastructure
5. Natural capital: nature's goods and services

### *1. Human Capital*

#### *1.1 Educational Status of Rural Women*

High educational status of women is the main factor for women's integration in the development process that increases their participation rate in the labor force and their productivity rate.

Total illiteracy rate in Syria amounted about 17.1% in 2003, while that percentage is upper in rural areas than urban areas, which is stand for 23% in the rural ( 34.8% for females and 11.7% for males), while it stand for 11.8% in the urban. As for females enrolled at schools during 1970-2002, that percentage increased at all educational levels as follows:

- Increased from 35% to 47.2% in the elementary schools
- Increased from 26% to 45.9% in the preparatory schools
- Increased from 23% to 49.1% in high schools
- As for university, it increased from 42.4% in 1998 to 46.1% in 2002 as well

#### *1.2. Women's Share in Training Opportunities*

Women are often not identified as target group for technical training. Cultural and social restrictions in addition to time constraints make it impossible for them to travel to training sites or to take long absences from home in order to attend courses. Women often do not hear about training opportunities because of limited contracts with technicians, extension staff and organizations in general.

#### *1.3. Health Status of Rural Women*

Parity is an essential task for women in rural societies. Therefore, high women fertility lead to women health exposes to healthy dangerous risks, especially, where health unawareness is not

exist. Furthermore, due to the increase of educated and awarded women's rate, mortality rates among overall mothers have decreased during last few years from 143 per thousand alive births in 1990 to 107 in 1993 then to 65.4 in 2002. Infant mortality rates declined from 0.024 to 0.018 over the past fifteen 15 years (on average 1.6% per annum). The percentage of contraceptive prevalence rate increased from 40% in 1993 to 46.6% in 2002. (Syrian Arab Republic, National Report, 2004). Under this framework, the government has initiated providing RH services, especially in the under-served areas, in close cooperation with the United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA).

## 2. *Financial Capital*

although the direct relationship between wage and educational status, it was noticed that there was a big variation among men and women wages at all levels of education, either at systematic sector, or non-systematic sector. In addition, the highest percentage of unpaid women workers is in household work group, where 80% of women workers earn less than SP6000 per month comparing with 41% of men, and 88% of women workers in the agricultural sector, which conclude the majority of women workers, earn less than SP 5000 per month via 50% of men. Statistics showed that unpaid women workers percentage stand for 46.3%, while paid workers accounted about 41.9%. As for self-employed workers, their rate stand for 10.5% , while business owners rate was 1.3%.

as for women possessing of productive resources and financial capital, the findings of the most recent agricultural census in 1994 show that the percentage of women who own agricultural land amounted to only 5%, for animals heads 4% and for agricultural machineries amounted only 1% of the aggregate holders.

## 3. *Social Capital*

In this context, resources are inclusively defined by the accessing and conducting the economic, social, and cultural resources. In addition, the situation of woman is decided through her accessing to decision-making position, whether at home or at public life level. As if a very few of Syrian rural women are participating in decision-making, that does not mean that their requirement and needs are bleached in their priorities. On the other hand, women aren't considered as workers unless they are working outside their villages. So in that case, they are not allowed to control or to dispose their income. Although women have right to inherit and own land and property legally, the traditional thoughts and customs prevailed, especially in rural areas, bound them to practice that right actually.

## 4. *Physical Capital*

The estimations that drawn of 1994 census, demonstrated that in the rural areas, 56% of households are provided with piped water, and 92% electricity supply. While, only 29% of households are supplied with modern sanitary net, therefore, this data have many complies on women domestic burden, in particular because of inadequate infrastructure provision.

## 5. *Natural Resources*

Although women work in land, but their possessing rate still very low; in addition, they don't own transportation means and agricultural wells.

## **Obstacles**

- few women holding of agricultural productive resources such as land, animals, and machinery;
- Women absence from decision making process, either inside or outside home;
- Women perform all un-mechanized agricultural tasks and perform multiple tasks, which add more burden to them;

- Women workers in agriculture suffer from high illiteracy rate among them and drop-out of schools;
- Women earn less wages, especially in joint, informal and private sector;
- Women do not know their legal rights
- Miss applying some laws and regulations in favor of women such heritage legislation

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- Since illiteracy rate among rural women is high, they are not aware of their economic, social, and political rights. Therefore, increase awareness of the decision makers and planners about women empowerment concepts
- Enabling women to own productive resources and benefits to improve women participation in agriculture;
- Removing all obstacles hindering women's effective involvement in all spheres of life,
- The mobilization of all stakeholders, including rural women and men, at all levels and all stages of the information process
- Improve women production and their skills in agriculture by alleviate women's domestic burden and encouraging them to utilize new agricultural techniques;
- Conduct of national surveys on rural women and time-use surveys to determine the respective contributions of rural men and women and identify the obstacles that bound to realize development
- Providing special support, such as credit, under poverty reduction programs so that rural women can set up their own enterprises and income-earning activities, in particular in the smallholder sector.
- The selection of economic and social indicators, the setting up of databases on rural men and women at regional and national levels, and a monitoring system
- Encouraging women to participate in development process of the whole society by liberating them from all obstacles and constrains that bound them to be more advanced and progressed.