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The Role of Farmers' Organizations in Empowering and Promoting the Leadership of Rural Women

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Introduction

Farmers in developing countries, mostly working on small scale, family farms, have long suffered from governments' mis- and under-investment in smallholder agriculture. Lack of access to natural resources, inappropriate policies, thin and uncompetitive markets, weak rural infrastructure, inadequate production and financial services, and a deteriorating natural resource base have all contributed to creating an environment in which farming has frequently been risky and unprofitable for smallholders.¹

Farmers all over the world have tried to address their conditions of hunger and poverty by organizing themselves into farmers, producers and various self-help groups and associations. Farmers' and rural producers' organizations (FOs) refer to independent, non-governmental, membership-based rural organizations of part or full-time self-employed smallholders and family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fishers, landless people, women, small entrepreneurs and indigenous peoples. They range from formal groups covered by national legislation, such as

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

¹ IFAD, Rural Poverty Report 2011

cooperatives and national farmers unions, to looser self-help groupings and associations.² They can be organized from local, to national, to sub regional, to regional and international levels. Many of these FOs have mixed with men and women farmers as members.

FOs are essential institutions for the empowerment, poverty alleviation and advancement of farmers and the rural poor. Politically, FOs strengthen the political power of farmers, by increasing the likelihood that their needs and opinions are heard by policy makers and the public.

Economically, FOs can help farmers gain skills, access inputs, form enterprises, process and market their products more effectively to generate higher incomes. By organizing, farmers can access information needed to produce, add value, market their commodities and develop effective linkages with input agencies such as financial service providers, as well as output markets. FOs can achieve economies of scale, thereby lowering costs and facilitating the processing and marketing of agricultural commodities for individual farmers. Marketing-oriented FOs can assist their members purchase inputs and equipment, meet quality standards and manage the drying, storage, grading, cleaning, processing, packing, branding, collection and transportation of produce. In this way, FOs provide a more reliable supply to buyers and sell larger quantities at higher prices. Organized farmers have greater bargaining power than individuals and are better able to negotiate with other more powerful market players to ultimately increase the profits that accrue to farmers rather than intermediaries and buyers.³

When we look at the involvement of both men and women members in FOs, as well as in their leadership structures, we however see a disparity. While women may comprise 30-50% of their members, and while women farmers do up to 80% of farm work, women have a weak presence in the leadership of their FOs. And in some cases, there is still limited ability of the few women leaders at the national level to effectively represent the interests of grassroots women. Women's groups tend to remain confined to the local level. In mixed organizations, while women may be well represented as members, there are generally few women in leadership positions – and increasingly fewer as one moves from local to provincial, to national, or to international levels.⁴ This translates into a dramatic disproportion between rural women's voice and decision-making role and their enormous contribution to agricultural marketing, production and livelihoods.⁵ Thus, women's role in agriculture remains largely unrecognized in policy and resource allocation; and the benefits of organized actions are not significantly felt by women farmers.

This paper will to discuss how FOs can empower small scale women farmers, the issues and challenges FOs face in their work to empower their women members, as well as some priority issues for intervention. In so doing, the paper will cite some examples from: (a) the experiences and observations of the author as she works for and with FOs in Asia that have both women and men as members, and women-only members; (b) the outputs of the “Special Session on Promoting Women's Leadership and Rural Producers' Organizations” organized by IFAD in

² Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) Policy Brief 12. 2007

³ Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) Policy Brief 12. 2007

⁴ For example, in AFA, nine out of ten member national FOs have mixed membership; none of them are led by a woman.

⁵ IFAD Technical Advisory Division. Farmers' Forum 2010 – Preparatory Workshop on Promoting Women's Leadership in Farmers' Organizations. February 12-13, 2010.

February 12-13, 2010 in Rome, Italy; and (3) current activities being undertaken through the Rural Women Leadership Project, being implemented by Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and NRM (WOCAN), with the support of IFAD.

Initiatives by AFA members

Some of the initiatives by AFA member FOs in promoting women's leadership in their organizations include:

Farmer and Nature Net (FNN), Cambodia

FNN was established in 2003 after a process of consultations among village based farmers associations supported by its NGO partner, CEDAC. It acts as an umbrella organization representing and providing technical, management and capacity building services to its more than 40,000 members. It has a women's arm, with its own structure but integrated in the over-all FNN structure. The women's arm promotes savings groups in the villages, as well as cooperative selling and buying of agricultural and household products.

Korean Advanced Women Farmers' Federation (WAFF), Republic of Korea

Established in 1996, WAFF provides education services, organizes farmers exchanges, advocates for good agricultural practices, administers to the needs of its 70,000 members. It received the top prize for its business academy educational program from the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Side by side with its male counterparts, the Korean Advanced Women Farmers' Federation (KAFF) pushes for policies which will benefit both women and men farmers.

Rural Women's Leadership Project in Nepal and the Philippines

The Rural Women's Leadership Program is being piloted in Nepal and the Philippines with the following objectives: (1) strengthening the capacities and competencies of rural women, their associations at all levels and of their professional organizations so that leaders and members are able to express themselves, choose their leaders appropriately and hold them accountable, and manage their own organizations effectively; and (2) supporting to enhance the quality of training and policy advocacy.

The main target groups are rural women's organizations in Nepal and the Philippines. In Nepal, the pilot project is being implemented within the five regions where the three major peasant federations and associations are engaged, and includes some of the 10 districts where IFAD works in west Nepal, which is a socio-politically and economically deprived area. In the Philippines, the project is implemented within the provinces where PAKISAMA and LAKAMBINI have members, namely: Quezon, Batangas, Cordillera, Sorsogon in Luzon, Bohol, Iloilo, Samar in Visayas, and Bukidnon, Agusan del Sur, Compostela Valley in Mindanao.

PAKISAMA's Gender and Development Program had been established prior to the Rural Women's Leadership Project. But an organizational and leadership crisis in the past had weakened the program and the leadership of its women members in the organization. The project

was therefore implemented with the hope that the Gender Program would be revived and strengthened again.

PAKISAMA is a national confederation of 28 peasants' organizations located in 30 provinces in the Philippines, and two national sectoral federations of women and fisher folks established in 1986. In 1993, PAKISAMA organized a national consultation for its women members. This paved the way for the creation of an ad hoc structure of peasant women, now known as LAKAMBINI (more discussions on this women's organization are given below). In 1995, it began to implement a Gender Program. Through the program, PAKISAMA launched a series of gender sensitivity seminars among its women and men leaders at the base, regional and national levels. This resulted in the development of a handful of gender advocates within the Confederation.

Under this program, PAKISAMA trained and developed women organizers and trainers who then subsequently helped conduct the training sessions on basic gender awareness and organize peasant women respectively. The Program employed a participatory action research (PAR) method that allowed women to understand and analyze their own situation and assisted them in identifying possible solutions to their problems.

In response to the economic empowerment issues facing the women gender advocates, an Economy Building Program was also set in place. Later, it was able to serve at least 10 local groups in terms of providing credit and consultancy services for their respective income generating projects. The simultaneous implementation of consciousness raising activities, leadership and women organizing trainings, and the PAR, contributed to the formation and strengthening of the women/gender committees within the member organizations of PAKISAMA (composed of men and women members), and the all-women organizations at the village, municipal and provincial levels, who would then be members of LAKAMBINI. The Gender Program provided the seeds for women organizing within the Confederation, facilitating the formation, strengthening and consolidation of all women groups into LAKAMBINI.

Among the peasant organizations belonging to the moderate left, LAKAMBINI was the first national women's organization to be established from a mixed peasant organization. It then became a key player in many advocacy activities of national peasant organizations. Its leaders articulated women's positions in several national agricultural policies, including advocacy for land titling with women's names on the land certificate awards in line with the agrarian reform program, a magna carta for women, gender and development budget, violence against women and children, trafficking, CEDAW, access of credit services to women. In 1998, it conducted the first ever campaign on food security in celebration of the International Rural Women's Day. It joined issue-based coalitions to push for some bills in Congress, such as the Women in Nation Building Act, the Family Code, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law.

At the PAKISAMA level, LAKAMBINI succeeded in its advocacy for the following: (1) formation of gender committees/gender programs within other member organizations of PAKISAMA; (2) passing and approval of the PAKISAMA Gender Policy and Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy and (c) development of policy guidelines for mainstreaming a gender perspective in peasant organizations. PAKISAMA has an affirmative action policy – women

should represent at least 30% participants in all project activities of PAKISAMA.

At the international arena, LAKAMBINI participated in the 1998 World Farmers' Congress, organized by the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) and in the Farmers' Exchange Program with the Gender Committee of ZLTO, a farmers' organization in the Netherlands. A LAKAMBINI leader was later elected as the chair of IFAP's Standing Committee on Women, a body responsible for promoting global awareness of the situation of rural women.

A serious organizational and financial crisis was experienced by PAKISAMA and LAKAMBINI from 2003-2006; and consequently, its Gender Program came to a standstill. Thus, when the Rural Women's Leadership Project was implemented in 2010 (first year), PAKISAMA leaders and members had to undergo refresher courses on gender sensitivity prior to attending gender leadership courses. PAKISAMA leaders also had to review the organization's gender policy, now using an organizational analysis framework, guided by a WOCAN consultant. In an effort to develop more and new leaders, PAKISAMA conducted gender sensitivity training sessions for around 200 women and 50 men farmer-members of PAKISAMA. Through it, PAKISAMA and LAKAMBINI hopes to develop a new line of women leaders who can be formed and trained for leadership positions at the national level as well as a new line of men leaders who support women's leadership in the organization.

The activities on gender mainstreaming and the leadership courses conducted during the first year of the Rural Women's Leadership Project have invigorated the women members of PAKISAMA. Currently, PAKISAMA has a strategic plan for gender mainstreaming which it constantly monitors. As PAKISAMA started its commodity cluster formation for some products (e.g. Philippine lemons) more women members began to take leadership positions in the various activities of the cluster. Some of the women members have started paralegal clinics to understand more of their rights to land as women farmers. As this is a two-year pilot project, PAKISAMA, together with WOCAN and AFA, will conduct a gender-responsive, outcome based evaluation of the Project in the last quarter of the year in order to gather lessons learned which can guide the further improvement of the Rural Women's Leadership Project.

How FOs can promote rural women's leadership

In February 2010, IFAD sponsored a Special Session on Promoting Women's Leadership in Farmers' and Rural Producers' Organizations. This session was attended by over 60 participants, including 35 women farmer representatives attending the Farmers' Forum,⁶ members of the Farmers' Forum Steering Committee,⁷ observers from NGOs and FAO and IFAD staff. Reading from its report, the following strategies can be used by FOs to promote rural women's leadership:

1. **Quotas for women's participation.** For FOs with both women and men members, it is

⁶ The Farmers' Forum is organized by IFAD every two years, participated by around 60 representatives of international and regional organizations of farmers, fishers and indigenous peoples.

⁷ The Steering Committee is composed of representatives from the participating international and regional organizations of farmers, fishers, pastoralists and indigenous people.

necessary to establish quotas for participation of women in all activities and leadership structures of the FOs. Quotas help to establish the necessary critical mass of women as members and leaders to bring about change in policy and institutional culture. Participants shared stories from their respective organizations where quotas (ranging from 30 to even 50 per cent) successfully increased women's participation. Quotas should be specified in the FOs statutes, planning and monitoring tools and systems.

2. **Own space and platform.** While quotas are necessary, these are not sufficient conditions for women to exercise leadership in FOs. Even in organizations that have a quota system, the concerns of women farmers may not be voiced strongly enough. In these cases it may be necessary to establish women-only committees as a place for women to gain confidence and a platform for women members to negotiate with the rest of the organization, external partners and institutions.
3. **Conduct gender sensitivity sessions for women, then to men, then to both women and men.** Both women and men may feel, and understand the impact of gender inequalities in the home, farm/workplace, and in society as a whole. However, it is necessary to conduct these gender sensitivity sessions to women first, as men tend to dominate discussions. Much of the particular issues that women farmers face are due to cultural, social, and traditional norms and stereotypes. It is important for women to be able to realize these. Their realizations will give them the power and inspiration to change their situation. As FOs are mostly led by men, these men leaders must understand and support gender equality. Thus, they need first to be sensitized to the gender dynamics and gender inequalities.
4. **Build and strengthen leadership of women and men supporting gender equality.** The current culture and modus operandi of many FOs, including current dominant leadership paradigms and styles, reflect masculine cultural norms, and this needs to change. Training sessions and a formation program on alternative leadership which incorporates good masculine and feminine qualities and traits can be implemented by FOs with both women and men leaders as participants. The leadership program should not be a one-shot deal, but should be a systematic re-programming of the culture and mindset of the person such that s/he grows to be more and more of a gender-sensitive /responsive leader who can transform structures and systems.
5. **Respond to both practical and strategic gender needs.** As leaders and members begin to be more gender sensitive, FOs can undertake projects that respond to practical and strategic gender needs of women. Activities and projects that meet their needs will motivate women farmers to organize themselves into collective action, separately or with men. Participants to the Special Session said the economic empowerment of women is an essential condition to advance the voice and leadership of women in FOs. Vital to economic empowerment is women's access to land and water resources, credit, alternative energy sources, technology, information and markets.
6. **Mainstream a gender perspective in all policies, programs, culture of the FOs.** As both women and men leaders of FOs increase their understanding and appreciation of gender equality, FOs can undertake an organizational analysis with a gender lens. The FOs can

analyze their technical (policies, tasks and responsibilities, expertise), socio-cultural (policy influence, decision-making, room for maneuver) and cultural (organizational culture, cooperation, attitude) dimensions of the organization. After careful analyses, FOs can then make a plan to mainstream a gender perspective in all these aspects.

7. **Conduct capacity building and training programs that put women farmers at the center.** Participants to the Special Session see organizational development and capacity building endeavors as the glue that holds together efforts to promote women's leadership in FOs. Various types of capacity building were identified as being needed. Women need access to the latest technological information regarding agriculture, production and coping with climate change, as well as information technologies to access this information. They need to acquire entrepreneurial and marketing skills; confidence building; leadership skills; and the ability to negotiate and discuss with authorities. They also need to understand the policy issues that affect them as farmers. More specifically:
 - a. training should be targeted and decentralized so that women can be empowered to carry out their own training.
 - b. capacity building should include exchange visits, farmer to farmer exchanges, and visits to research institutions and high schools.
 - c. FOs must be flexible and take into account women's time constraints, especially those of mothers of small children, and in general, the household dynamics that affect their participation dynamics.
 - d. day care facilities must be created to enable women to participate in training, and thus to fulfill their roles as professionals, take on greater leadership roles within their organizations, and focus more on creating profit from their work. Their cost should be incorporated into the training activities that may be funded by donors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Governments and development agencies can create more appropriate and sustainable agriculture and rural development policies and programmes, to identify and benefit small and poor women farmers more effectively, by targeting women farmers' needs and then by working with, supporting and involving women leaders in both women-only and mixed-membership FOs in the planning and implementation of agricultural and rural policies and programmes.
2. Governments and development agencies can institutionalise mechanisms to effectively involve leaders of women farmers' organizations in agricultural and rural policy making, implementation, and assessment as well as in agricultural research and development, through various affirmative action such as quotas, women-only consultations, and women-friendly logistics (e.g. conference venue with day care facilities).
3. Governments can enact appropriate legislation and regulatory frameworks to ensure FOs

enjoy the right and freedom to operate independently, with particular incentives for rural women to organize themselves.

4. Economic empowerment is the critical precondition for women to play a strong leadership role in farmers' organizations. Thus, governments and development institutions can encourage mixed FOs to promote women's leadership when they enter into partnerships on projects along this line. They can support the development and improvement of FOs through capacity-building assistance and financial services so that they can undertake programs and activities to help promote rural women's leadership. Development agencies, governments, employers and workers can assist FOs with capacity-building efforts to train women members in business skills, accounting and financial administration, information technology, planning and management as well as organizational leadership to represent their FOs in various policy fora. Training could tackle other areas that need improvement including transparency, democracy and accountability. Funds could be provided for this purpose, but the identification of training needs and definition of the training programmes' content must be conducted with a very strong and meaningful involvement of women farmers themselves.
5. Knowledge, information and technologies can reach women farmers at the grassroots level more effectively if agricultural research and extension institutions involve them proactively (e.g. increase of women agricultural extension agents and gender-sensitive male agricultural extension agents).