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FOOD: Women Farmers are Invisible Actors in Hunger Drama

By Erwin Northoff ()*

ROME, Oct 11 (IPS) - Women shoulder more and more of the burden of providing food in many parts of the world as they plant, plough, harvest and fish, gather fuelwood, fetch water, cook, breastfeed, and sell foodstuff.

But although they are the main actors in feeding the world and fighting hunger and malnutrition, most of their work is unpaid or grossly underpaid and they have little or no access to land, credit, training and technology.

Far too little attention is paid to alleviating women's drudgery in rural areas, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned on the occasion of World Food Day, 16 October 1998.

The theme of this year's World Food Day and FAO's international television campaign TELEFOOD is 'Women Feed the World' - a reminder to governments and the international community that the situation of women in rural areas needs to be improved to ensure food security and reduce the number of undernourished people - now 800 million.

On a global scale, women cultivate more than half of all the food that is grown. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, they produce up to 80 percent of basic

foodstuffs. In Asia, they account for around 50 percent of food production. In Latin America, they are mainly engaged in subsistence farming, horticulture, poultry and raising small livestock.

In countries in transition, the proportion of rural women working in agriculture ranges from about a third in Bosnia and Herzegovina to more than half in Poland. In some parts of the world the role of women in agriculture has become increasingly dominant as men are forced to leave their homes in search of jobs and income in towns and cities. This new trend, called the 'feminization of agriculture', is most accentuated in sub-Saharan Africa where the male population in rural areas is falling rapidly and women are now forming the majority of smallholder farmers. Women head approximately one third of rural households today, according to the FAO.

While the dominance of women in rural areas is evident, policy-makers, planners and extension officials often behave as if women did not exist, as if the situation and needs of all farmers were the same, whether they are men or women.

"Development policymakers are becoming increasingly aware of the crucial contribution of women farmers to food security," said Sissel Ekaas, Director of the FAO Women and Population Division. "Nevertheless 'gender blindness' prevails and agricultural policies on the whole still do not address the needs of women farmers adequately."

Studies have shown that when women farmers have access to resources such as land, credit, technology training and marketing, they are more productive than men farmers. But the world's primary food producers have generally less access to resources than men. Ms. Ekaas listed the reasons for this: 'gender-blind' development policies, discriminatory legislation, traditions and attitudes, lack of access of women to decision-making processes.

Without secure land rights, women are often denied access to credit or the benefits of membership in co-operatives and farmers associations. Land ownership titles, however, are mostly given to the male head of household. For example, less than 10 percent of women farmers in India, Nepal and Thailand

own land. Similarly, in Latin America agrarian reform programmes tend to give land titles to men.

Without secure land rights, women farmers find it difficult to obtain financial support from banks. Land is usually required as collateral for loans and credit schemes, and loans are often channelled through rural organizations to their members. Membership is often limited to the head of household. "This is a serious obstacle to women farmers and their productivity," Ekaas said.

Without credit, women farmers cannot buy inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and better technology, or hire workers. An analysis of credit schemes in Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Zambia and Zimbabwe found that women received less than 10 percent of the credit awarded to smallholders and one percent of the total amount of the credit directed to agriculture. In Jamaica, women account for only five percent of loans granted by the Agricultural Credit Bank.

Ironically, numerous studies have suggested that women may be more reliable than men in repaying their debts.

"Where they are the main food producers, women should also be a priority target of extension and training initiatives," Ekaas said. However, it is common practice to direct extension and training services primarily to men in most places.

An FAO study showed that female farmers receive only five percent of all agricultural extension services worldwide and that only around 15 percent of the extension agents are women. In Egypt, women account for 53 percent of agricultural labour but only one per