

Role of Women in Pump Irrigation in North East Thailand

Five selected pumping schemes in Northeast Thailand were part of the Mekong Irrigation Programme, implemented during 1985-1991. The main objective of this Programme was to increase agricultural production. Women play a significant part in crop production even though many young women migrate to cities for off-farm work. Once women are married, their off-farm work decreases and they assume major roles in regular farming activities. Women are also responsible for household work and often engage in craft production. Even though the income women gain in craft production may be minimal, it serves an important purpose in reducing the uncertainties of crop production.

The impact of the increase in irrigated crop production has led to an increase in the workload for women, in exchange for which there is a more stable production of rice. Some women now perform their traditional dry-season activities, like weaving, at night. The introduction of pump irrigation has improved the water situation in the dry season through a higher water level. More water is now available for growing vegetables for domestic use, as well as for the market.

Farmers of the pump irrigation systems are organized in Water Users' Groups (WUGs). These groups decide on the water allocation schedule, collect water fees and organize canal maintenance. These WUGs are informal groups, with no legal entity. Once a WUG has established itself as a legal cooperative, it is called a Water User Cooperative (WUC) and the group becomes a legal entity. This status allows better access to credit. The formalization of WUGs into WUCs has reduced the number of female members, because only one member of each household can represent the household. In most cases, male farmers, who are considered the heads of the household, take up membership.

A conclusion of this experience is that formalization of organizations may inadvertently exclude women from participating in group meetings and management activities. Therefore, attempts to improve the effectiveness of farmers' organizations should consider women's needs and opinions as well as men's.

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