

## Participatory Management: Who participates?

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The Gender Program of the International Irrigation Management Institute (IIMI) is currently undertaking a study which examines, among other things, some of the constraints to female participation in Farmer Organizations. To this end, IIMI's Gender Program is conducting detailed field studies in three sites - Rajangane, Mahaweli System II and Gampola Raja Ela- which were chosen to include the three Participatory Management Programs which are currently being implemented in Sri Lanka: Management of Irrigation Schemes (MANIS), Integrated Management of Major Irrigation Schemes (INMAS) and Mahaweli. Some first findings of these studies will be presented here.

The success of all three Participatory Management Programs in Sri Lanka stands or falls with the development of strong and competent Farmer Organizations (FOs). FOs are expected to assume part of the responsibilities and costs of operating and maintaining irrigation infrastructures, in return for which they should get a better, more reliable and more equitable access to irrigation water. The question this brief article aims to address is to what extent strong FOs, which represent the needs and interests of the main end users of irrigation services, can be expected to emerge when women are inadvertently excluded from participation.

### **1. What are the constraints to female participation in FOs?**

In all of the three irrigation systems under study, there is limited participation of women in FOs. Membership of and participation in FOs is confined to just one member of every irrigating household, and when there is a man in the household he will most often be the one to participate. Although family members are usually allowed to represent the landholder at FO meetings, in practice women rarely represent their male relatives. Women who do not have a man (husband or son) in the household sometimes do participate, but their participation in meetings is often less active than that of men. Female participants in meetings have been observed often to remain silent. The exceptional women who are actively involved in FOs are women who have already gained some status in the community, through relations or through a reputation for hard work in other community organizations. Usually these women are older, they have grown-up children and are less burdened with household tasks.

The main reason for the absence of women as active participants in FOs is that the legal recognition of irrigator status tends to be reserved for men, except in those cases where women are heads of households. Participation in users' organizations is often confined to persons holding landtitles, having official irrigator's status or to "the head of the household". All three qualifications far more often apply to men than to women.

In Sri Lanka, the question of who should be the members of FOs has hardly been given any thought. It has been automatically assumed that the "farmers" who are to form the FOs are men, since both farming and irrigation are conceived as all-male affairs. Training and awareness building programs are usually directed solely at male farmers. Women only come into the picture as "helpers of their husbands", irrespective of how much time and other resources women actually devote to irrigation and irrigated agriculture and despite of a growing body of literature documenting the important roles of women in irrigation systems in Sri Lanka (e.g. Lund, 1978, Schrijvers 1986, Kumar 1990, Rajapakse, 1989, IIMI, 1992).

Another reason for low female involvement in FOs may be that organizations like FOs are projected as public organizations which are associated with male roles rather than with female roles. Very few of the women without male members in the household, who officially are members of FOs, do attend meetings and when they do they often remain rather passive. The fact that FOs are dominated by men in itself may pose a barrier to women to participate in a more active manner, as they are seen to be participating in other community organizations.

## **2. Who are the main users of irrigation systems?**

When FOs are to be organizations which adequately represent and address the needs and interests of the main end users of irrigation services, then all the main end users should be involved in FOs.

Implicit exclusion of women as FO members can thus only be justified on the grounds that (1) women cannot be considered users of irrigation systems or that (2) decisions made by men adequately reflect an intra-household consensus.

The studies show that, especially in the Dry Zone irrigation systems, women are involved in many tasks in irrigated agriculture. Also in the Dry Zone, a relatively large number of households (20% or more) are headed by women, who therefore are solely responsible for all household and agricultural activities. In male headed households, at the household level women also assume a large share of the farming responsibilities; not only by working in the fields but also by mobilizing "attam" (labor sharing) groups, supervising hired laborers, managing agriculture related family enterprises and by organizing finance for agricultural purposes from various sources. Financial management of household and farming activities is often seen to be handled by wives and daughters. Many women perceive one of their roles as needing to ensure financial and food security, especially in times of stress.

Female tasks and responsibilities are quite distinct from those of men, although many tasks are carried out by women as well as men. Although the amount of time women and men dedicate to activities related to irrigation and irrigated agriculture vary with the economic status of a household, on average women spend as much or more of their time

to irrigation related tasks as men. Women are even involved in tasks that are traditionally thought of as strictly male; in Rajangane and in System H of the Mahaweli women can for example be found levelling, making bunds and irrigating. Traditionally women were constrained from entering the threshing floor due to ideas of ritual pollution - nowadays, in the Dry Zone, because of economic necessity, women do undertake work related to threshing.

**As** a result of the policy emphasis on Other Field Crops (OFCs), the participation of women in irrigated agriculture has dramatically increased. In the study sites, the major responsibility for OFC cultivation is with women. Both male and female farmers accept that OFC cultivation depends for a large extent on women.

Contrary to common belief, preliminary observations also show that women are actively involved in on-farm water management. Those wives and daughters who are heavily involved in irrigated agriculture discuss with neighboring farmers about water rotation schedules. Interviews with men and women seem to indicate that women are more concerned about equity of water distribution than men. Women explain this by stating that "it is difficult to live with a neighbors' poverty". Many women also actively participate in canal clearing and desilting operations carried out by FOs as part of ongoing maintenance of irrigation systems.

In the Dry Zone irrigation systems under study, it is found that there are many households where women are forced to take on more farming responsibilities because of the high rate of alcohol consumption by male household members. It is estimated that at least 30% of the men in Rajangane and System H of the Mahaweli are heavy users of alcohol. On the one hand, alcoholism can be seen as an indicator of problems of poverty and distress. On the other hand, alcoholism is a serious drain on a household's labor and financial resources, creating problems which remain to be resolved by women.

The fact that men and women have distinct responsibilities with respect to irrigated agriculture implies that women have specific knowledge about irrigated agriculture and specific needs with respect to irrigation. This in itself would justify some sort of female involvement in FOs, unless of course men do adequately represent women's concerns at meetings. The field data do not support such a hypothesis. Although there are some farming couples who make most of the farming decisions together, in many households men and women have different objectives and perspectives.

When asked directly, both men and women have a tendency to point at the men as the main provider and decision maker. However, this seems to reflect cultural desirability rather than actual practice. In quite a number of households, women are much more aware about the financial aspects of farming and many women are the ones who try to economize. Women, even those from very poor families, try to have some savings which they often conceal from their husbands, to be used in emergencies such as illness.

### **3. Do women want to become FO members?**

When asked directly whether or not they would like to become more actively involved in FOs, some women (both those with husbands, as well as those without husbands) reply that they do not see the need to participate. This does not so much indicate a lack of interest by women in irrigation related matters, as it is the outcome of their assessment of the costs and benefits of FO participation. Some FOs are still in the development stage, and with a few exceptions the real benefits of FOs are not yet very clear to most of the people involved. The enthusiasm of both men and women with respect to ideas of Participatory Management is dictated by what they perceive as the level of responsiveness of the FO to their problems. Some women for example state that they do not have the time, or that the family budget cannot afford the loss of wages entailed by participation in the FO.

In Gampola Raja Ela, a MANIS system, most people are hardly aware of the Participatory Management Program. Here, the basic reason for many men to become members of FOs is the prospect of involvement in construction work connected with the ongoing irrigation rehabilitation program. In Rajangane and Mahaweli System H, most men and women have some idea about what the objectives of FOs are, and most are quite positive about it. However, many consider the costs of participation to be high. In System H of the Mahaweli, groups of people organize themselves and assign some representatives to attend meetings, instead of all of them going. Many women, when asked, say that they usually ask their husbands, neighbors or relatives to tell them about what happened at meetings. This is why many women do not feel a need to actually attend FO meetings themselves, especially in view of their numerous domestic and productive tasks. If women have any problem they want to bring to the attention of irrigation officials, they usually try to request an FO office bearer to represent matters at the FO meeting. Alternatively, women try to meet directly with officials: according to one of the Mahaweli Economic Agency officers interviewed, most of the complaints and problems brought to him for action are presented to him by women.

Women and men appear to perceive the FOs in a slightly different way. Although both of them are happy with the official recognition gained through involvement in FOs, most women expect that membership of FOs will improve communication with the irrigation officials. They anticipate that this in turn may help them to quickly find solutions to problems related to irrigated agriculture. Men have a tendency to associate FOs with other public organizations, and define their own involvement as "doing a social service to the community". In addition to expecting FOs to be a problem solving mechanism, many male office bearers are also concerned about their increased social and political status associated with their position in the FO.

Most women find it hard to picture themselves as active participants in FOs, though some female landholders resented their little involvement by wryly commenting that they are only asked to "work for shramadanas and provide tea and kiribath". Although there are

a few examples of very active women working as FO office bearers at both Field Canal and Distributary Canal Level, most women tend to consider FO matters as belonging to the male domain. The high involvement of women in other community organizations, such as Funeral Assistance Societies, Sanasa groups and *seettu* groups (informal saving groups), indicates that women are capable of and interested in assuming community responsibilities. Because of their limited time and resources, women in irrigation systems need to see a direct relevance of their involvement in organizations to the advancement of the family.

Although many of them are not directly involved, women are seen to be influencing FO decisions through discussions with men at the household level. For example, in the study areas, some wives of male office bearers were found to be the driving force behind their husband's involvement in the FO. Those women actively urge and support their husbands to assume their FO responsibilities, and often they help their husbands with whatever administrative or organizational work that needs to be done as a result of his position in the FO. However, in cases where the benefits of FO involvement are not directly apparent, wives perceive their husband's FO involvement as a barrier to the economic advancement of the family and try their utmost to limit the time spent by their husbands on FO activities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The intensive observations of the Gender and irrigation study have served to highlight several areas regarding women's roles and involvement in irrigated agriculture which have hitherto remained invisible.

**As** a result of confining membership of and involvement in FOs to men the flow of information and other services to and from irrigation agencies is mediated through male farmers. This reflects the implicit idea that decisions made by men adequately represent an intra-household consensus. The study shows that this is not always the case; women and men, because of their distinct roles and responsibilities within the household, have different ideas, interests and needs.

Irrigation, irrigated agriculture and irrigation management tend to be thought of as all male affairs. The study shows that this is an inaccurate perception of the reality in irrigation systems. Because of their high involvement in field activities as well as decisionmaking, women as well as men can and should be considered an interest group in irrigation systems.

Without actively promoting and facilitating women's involvement in FOs, women risk to become marginalized from decision making processes that directly affect them and their families. At the same time, the process of Participatory Management could benefit from the specific knowledge of women about irrigated agriculture and capitalize on their recognized community roles and experiences as managers.

In order to optimize agricultural production and to ensure that the potential success of Participatory Management is fully realized, factors constraining female participation in FOs need to be addressed. The inadvertent projection of FOs as predominantly male organizations has made women feel, even when they do sometimes attend meetings, diffident about their participation. FOs need to be perceived as community based organizations which are responsive to the needs and requirements of all stakeholders, irrespective of gender. Training and awareness programs should be geared at helping women to better understand and share in the potential benefits of FO involvement. What is needed is a genuine commitment and a focussed effort to make women's participation a reality in the planning and implementation of Participatory Management Programs.

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