

The power of knowledge lifts women farmers to centre stage

Seasonal migration off-farm by men is leaving women in charge of farms, which is challenging providers of agricultural development aid

BY GIO BRAIDOTTI

When husbands and sons from smallholder rice farms in Asia are driven by poverty to migrate in search of work, the task of producing food as well as caring for the family acquires challenging new dynamics. Asian social scientists believe off-farm migration is quietly reweaving the social fabric of rural communities. For women in particular, male migration has meant more fluid gender roles as wives take over managing the farm and supplying the family with leadership, experience and labour.

Concerned that donors and governments need to understand and match these social upheavals and innovations, ACIAR has funded collaborative research efforts to understand the impacts. The goal is to make adjustments that ensure appropriate resources, agronomic information, and support reach the women heads of households. ACIAR has also brought Australian R&D resources into this project through the participation of Dr Fay Rola-Rubzen at the Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia.

Heading the project is Dr Thelma Paris, senior scientist (socioeconomist and gender specialist) at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines. Prior to the project she collaborated with Ms Truong Thi Ngoc Chi at Vietnam's Cu Ulong Delta Rice Research Institute to compile a series of case studies. These explored the experiences of rice-producing Vietnamese women in the face of male migration. The results provided the impetus for a broader, expanded program throughout the Lower Mekong Basin and the Philippines that saw the additional involvement of Dr Chai Wongsanum, a Thai extension specialist who is introducing farmers to liquid bio-fertiliser, and Ms Joyce Luis from the Philippines who trained

women on improved seed health.

"During these interviews, we encountered women who cried due to their problems," Ms Chi says. "They are facing increased workloads, loneliness, emotional insecurity, worries and the pressure of managing their farms in addition to caring for their families. They felt alone and without support."

The stresses faced by women ranged across agronomic, social and family issues. The research identified a lack of access to new rice varieties, difficulties in disciplining children, fears about thieves, drunks, and "bad men" who might exploit a husband's absence. The safety of the absent family member was another source of worry, especially given migration to urban environments with their ready presence of alcohol, other women and diseases. "The wives can come to feel lonely, abandoned, and depressed due to the physical separation," Ms Chi says. "It clearly impacts on their health."

Surveying in 1999 helped disclose the extent of families affected by male migration from rural communities, which is estimated at about 70% in Thailand, 57% in the Philippines and 49% in Vietnam. Wherever it occurs, females assume the role of head of the household and farm. Entrenched gender roles, however, can mean that the women were not previously trained in modern farming practices.

"Despite the long-standing involvement of poor Asian women in rice production, they are not considered 'farmers' in their own right, leading to gender inequity in access to resources and opportunities," Dr Paris says. "Most often, plant breeders and other scientists talk to men only, neglecting women's indigenous knowledge and their potential roles as agents of change."

That the women have genuine farming experience and reserves of know-how is made abundantly clear by an extraordinary finding: farm production by female-headed



PHOTO: BRAD COLLIS

Dr Thelma Paris, a social scientist with the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

PARTNER COUNTRIES: the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam

PROJECT/DESCRIPTION: PLIA/2000/039: Impact of migration and off-farm employment on roles of women and appropriate technologies

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households affected by migration does not differ greatly from households unaffected by migration.

"The women obtain information from their relatives, friends and neighbours because they are rarely given training on agriculture and they are rarely included in extension programs," Dr Paris says. "One of the reasons for their non-participation is due to scheduling clashes between extension activities and the need to take care of households, children and farm jobs."

The ACIAR project has set about addressing the gender bias, providing training programs that endeavour to reach all farmers, irrespective of sex. The scheduling of these activities is adjusted to take into consideration constraints on women's time.

Dr Paris recounts efforts on three agricultural fronts. There are new technologies targeting emerging problems such as drought, salinity and submergence. Efforts are also in place to ensure that

extension programs about increasing rice productivity reach women, including widows as well as those acting as heads of households. Then there is the provision of skill regarding pest management—reducing use of seeds, reducing fertiliser and reducing pesticides in Vietnam.

“In the ACIAR project, women engaged in managing farms were organised into groups and given new knowledge and skills on farm management,” Dr Paris says. “Awareness on the important roles of women in agriculture increased due to this training and women developed self esteem. As a group they were empowered to make sound and timely decisions in rice farming.”

Both Ms Chi and Dr Paris say that the farmers reached by the project have responded well to the challenge and are adopting the new seeds and the agronomic techniques provided by the ACIAR-funded training schemes.

“Now they are more outspoken in expressing their needs, such as seeking help from the government not to limit their loans due to the limited size of their landholdings,” Ms Chi says. “They want more opportunities to attend technical training programs and develop strong interaction with local extension or agricultural staff.”

Importantly, the women also want scientists and extension workers to listen to their ideas and consider their opinions in technology development and dissemination. One such idea is to develop employment opportunities within their village, negating the need for husbands and sons to migrate to wealthier rural or urban areas when seeking additional income.

The researchers experienced a sense of a renewed commitment to their work, demonstrating to the agricultural R&D establishment the power of social science and gender research to drive farming improvements side-by-side with the more traditional technical R&D programs.

Ms Chi adds that she is still perplexed why discrimination against women still exists in Vietnam’s society.

As educated women they understand that knowledge is power—the kind that can make women left behind by male migrants effective farm managers, capable of translating increased productivity to improvements in income and household welfare. ■

Refining communication as a tool for social change

BY ELSKE VAN DE FLIERT*

Agricultural aid can make meaningful improvements at the farm and community level, yet novel ideas that work in scientific trials do not necessarily offer the same potential on-farm. Crucial to success is an effective communication approach that is responsive to the agro-ecological, socioeconomic and cultural factors that can influence the outcome of technology transfer during an agricultural development program.

This issue is being examined in its own right in an ACIAR-supported project that is seeking to maximise outcomes for Vietnam’s ethnic minority communities participating in agricultural programs.

Vietnam has been one of the fastest growing economies in the world, with an average annual GDP growth of about 7.5%, and agricultural development has contributed largely to this growth. For instance, Vietnam is now one of the largest rice exporters in the world, just 20 years after being a net importer.

Vietnam’s Agricultural Science and Technology system—which covers research, extension, education, specialised government agencies, and mass organisations—has significantly aided this growth. It has particularly helped farmers in the lowlands, where the largest potential for growth lies and the greatest impacts have been achieved.

The picture changes in Vietnam’s remote highlands, which are predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities, 75% of which fall below the international poverty line, compared with 31% of the Kinh majority. The remoteness, ethnocentricity, language and cultural barriers all contribute to a difficulty in communicating in ways that hinder research and extension, as well as making it difficult for these communities to articulate their farming needs and constraints.

To address the communication issues faced by crop protection researchers and extension officers in the Central Highlands, ACIAR supported the University of Queensland (UQ) and the Vietnam Plant Protection Research Institute (PPRI) to conduct a small project in 2007.

An exploratory field study in seven ethnic minority communities in Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces revealed that little more than a third of the respondents felt comfortable communicating in Vietnamese, despite the large majority having attained several years of formal education. Interestingly, commune leaders tended to assess their members as being more proficient in Vietnamese than the members did themselves and, as a result, many commune leaders used Vietnamese when communicating to them, but they too are often

dealing with a mix of ethnic groups.

Community members, however, complained that language is one of the constraints in dealing with the government, in addition to long distances and difficulties in gaining access to government officials.

Farmers expressed a strong need for information, particularly about fertilising and pest management practices. Most farmers reported that they have never or seldom met an extension officer. Their main sources of information are fellow farmers and agricultural input retailers. They also expressed a concern about their limited access to market information, as a result of which they often under-price their produce.

In an initial attempt to build communication bridges between R&D practitioners and ethnic minority communities, 25 staff from several research institutes, a university and the provincial extension service in Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces joined a training workshop.

The workshop aimed to improve the skills of the participants to effectively target their research and extension efforts towards these communities. This was done by raising awareness about contextual aspects of rural highland conditions and ethnic minority culture, and building skills in ‘participatory communication’. Participants also explored how they could incorporate these new skills and knowledge in their current work and follow-up activities.

Overall, the project has highlighted that setting research agendas, as well as testing or adapting innovations and evaluating impacts should be done with the specific communities, using their criteria for improvement, in order to bring about meaningful change.

A subsequent project is being developed in the north-west highlands of Vietnam that will assist to identify the needs, opportunities and challenges for agricultural research and development in this region. The proposed study will investigate the constraints and potentials for improvement of the agricultural sector, including enterprise diversity, crop and livestock production systems, and marketing mechanisms. This will provide input for agricultural research activities such as the ethnic minority women farmers and native vegetables project.

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