



Increasing food production in Africa depends on women's participation, says Marie-Angélique Savané, President of AFARD.

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IDRC-F102e

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*A monthly features service on
scientific, technical, and
educational subjects pertinent
to development.*

Words: 1125 approx.

WOMEN, KEYS TO AFRICA'S FOOD PRODUCTION

by JEAN-MARC FLEURY

Marie-Angélique Savané recalls how experts came to her village to teach the men how to grow rice. The only problem was that, in the Casamance region of Senegal, it is women, not men, who usually work in the rice fields.

Today Mrs Savané wants to come to grips with a situation that made her smile as a child, and is devoting her full time to improving the condition of women in Africa. In Senegal and several other Francophone African countries, people stop her on the street, recognizing her as the Editor-in-Chief of the West African magazine Famille et Développement. But Marie-Angélique Savané is no longer with this well-known family education publication; she is now President of the Association of African Women for Development Research (AFARD), an organization whose members are striving to involve African women more closely in the development process.

One of Mrs Savané's main concerns is the effect of agricultural modernization on women. "The new machines", says the President of AFARD, "are used primarily in the fields where export crops are grown. Thanks to mechanization, the acreage devoted to these crops is increasing." Yet women, who are responsible for farming the small fields that produce food for their families, continue to use traditional, rudimentary implements. "When they must, in addition, help the men in the enlarged fields, their work is doubled or even tripled," adds Mrs Savané, "and since the family food crops continue to be almost exclusively the women's responsibility, agricultural

modernization leads them to neglect their own fields." In countries where there are large plantations, such as the Ivory Coast, this situation is even more serious, because, as Mrs Savané points out, the women help the men on the plantations but must work their own fields alone.

The fact that the husband can count on the unpaid work of his wife -- or wives -- to feed him and his children has economic consequences that the President of AFARD has studied in depth. She explains: "The price of a kilogram of peanuts sold for export is not set according to what is needed to support the family. In developed countries, the employer must pay wages that are sufficient, not only for the worker's own needs, but also for those of his family. In Third World countries, the cost of maintaining the labour force is not included in production costs because the woman produces food for the whole family. This is why farm products bring very high profits for those who deal in them." This situation exists in many developing countries. In the Philippines, for example, studies have shown that 70 percent of the women working on farms are unpaid.

The African woman does not only play a primary role in food production: she is also often responsible for storing and processing the grains and legumes. Her role in the postharvest sector is particularly obvious at the grain milling stage, an arduous task requiring long hours of work. A family consumes an average of five kilograms of grain a day, and a woman can grind only about two kilograms an hour.

Since many women have the right to use income from their "surplus" food crops as they see fit -- even if such income also eventually goes to meet family needs -- they have been encouraged to increase their production. Village women have coordinated their efforts to grow more vegetables for sale in the towns and cities. Many have invested their meagre resources in tools, seeds and fertilizer, and some have stepped up their efforts to obtain more water for their crops. Unfortunately, only after harvesting did many realize that they had no means of transporting these perishable goods to market. Their work had been in vain. According to Mrs Savané, other women built henhouses, but because this doubled their water requirements, they made little

or no profit in the end. She talks about these experiences and many others to the groups she meets to encourage women to use more foresight in organizing their activities in order to prevent them from undertaking unrealistic projects that will only increase their workload.

There are, however, practical ways to assist women farmers. The exhausting task of threshing millet, for example, can be done mechanically although the close cooperation of the community must be obtained when the thresher is introduced. A large mill might produce too much flour, and the women would then be faced with a storage problem. The mill also puts an end to an important social activity -- the women's daily meeting around their mortars. On the other hand, the time thus gained can be devoted to other useful purposes. The installation of wells and water-supply systems would do away with the arduous task of carrying water and, according to most of the women surveyed, would result in increased production of marketable vegetables. Here again, the new equipment must be introduced in such a way that the community assumes responsibility for maintenance and cleanliness.

The African woman's determination and will are unquestionable: she feeds an entire continent. Moved to compassion by her predicament, national and international organizations have initiated various aid programs to improve her lot. If many of these have failed, says Mrs Savané, it is because organizations have often responded to requests made by women from well-to-do backgrounds. In other instances programs have tried to respond to unrealistic desires. Mrs Savané cites the literacy programs requested by women as an example: "They thought that by learning to write they would automatically get jobs with the government."

If we really want to help African women, explains Mrs Savané, we must begin by financing projects that will make their daily tasks easier: install mills, dig wells, organize child care centres and provide farm tools and simple carts for carrying water. Women's aid programs must absolutely be channelled through existing structures, either the rural community workers, as in Senegal, or local women's organizations which exist nearly everywhere. In Dakar, where Mrs Savané lives, women establish common funds called "tontines" which serve to buy gifts for one of their group, assist those who are ill, or purchase

essential tools. Existing structures of this type provide the easiest, most practical way of launching projects such as day care centres, and farming or handicraft production programs.

The President of AFARD maintains that while the condition of the African woman in itself justifies assistance programs specifically designed for her, the major role she plays in such key areas as farming, food production, health and population control should entitle her to become a full partner in all development efforts. In rural areas, particularly, it is totally unrealistic to talk about development without involving her. "With all due respect to the experts," says Marie-Angélique Savané, "increasing food crop production depends on women."

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IDRC-F102e

March 1979