

**THE ROLES AND ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN IN THE SIX SELECTED AGRICULTURAL PROJECTS IN THULAMELA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY OF VHEMBE DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY IN THE LIMPOPO PROVINCE.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Understanding the roles of women in agriculture and planning programs relevant to their roles and needs is a prerequisite for the success of agricultural development programs. This study is about the roles and activities of women in the agricultural economy in the six selected agricultural projects relating to their responsibilities in food production, food processing and distribution and secondly, the study looks at the extent of their involvement or participation in farming and decision-making. The problem investigated was the insufficient focus on women's roles and their activities in agricultural production by the Department of Agriculture of Limpopo Province. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from a randomly selected sample of 100 women. Other primary data was obtained from another randomly selected sample of 137 farmers, that is, male (71) and female (66) farmers who formed different focus group discussions. This resulted in a random sample of 237 respondents for the study. Key informants interviews and transact walks were used to collect other primary data. Secondary data was obtained from literature. Data was compiled by using D Base Program and analysed using the Statistical Package of Social Science Program. The study results showed that women are major contributors to agriculture and play a primary role in ensuring the food security and nutritional status of their household members. Their level of participation and involvement both in terms of time and number of days they spend doing farm work exceed that of men. They have absolute freedom indecision-making. The battle for food security in the study areas can be won only if the invaluable contribution made by women is recognized, their potential as farmers can be developed and they be involved in decision-making processes.*

**Key words:** roles and activities, agriculture, food security, household livelihood.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Seventy – five per cent (75%) of the world's poor live in rural areas, and most are involved in farming (World Bank, FAO & IFAD, 2009). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, agriculture remains fundamental to economic growth, poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability (ibid). According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (2009), three out of every four poor people in developing countries live in rural areas, and most of them depend directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihoods. In many parts of the world women are the main farmers or producers, but their roles remain largely unrecognized.

The 2008 *World Development Report: Agriculture for development* (World Bank et al, 2009) highlights the vital role of agriculture in sustainable development and its importance in achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving by 2015 the share of people

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suffering from extreme poverty and hunger. Climatic change and rising food prices are reminders of the need to focus on food security and agriculture for development. Accounting for different gender roles and equity to practical resources and opportunities is a necessary condition for doing so.

Recognizing the role of gender equality, key development organizations have engaged in a process of mainstreaming gender into agricultural development. The World Bank and FAO for example, have made some progress in their gender – mainstreaming strategies and have recently embarked on more action –oriented process of gender integration (FAO, 2007; World Bank, 2006, 2008).

Gender issues must be addressed in development. First, gender dimension is crucial for economic reasons and from the efficiency point of view. This is especially true in the agricultural sector, where gender inequalities in access to and control over resources are persistent, undermining a sustainable and inclusive development of the sector. Second, equity or distributional issues are related to gender differences in outcomes, where gender differences, denotes a socially constructed relationship between men and women (Reddy and Moletsane, 2009). Gender differences affect the distribution of resources between men and women and cause many disparities in development outcomes. Third, gender roles and relations affect food security and household welfare, critical indicators of human development. Last but not least, gender equality is a basic human right, one that has value in and of itself.

Significant gender inequality can be found in people's access to other key productive assets and services: land, labour, financial services, water, rural infrastructure, technology and other inputs. Available evidence indicates that the distribution of land ownership is heavily skewed towards men (Deer and Leon, 2003; Doss, 2005). Where government investment programs overlook the significant contributions and differential roles of women in development, food security and poverty increases. Gender inequalities limit agricultural productivity and efficiency and in so doing, undermine development agenda. Failure to recognize the different roles of men and women is costly because it results in misguided projects and programs, forgone agricultural output and incomes and food and nutrition insecurity.

If sustainable agricultural development is to be translated into food and nutrition security, then the active engagement of women is absolutely necessary. Women also have the right to be equal partners in the agricultural sector. In South Africa (Integrated Food Security Strategy), the government calls for a rights-based approach to food security that includes gender equity. Public policies, written from a human rights perspective, recognize the interrelations of all basic rights and assist in the identification of those whose rights are not fully realized. In this way they facilitate corrective action and appropriate strategies to enable equal protection for all. Equal representation and active engagement of both women and men in the policy making processes are required so that their varying needs and priorities are appropriately targeted (World Bank et al, 2009).

It is time to take into account the role of women in agricultural production and to increase concerted efforts to enable women to move beyond production for subsistence to higher-value market-oriented production. This study is a step forward to mainstream women in agricultural development. It focuses on critical roles of women in agriculture, household and food security, in particular, the extent to which rural women are integrated into agricultural production processes. The activities of women in the agricultural economy are

reviewed, examining their involvement and participation in order to indicate the extent to which women are integrated into or by-passed by government interventions.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to a greater understanding of the roles women and men play in the different stages of agriculture and to determine the extent of government support dedicated to women development. The study looks at what men and women are doing and what effect this has on their livelihood options. The study also investigates intensively the activities of women in the agricultural economy, examining their involvement and/or participation in order to indicate the extent to which women are integrated into agricultural processes. Whilst housework and child care are recognized as extremely important, they are not looked at here in great detail as the focus is on production.

The aim of this study is specially to promote the concept and practice of women participation in agricultural development activities. It is the researcher's conviction that this study answers a plea, from persons with responsibilities for, and an interest in furthering development for concrete guidance on how to move in the promotion of women's participation in agricultural development. It is also the researcher's hope that this study will stimulate further efforts throughout the region enabling its women to participate actively in their own development.

There is considerable support for the view that development in this region has for too long benefited the few (men) and excluded the many (women). The means by which this trend would be reversed, it is argued, is a process of participation. There is an increasing support for the concepts of 'participation' and the term is now commonly added to existing terminologies to suggest a major change in emphasis.

It is seldom that women, particularly those in the disadvantaged areas, have an opportunity to make themselves heard. In this study, an effort has been made to give as much room as possible to the knowledge and experience of the involvement and participation of women in agricultural development. In recent years, there has been an enormous increase in studies about women and development but there is a strong feeling that most of these studies are only meant to be food for discussion among experts.

Achieving and maintaining women involvement and participation in development (agriculture in particular) has become one of the focal points in developing and developed countries. Until now, agricultural policies - whether oriented toward export production or local food production - have focused insufficiently on women and their activities. Policy makers do not take into account sufficiently the interests of women and this does not lead to their empowerment.

The motivation is therefore that the results of this and future studies should promote an understanding of gender and its relevance in the agricultural development processes; to promote awareness of issues related to women and development and, more specifically to women's role in agricultural production.

Although the focus of the present study is on the participation of women in agricultural production; a male perspective was also included in the methodological design as active role players within the family environment set up. The concept of gender analysis arose from the need to mainstream women's interests while at the same time acknowledging that women could not be treated as a homogeneous group.

This paper discusses the roles and wide range of activities of women in the six projects relating to their responsibilities in food production, food processing and distribution, and secondly, to show the extent of their involvement or participation in farming and decision-making.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Although the focus of the study was on the roles and activities of women in rural economy and or agricultural production; a male perspective was also included in the methodological design as active role players within the family environment (Table 1 below). A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data (both quantitative and qualitative) from a randomly selected sample of 100 women. The subpopulations (projects) vary considerably and therefore it was advantageous to sample each subpopulation (project). Then random sampling was applied within each project as indicated in Table 1, below.

**Table 1. The study sample size for respondents interviewed using the focus group discussions and a questionnaire, 2009 (N=237)**

Project	Farmers	M	%	F	%	Sample size focus group discussions				Sample size questionnaire	
						M	%	F	%	F	%
<b>Dzindi</b>	105	65	61.91	40	38.09	10	9.5	13	12.4	12	11.4
<b>Lambani</b>	111	51	45.95	60	54.05	13	11.7	12	10.8	35	31.5
<b>Malavuwe</b>	26	10	38.46	16	61.54	10	38.5	05	19.2	11	42.3
<b>Mulenzhe</b>	126	76	60.32	50	39.68	14	11.1	13	10.3	12	9.5
<b>Palmarvile</b>	60	39	65.00	21	35.00	12	20.0	11	18.3	10	16.7
<b>Tshiombo</b>	98	53	54.08	45	45.92	12	12.2	12	12.2	20	20.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>526</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>55.9</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>44.1</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>13.4</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>19.0</b>

Other primary data was obtained from another randomly selected sample of 137 farmers, that is, 71 male and 66 female farmers (Table 1 above) who formed different focus group discussions. This resulted in a random sample of 237 respondents for the study which included men and women from the six projects. Key informants interviews and transact were also used to collect primary data. Secondary data was obtained from literature. Data was compiled by using D Base Program and analysed using the Statistical Package of Social Science Program.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1 The roles and activities of women in agricultural economy

Women's participation in agriculture is a topic of major concern in most developing countries of the world. While it is true that traditionally women are mainly responsible for tasks around the home, there is enough evidence to support the fact that women also play a very important role in farming. Women make substantial contributions to food production even when they are secluded or involved in male-dominated farming systems. (Sender, 2002), (Jacana, 2006), (FAO, 2007), (Meijrink and Roza, 2007) and (Byene, 2008 ).The importance of women in agricultural production and nutrition lies in the fact that they are the ones responsible for determining the quantity and quality of the food available and ultimately determines what food reaches the table.

Many authors, including the FAO (2007), argue that the economic contribution of women is known to be substantial. Women produce more than half of the food in the developing world and as much as three-quarters of it in Africa. Women play a substantial role in the storage, processing, and marketing of food and cash crops, and they are often in charge of small livestock.

The purpose of this sub-section is, firstly, to discuss the wide range of activities of women in the six projects, relating to their responsibilities in food production, food processing and the distribution of food; and secondly, to show the extent of their involvement or participation in farming and decision-making.

### **3.1.1 Food production**

Current literature provides ample evidence of the assertion that women in Africa play a major role in the small-scale agricultural production of crops for home consumption and for sale purposes. In Africa, food production includes the pre-planting activities of land-clearing and hand-digging or ploughing, followed by planting the seeds and the cuttings, hoeing and weeding, deterring birds, controlling pests and harvesting. African women traditionally grow the basic root crop, kitchen vegetables and spices. They are also responsible for growing some of the more recent staple foods, such as rice and mealies (Reddy & Moletsane, 2009).

#### **3.1.1.1 Pre-planting activities**

It is clear from the information in Table 2 below that the women in the six project areas assume responsibility for many pre-planting activities, such as felling trees, levelling the soil with their hands and applying fertiliser. Their involvement in other activities, such as ploughing with oxen and levelling the land with oxen, varies significantly between projects. The use of oxen by women in agricultural production is still somewhat uncommon in the project areas. Table 2 shows that only a few respondents at Malavuwe, Mulenzhe and Tshiombo use oxen for levelling their fields, and only a small number (18%) of the respondents in the six projects use oxen for ploughing their fields in preparation for planting.

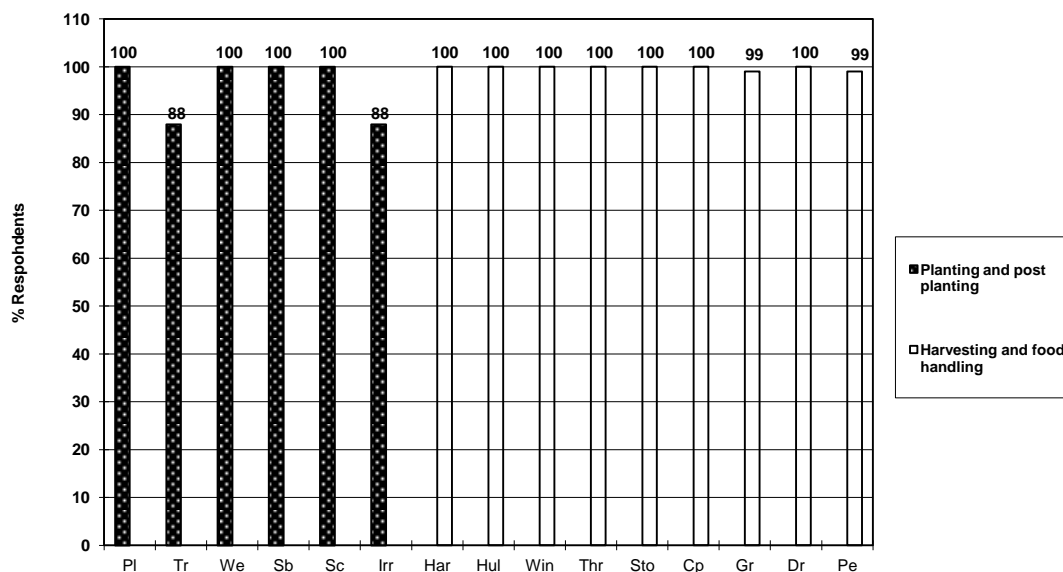
As expected of poverty stricken rural women, the levelling of seedbeds is done by hand. This applies to all the women at Dzindi, Lambani, Mulenzhe and Palmaryville, while it applies to 95% of the women at Tshiombo and 90.91 % of the women at Malavuwe. The conclusion here is that most of the women in the study areas have no access to any mechanical energy source other than their own physique. The main limiting factor in human-power technology is that it is a very inefficient system.

**Table 2. The frequency distribution of respondents in the six project areas according to the pre-planting activities they participate in (N = 100)**

Project areas	Pre-planting activities					Total
	Felling trees	Ploughing with oxen	Levelling with oxen	Levelling with hands	Fertiliser application	
	%	%	%	%	%	
Dzindi	41.67	58.33	0	100	100	100
Lambani	85.71	8.57	0	100	100	100
Malavuwe	100	27.27	36.36	90.91	100	100
Mulenzhe	100	33.33	33.33	100	100	100
Palmaryville	100	0	0	100	100	100
Tshiombo	100	5	25	95	100	100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.1.1.2 Planting and post-planting activities

According to Figure 1 below, 100% of the women in all the project areas participate in planting (P1), weeding (We), scaring birds (Sb), spraying crops (Sc), transplanting (Tr) and irrigation (Irr). Mulenzhe women do not transplant or irrigate, because their farming is of a dry land nature.



**Figure 1:** Frequency distribution of respondents according to the planting and post-planting processes as well as harvesting and food handling activities they participate in (N = 100)

### 3.1.1.3 Harvesting and food handling activities

As expected (Figure 1 above), all women in the study areas carry out almost all the harvesting (Hr) and food-handling activities, such as hulling (Hl), winnowing (Win), threshing (Thr), carrying produce (Cp), drying (Dr), storing produce (Sto), grading (Gr) and peeling (Pe). These women are always prepared to engage in these activities because they are subsistent farmers and therefore rely heavily on their farming produce for their livelihood.

### 3.1.1.4 Food processing and marketing

Women produce most of the food that is consumed in African homes. In addition to production, they prepare practically all of the food for the table and they play a major role in the harvesting and storage of the crops that they work so hard to produce (FAO, 2001). Women not only play a dominant role in food farming but an even more important role in the processing, storage and marketing of food crops. They are extensively involved in the processing and storage of food crops for family consumption. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (2001), the many activities required to process foodstuffs into edible or marketable form are traditionally women's responsibilities and almost entirely undertaken by female members of the household. It seems clear that in relation to these activities, women decide on the allocation of the time devoted to these endeavours and on the manner in which they are carried out.

According to the survey, all the respondents (100%) in the study areas participate in food-processing tasks such as milling or grinding cereals and drying vegetable leaves and cereals and they also complete a wide range of food preservation processes. The conclusion here is that women in the study areas do not only have the responsibility to provide food, but also to process and market it. The marketing of food and food products is virtually the only available way to raise the necessary capital for rural women in the study areas. Women in the six

project areas also pursue marketing activities as their primary means of obtaining a cash income for household expenditure.

### **3.2 Animal production**

In traditional African agricultural societies, men carried primary responsibility for the major stock, usually cattle or camels and sometimes goats. They made decisions regarding the acquisition and disposal of these animals and also saw to their daily care. Boys and young men were the cattle herders of the families, but they were assisted by women and girls. Small stock, usually sheep and goats, were still considered as part of the men's domain, but since the women provided more labour toward their care, they were allowed to play a greater role in their disposal. It was the women's responsibility to attend to the poultry and to dispose of them. These traditional patterns are undergoing modification, especially where there has been extensive migration by males. Women are assuming increasing responsibility for cattle care. Where cows are stall fed, even the feeding of cows has become women's work (FAO, 2001).

According to the data collected, a small number of women in the six project areas are involved in gathering forage (27%), cleaning the shelters (27%), cleaning the animals (9%), herding the animals (17%) constructing the animal shelters (30%) and buying and selling large animals (20%). The survey also shows that most of the women in the study areas participate in feeding the animals (61%), as well as collecting and disposing of waste (79%).

### **3.3 The extent of women involvement/participation in farming**

Although the contribution of women to economic activity, as viewed by the FAO (2001), is already substantial, it is by and large undervalued. Women provide an estimated 50% to 80% of agricultural labour, depending on the region; they produce most of the subsistence food and often help to produce cash crops. As emphasised by many authors, women participate actively in cash crop production, either as extra hands during harvest time or as employees on large farms. They sometimes spend more time in export production than men do.

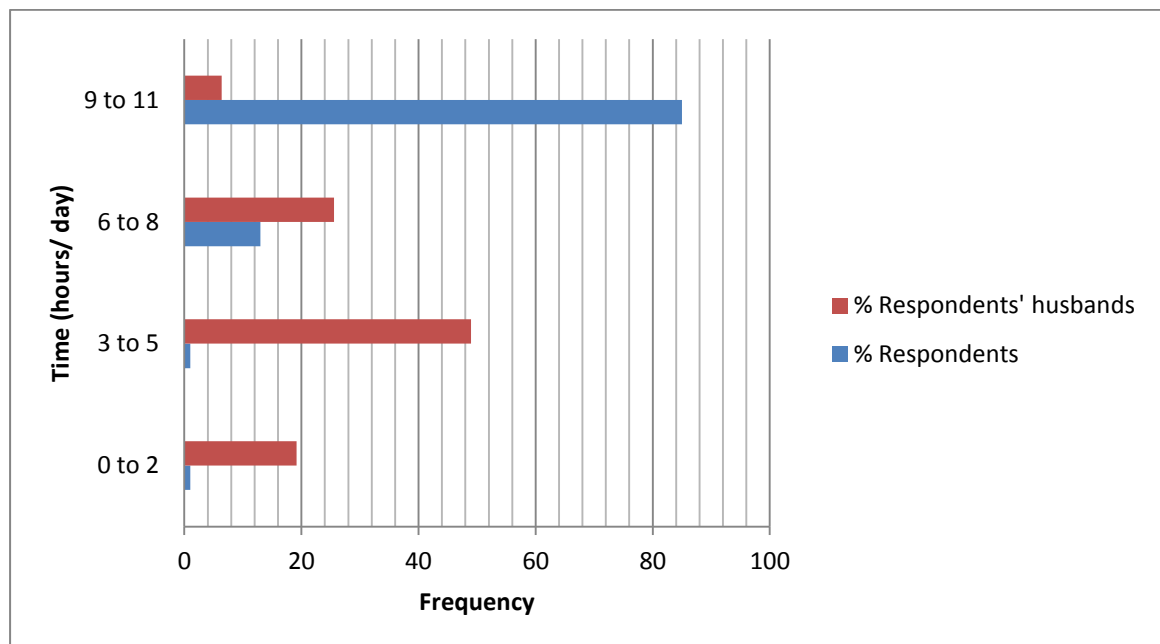
The FAO (2001) further argues that in farm families, more agricultural work is done by women than by men and that it is common for women to work more hours a week. Women participate in production, harvesting, marketing, and storage and in some societies, they carry out all the agricultural functions except the initial land clearing and heavy ploughing.

#### **3.3.1 Time (hours) spent in farming**

Figure 2 below shows the time (hours per day) spent on farming by the respondents and their husbands. The outstanding findings show that 85% of respondents (women) spend eight to nine hours per day doing farm work. The tendency is similar in all areas. Only two women, both residing in Tshiombo, work less than 3 hours per day on the farm. These two women are employed and are not working on the farm full-time. According to Figure 2, about 49.94% of the respondents' husbands spend 3 to 5 hours per day doing farm work.

It is not surprising that women in the six project areas are spending more time doing farm work on their farms; the reason being that they are not getting assistance from other members of their families/households on a full-time basis.





**Figure 2. Distribution of respondents, and respondents' husbands according to the time, in hours per day, they spend doing farm work on their farms.**

It is clear from the study that in the study areas, more agricultural work is done by women than by men and that women work more hours a week than men, that is, their working hours exceed that of men.

### 3.3.2 Number of days (per month) spent on farming

#### 3.3.2.1 Respondents

The survey shows that the majority (96%) of the respondents in the six projects are full-time farmers, which means that they spend 30 or 31 days per month doing farm work, while only four percent are part-time farmers who work on the farms regularly.

The conclusion from Table 3 below is that the majority (72.34%) of respondents in the six project areas are involved in farming much more than their husbands are. This is related to the husbands' employment. There is disparity between the projects because of the fact that in some projects, such as Mulezhe and Palmaryville, males are unemployed and always available to work on the farms.

The level of participation and involvement of women, both in terms of time and the number of days they spend doing farm work, is exceeding that of men. The reason is that most of the respondents' husbands are employed and some are pensioners. Those who are employed are not always available to work on the farm and that is why most of them spend a limited number of hours or a few days working on the farm. Those who are pensioners are also not always available because of old-age. Most women are always available as they are self-employed or staying on the farm and therefore able to spend more time working on the farms.

**Table 3. Distribution of respondents in the six projects according to the degree of involvement in farming as compared to husbands, (N=47)**

Project areas	Involvement in farming operations				Total
	Much more than husband	More than husband	Same as husband	Less than husband	
	%	%	%	%	
Dzindi	33.33	66.67	0	0	100
Lambani	100	0	0	0	100
Malavuwe	100	0	0	0	100
Mulenzhe	12.5	25	62.5	0	100
Palmaryville	33.33	0	33.33	33.33	100
Tshiombo	100	0	0	0	100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>72.34</b>	<b>8.51</b>	<b>14.89</b>	<b>4.26</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.4 The involvement of women in decision-making

One of the crucial variables of a farm system, as noted by FAO (2004), is decision-making within the farm household concerning objectives and how to reach them with the available resources, i.e. the type and quantities of plants grown and animals kept and the type of techniques and strategies applied. The way in which a farming household makes its management decisions, depends on the characteristics of the household, e.g. the number of men, women and children; their age, state of health, abilities, desires, needs, farming experience, knowledge and skills; and the relations between the household members.

Women, according to FAO (2004), are dramatically under-represented in decision-making bodies (from household-level up) because of their poorer education, lack of confidence and greater workload.

**Table 4. Distribution of respondents according to their present decision-making freedom, (N=100)**

Decision making freedom	Total	
	N	%
Has no freedom in decision making	3	3
Has full decision-making freedom on some production aspects	12	12
Has absolute freedom (decides everything)	85	85
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

An analysis of decision-making freedom in the sample (Table 4 above) indicates that the majority (85%) of the respondents in the study areas have absolute freedom in decision-making and therefore decide everything on the farm. The survey also shows that 12% of respondents in the six project areas have full decision freedom some production aspects, while only three percent (3%) of respondents have no freedom at all in decision-making.

It has also been found, from an informal discussion with the respondents, that women in the study areas exercise considerable decision-making and managerial powers in food production activities, as well as in their entrepreneurial activities, which they pursue independently.

The fact that the majority of women in the six project areas have absolute freedom in decision-making on their farms (they decide everything), indicates that there is no problem in as far as maintaining and improving the functioning of the farming enterprise is concerned.

When asked what their preferences are in terms of their decision-making freedom, more than nine in every ten women (93%) indicated that they prefer to have absolute freedom in decision-making (decide everything), while only seven percent (7%) indicated that they prefer to have full decision-making authority in terms of the land (4%) and in terms of production aspects (3%). The conclusion here is that women in the study areas have a greater say in the decision-making processes that involve their families, households and farm businesses.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

### 4.1 The roles and activities of women in agricultural economy

Women are the main farmers or producers in the six projects but their roles remain largely unrecognised. They play multiple roles in agriculture and households, that is, productive, reproductive and social. The productive roles focus on various economic activities, whilst their reproductive roles include childbearing and rearing. Household maintenance such as cooking, fetching water and fuel wood are other roles they fulfil. Women's social roles include arranging for funerals, weddings and related social events. Women play a very important role in farming. They make substantial contributions to food production and agricultural wage labour even when they are secluded or in male-dominated farming systems

Women produce most of the food that is consumed in the six projects. In addition to production, they prepare practically all of the food for the table and they play a major role in the harvest, storage, processing and marketing of the crops that they work so hard to produce. In relation to these activities women decide on the allocation of the time devoted to them and on the manner in which they are carried out.

#### **4.2 The extent of women involvement/participation in farming.**

More women than men in the six projects do agricultural work and work more hours a week. Women participate in production, harvesting, storage, processing and marketing. They carry out all agricultural functions except initial land clearing and heavy ploughing. The majority of them spend eight (8) or more hours per day doing farm work. They work more hours than men. The level of participation and involvement of women both in terms of time and number of days they spend doing farm work exceed that of men. The reason is that most of the husbands are employed and some are pensioners.

#### **4.3 The involvement of women in decision-making**

One of the crucial variables of farm system is decision-making. The husband and wife and various family members are potential participants in the decision-making process. The family can be classified in certain instances as a decision-making unit or group. Women in the six projects have absolute freedom in decision-making and therefore have a greater say in the decision-making process involving their households and farm businesses. This indicates that there is no problem in as far as maintaining and improving the functioning of the farm enterprise.

### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 The roles and activities of women in agricultural economy**

Women are the direct agents of development in the six projects since their husbands, in many cases, are migrant labourers and widows. For development efforts to be sustainable in the six projects, it is vital to appreciate the positive role played by women in local level planning. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable rural development. It is thus recommended that ways by which women in the six projects can be encouraged to participate more fully in environmental management and education be devised and augmented.

It is important that the development planners should acknowledge the fundamental contribution of women in the study areas to household and national food security and the multiple roles they play throughout the entire food chain. The battle for food security in the study areas can be won only if the invaluable contribution made by women is recognised and if the social, political and economic context empowers them to develop their potential, as farmers, actors of development and human beings.

#### **5.2 The involvement of women in decision-making**

One important inference that could be drawn from the study is that women do take part in the decision-making process. Thus in order to help them in rational decision-making, the extension workers should educate them about the decision-making process and continue to

give them sufficient information so as to be able to make informed decisions. Women programmes in the study areas must recognise and address the problem of helping men and women to cope with tensions that may arise with shifts in power and in roles. To do this, many women's programmes must include men, not to lead or dominate but to participate, debate and share in the development of decision-making mechanisms as equals. Where decisions on many aspects of agricultural production are made jointly, development projects should therefore address gender equally instead of approaching only the head of the household often assumed to be a man.

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