

## The Contribution of Women in Rural Development in Iran

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**Abstract:** This paper highlights the concerns of women and the challenges they face in rural development process. Agriculture is certainly a major contributor to rural development in many countries. It is one of the most important economic sectors in Iran. In this way rural women play a special role in rural development. When women are economically and socially empowered, they can become a potent force for change. Findings through secondary data showed that although women have an important role in rural development in Iran, but there are some problem faced by women farmers. The finding can assist the local organizations and community developers for remove this problem.

[Fatemeh Allahdadi. **Enhancing the Role of Women Farmers in Rural Development.** Journal of American Science 2011;7(1):703-707]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.americanscience.org>.

**Key words:** women farmers, rural development, agricultural development

### Introduction

The subject of "women and development" has invited a good deal of attention, especially in the case of rural women, in recent years and rightly so. Women constitute about 50 percent of the world's population and one-third of its labor force (Reddy & Rani, 1982). Women play a very important role not only in running the household but also the community development. It is argued that the rural women in Iran have been actively involved in agriculture (Jamali, 2009). Women's work in agriculture has become more visible over the last few decades as women farmers become more involved in agricultural activities, increasingly assuming the responsibility for household survival and responding to economic opportunities in agricultural production. This has made rural development considerably dependent on the capacity enhancement of women farmers as they increasingly provide a vital contribution to the development of rural communities. Despite the growing importance of the women farmers' role in agriculture, as well as in rural development, the lack of access to and control over productive resources deprives them of opportunities for their own capacity building and improved quality of life. In addition, the long tradition of gender gap and inequalities seriously restricts women's right to legal, institutional and policy support services. They are disadvantaged through limited access to land, credit, technology and information, and especially in the remuneration of their activities resulting to a wide underestimation of women's economic contributions. Also, there are very few programs for enhancing women farmers' welfare and their empowerment under a new rural environment (ASIADHRRRA, 2007).

### Methodology

The research was performed as a qualitative library in which the researcher had to refer to relevant and related sources. Sources that we used to collect needed information about Iran in order to write this article were the, rural cooperatives, Ministry of agriculture State Planning Organization, official websites of agriculture in Iran, as well as relevant literature and articles about the rural development. Likewise, I have used a number of articles and official websites of the various world known organizations.

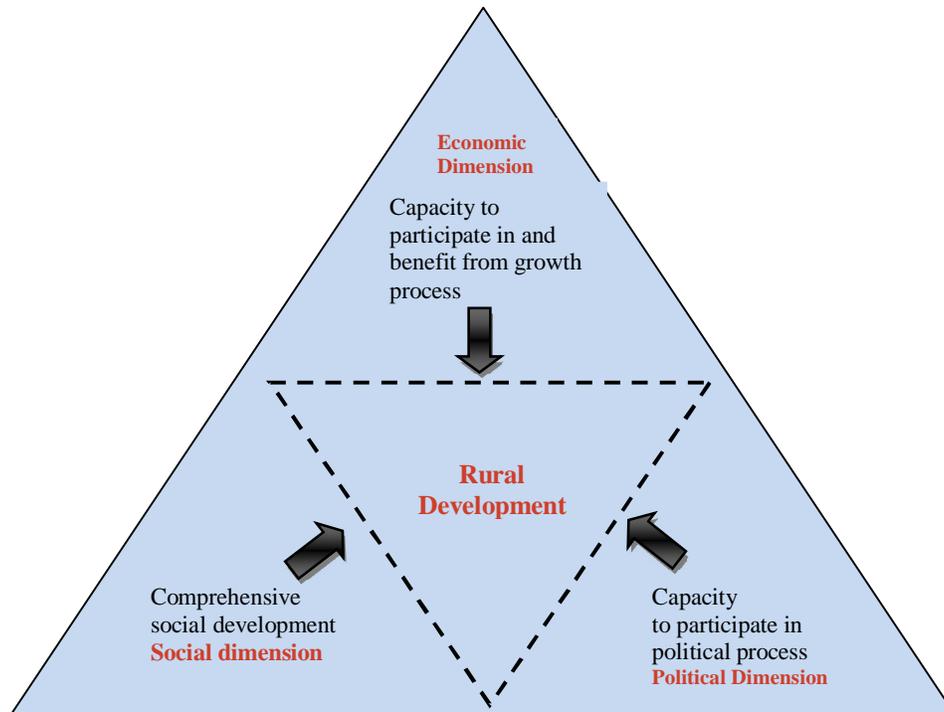
### Rural Development

The concept of rural development has changed significantly during the last 3 decades (Harris, 1982). Until the 1970s, rural development was synonymous with agricultural development and, hence, focused on increasing agricultural production (Fernando, 2008). Rural development in general is used to denote the actions and initiatives taken to improve the standard of living in non-urban neighborhoods, countryside, and remote villages. These communities can be exemplified with a low ratio of inhabitants to open space. Agricultural activities may be prominent in this case whereas economic activities would relate to the primary sector, production of foodstuffs and raw materials (Wikipedia, 2010).

Rural development is a more specific concept than the concept of community development. In broad terms, rural development is about improving the quality of life of all members of rural community (Figure 1). Rural development covers three different but interrelated dimensions. The first is the economic dimension that encompasses providing both capacity and opportunities for the poor and low-income rural

households (UNDP, 2005). The economic dimension also includes measures to reduce intra- and inter-sectoral income inequalities to reasonable levels. Second is the social dimension of supporting social development of poor and low-income households and disadvantaged groups, eliminating inequalities in social indicators, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, and providing social safety

nets for vulnerable groups. Third is the political dimension of improving opportunities for the poor and low-income people in rural areas, including women and ethnic minorities, to effectively and equally participate in the political processes at the village level and beyond and outside rural areas (Fernando, 2008).



**Figure 1: Three Dimensions of Inclusive Rural Development. Adapted from Fernando (2008)**

### Women's Empowerment for Rural Development

The meaning of "empowerment" turns on what we mean by power. Most social scientists use a definition of power something like Max Weber's (1992): 'power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance', regardless of the basis on which this probability rests (Presser & Sen, 2003). The World Bank has identified women's empowerment as one of the key constituent elements of poverty reduction, and as a primary rural development goal. The Bank has also made gender mainstreaming a priority in development assistance, and is in the process of implementing an ambitious strategy to this effect. The enhancement of women's empowerment is the main rural development goal (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). Where

agriculture is a primary occupation, women work to produce food for their families and where non-agricultural employment is not available, they may become informally self-employed, producing goods and services, within their capacity, to be marketed locally. Empowering women through education significantly impacts their survival rate and that of their children as well as the overall health and economic welfare of their families (UNICEF, 2010). Because of the empowerment of women, the elimination of gender discrimination and the creation of a balance of power between men and women, will not only be beneficial to women, but society as a whole shall benefit politically, economically and culturally (Allahdadi, 2010).

I propose the model of women's empowerment in Figure 2. It states that the macro social factors of laws, organizational rules and norms

affect women's access to economic resources and their subjective states of self-efficacy and entitlement (Presser & Sen, 2003).

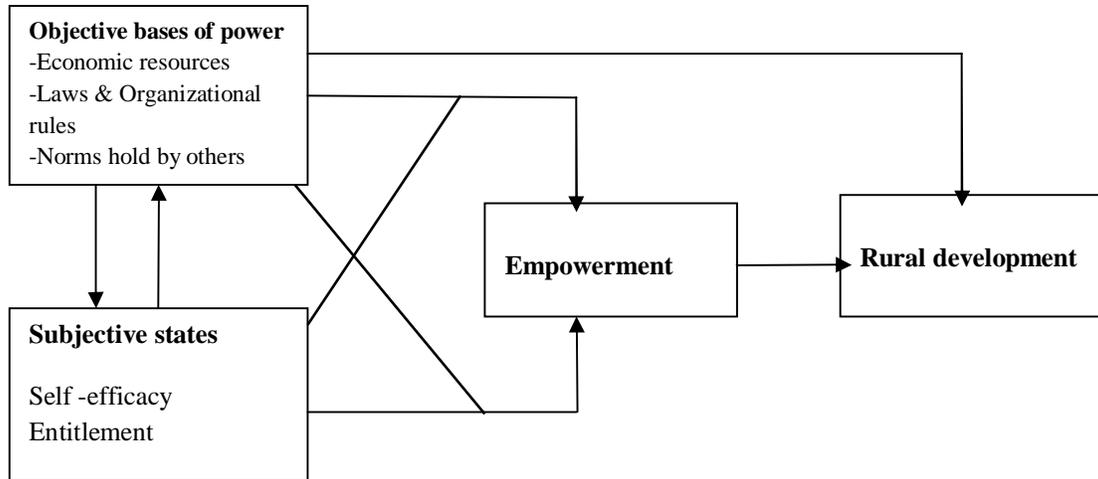


Figure 2: Model of women's empowerment. Adapted from (Presser & Sen, 2003)

### Problem Faced by Women Farmers in Iran

Women's contribution to local and community development is significant, but rural women everywhere are in a minority in decision-making and planning, particularly at regional and national levels. This is in part due to women's multiple roles and workload, but is also due to the persistence of traditional views about women's and men's roles in society (European Commission Directorate-General for Agriculture, 2000). Many factors contribute to generate some problems for women in rural agricultural development. The loss of lands, waters and forests experienced by local peoples is especially deepening the poverty of local women while increasing their domestic load and subsistence responsibilities. Since many indigenous women are also illiterate or have a low educational level, they continue to be excluded from job opportunities and rural management roles. Changes in traditional social, cultural and political institutions and practices have led to a loss of rules and codes of behavior that have long been instruments in ensuring gender-sensitive structures. Rural women in many developing countries face numerous barriers in their access to education, health care, sanitation and other basic services, and are excluded from decision-making on programs to meet these needs and entitlements.

Factors that effect on women empowerment in rural development can be include:

- Tradition and culture. Although this is the most commonly cited impeding factor, it should be clear that culture is not static
- Women have limited mobility and high levels of illiteracy.
- Insufficient financial resources. The resources allocated for the provision of information, services and resources to women often cannot support separate women's development components.
- Equipped local agricultural institutions. Agricultural institutions are not set up to meet the challenges of reaching out and working with rural women.
- Unsuitable administrative and financial procedures. The implementing agency's procedures are generally not adapted to the requirements of working with rural women and to a timely response to their needs.
- Lack of specific focus on women's development in extension agents' job descriptions. The job descriptions of extension agents generally do not support working with women and facilitating women's awareness of their own potential, ability negotiate their own needs, and capacity to access and manage new resources.

- Insufficient understanding of development and gender. There is a need to strengthen the understanding of development and gender, and the communication, planning and monitoring skills not only of the field agents working with women, but also of the management staff supervising and advising these field officers.
- Undervaluing of women's contribution to development. Activities targeted at women are often assimilated with domestic activities and their added value undermined, thus leading to an underestimation of women's potential contribution to development (IFAD, 2010).

The common problem among rural women in Iran can be categorized into four major categories; including: economic, program, political and socio-cultural issues

**1) Economic issues:** such as rural women's lack of title to productive assets and access to "inputs" (land, credit, water, fertilizer, seeds, information, technology, training, etc.) and markets; the increasing drudgery and time spent by women in agricultural activities which is not compensated by increases in value added; and the limited availability and/or relevance of technology and other aids for women.

**2) Political issues:** such as institutional barriers to women's political participation and organization (patriarchy, non-organization of women, rural isolation).

**3) Socio-cultural issues:** such as low status and disadvantaged position of women resulting in lower education; little access to training; non-participation in decision making; lower income; poor nutrition and health; few property rights.

**4) Planning issues:** such as inadequate gender-differentiated and disaggregated data, as well as data gaps with regard to rural women, which results in overlooking gender issues for planning; and lack of appropriate methodologies that recognize and value women's contribution, actual and potential, to productive activities resulting in women's marginalization in projects and programs.

Rural women in their dual roles as producers in the farm and the home and as caregivers need appropriate technologies to ease their work stress and to improve productivity. In developing countries, technology development and extension programs

have not been responsive to household drudgery associated with different production activities undertaken by women. Hence, rural women's demand for technology that improves their productivity while reducing drudgery must be recognized. Most countries still lack adequate provision for women to hold land rights independently of their husbands or male relatives. Land ownership in rural areas determines the asset for production as well as access to credit and agricultural support services and the social power to negotiate for resources and membership in decision-making agencies. Hence, rural women must be empowered with legal and institutional measures to secure land and other resources. (ASIADHRRA, 2007).

### Conclusion

Agriculture is certainly a major contributor to rural development in many countries. It is one of the most important economic sectors in Iran. Rural women are major contributors in agriculture. However, the women's status is low by all social, economic, and political indicators. Without education, it is more difficult for women to move out of poverty and they enter into a vicious circle of reduced employment opportunities and occupational mobility, lower income, early marriage, poor child health care and increasing fertility. In other words, without women's empowerment the rural development goals cannot be achieved.

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November 15, 2010