



## Trade and Agriculture: Threats to Rural Livelihoods and Food Security

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Under agricultural trade, especially the Agreement on Agriculture of the WTO, the key issue<sup>1</sup> raised by advocates but still inadequately covered by research has been food security at the household and community level and food sovereignty at the national level. The issue of food security as this has been raised in relation to agricultural products can also be raised in relation to the impact of trade liberalization on other livelihoods engaged in by rural women and men that do not fall under the negotiating issues of the WTO-AOA. Examples discussed below are fish trading, traditional woven cloth production, sticky rice box production, and seaweed farming. Products from these activities are considered part of the discussions on non-agricultural market access or NAMA, which involve the trade of manufactured goods. They have been included in this section because they help to further illustrate the interaction between gender relations and the expansion of markets in the rural areas and in highlighting the critical link between small-scale production with the food security of poor households and communities.

In the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action, “[f]ood security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” The Rome Declaration also recognizes that women play a significant role in the provisioning of food. Although rural women are usually portrayed as those who cook the food, women are also engaged in farming, fishing, and other agricultural activities.

Food security does not only deal with women’s ability to purchase food from the market but also deals with women’s work and livelihoods in agriculture-based economies. Towards supporting rural women’s roles in food security, the Rome Declaration committed to securing women’s access to resources such as credit, land and water. It is also committed to provide gender-equal opportunities in education and training in food production, processing and marketing as well as developing extension and technical services for women producers.

### **Box 4. Rural women’s unpaid work: linking housework with productive work**

Carswell (2003) studied the sugar-producing households in Fiji describing the intra-household distribution of paid and unpaid work between the genders and the

<sup>1</sup> The set of subsidies that developed countries provide to their agricultural sector is a major negotiating issue in the WTO negotiations. These subsidies are preventing developing country products from competing fairly in developed country markets. A related issue is the dumping of these subsidized products into developing country markets. Dumping products means that imported goods enter countries at prices that are much less than their cost of production that has been made possible by subsidies See UNDP (2005) and UNDP (2003) for a fuller discussion.

generations. While highlighting that dualistic distinctions between productive and reproductive work are not simple and must be understood within its socio-cultural context, she associates the invisibility of women's domestic work with the invisibility of women's work in Fiji's sugar industry. The dualistic framework serves to maintain a conceptualisation of unpaid work, which is regarded mainly as women's domestic work, as somehow distinctive from other types of work. Quoting Carswell (2003): "What is distinctive are not the tasks, but the context in which they are performed. Household/family relations subsume these tasks under duty, obligation, responsibility, altruism as well as love and emotional attachment. It is the conceptualisation of this familial context, with the associated gender and generational roles, that allow FSC [Fiji Sugar Corporation] and growers' organisations to, for the most part, officially overlook the contribution of women and children's unpaid labour to the smallholder system. Furthermore, discussions on land control and the demise of the preferential trade agreements for sugar seldom take into account how gender and generational constructs differentiate these issues for household members. Rather the household is usually viewed as a homogenous entity under the control of the male household head or the 'cane contractor' (Carswell, 2003: 146)."

Threats to food security brought about by trade liberalization come in the form of loss of livelihoods due to the entry of cheaper agricultural goods from other countries or competition from foreign agricultural businesses. FAO (1999) has documented import surges, which is the sudden and large rise in imported commodities after liberalisation, in dairy and meat products, has proven to be detrimental to domestic production for some countries, especially in the Caribbean. In addition, preferential treatment that guarantees market access by developing countries to some developed countries is no longer allowed under WTO rules thus increasing the pressure among producers in developing countries to compete amongst each other.

Trade liberalisation was expected to result in a decline in sugar prices when the preferential trading arrangement that Fiji enjoyed with the European Union ends as Fiji sugar is forced to compete with other low cost producers. In Carswell (2003), households were asked what they would do when prices declined. Respondents replied that there would be a diversification of farm production toward other cash crops and gardening for local markets, expansion of home-based production (such as handicrafts), expansion of the subsistence base (largely rice and root crops production), or seeking off-farm employment. Some suggested strategies revolved around "investing" in children through education and "good marriages". Carswell (2003) did not discuss how these strategies may be gender differentiated although it is clear, for example, from her discussion that off-farm employment for women would be difficult because employment was usually found in industries where men dominated such as sugar cane harvesting, gold mining, and forestry.

Food security, especially as borne out by research on African economies, is seen as a differentiation between cash crop activities that are usually male-dominated and subsistence (or food) cropping that is usually female-dominated. In trade discussions, cash cropping is associated with exports, although exporting is not necessarily the case

for all cash crops<sup>2</sup>. Pham and Karadjis (2003) report gender differentiation in terms of cash cropping and subsistence farming for Vietnam. Women upon whose shoulders food security primarily rests find the increased reliance on the cash economy difficult to deal with because of price instability and other risks. Given the risks that women face as they increasingly rely on the cash economy, women seek diversification of food sources such as livestock production. Thus, as the cases on both Fiji and Vietnam demonstrate, trade liberalisation has increased risks for securing food and livelihoods.

Dreze and Sen (1999), however, cautions over this simplistic gendered dichotomy in cropping type and reminds of the difficulty in distinguishing between cash cropping and food cropping.

..., but it must be recognized that the complex changes in gender relations taking place along with a process of expansion in economic opportunities cannot be reduced to the simple format of a dilemma between food crops and cash crops. We have to look at the nature of labour markets, the access of women and men to employment opportunities, the gender features in land ownership, and the social traditions in the intrafamily division of consumption and work. (Dreze and Sen, 1999: 175)

Indeed, much of the analysis on food security and trade liberalization need to be able to provide further clarity on the factors that Dreze and Sen (1999) point to above. For example, there is much agreement among feminists that property rights over land plays a prominent part in determining the impact of trade liberalization on the well being of women and their households. Citing Joeekes (1999)<sup>3</sup>, Fontana (2003) says that “[p]roperty rights in land are more relevant to the gender distribution of gains from trade in Africa than in Asia.” (Fontana, 2003: 3). Why there is a distinction between the continents is unclear, however. Certainly, a better understanding of whether and how international trade policy changes the various gendered property rights systems in the Asia-Pacific and, consequently, redefine women’s participation in a variety of markets is very much needed. A study on Vietnam’s agricultural sector by Pham and Karadjis (2003) sponsored by OXFAM-America is indicative. In the coffee plantations in the Central Highlands where “matriarchal” traditions are followed, the men began to perform critical roles in the export trade being primarily responsible for loading and transporting coffee from the village farms to the larger markets leading some to observe changes in the strongly collective, self-sufficient traditions of the households. Similar observations have been made in fish trading systems among Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand as well as in handicraft exports between Lao PDR and Thailand.

There is an implication from these studies that control over traded commodities goes to men when volumes and values of trade increase. Another implication is that trade is perceived to occur in the public sphere, which comes in the form of greater governmental control (through export taxes, for example) or involving farther distances

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Paolisso, et.al. (2002) evaluated the effect of the Vegetable and Fruit Cash Crop (VFC) Program in Nepal on the time allocation of males and females participating in the program. The VFC program, however, is not explicitly linked to trade policy.

<sup>3</sup> A copy of Joeekes (1999) could not be obtained while this paper was being written. Hence, it is not possible to identify the reasons given for the difference between Africa and Asia.

of travel to reach markets (across international borders, for example). Men have dominated the public sphere and this domination appears to take precedence when home-based production or local markets expand. The boundary between private as women's space and public as men's space becomes contested between the genders. The opportunities provided by trade liberalization, therefore, brings to women producers limited gain because men are in a position to capture the gains from trade through their dominance of the public sphere. Thus, the expected economic empowerment of women does not materialize.

Pham and Karadjis (2003) provides another example of the importance of recognizing women's work and undertaking this recognition in the public sphere. Pham and Karadjis (2003) found that the change in production system from state-led cooperative to household-based production in Vietnam has led to a re-emergence of patriarchal traditions. The experience of economies in transition can prove valuable in gaining an understanding of how changes in state involvement and shifts towards the use of market structures can affect gender relations, especially in the provision of care.

The importance of this issue to gender equality arises from the fact that the old cooperative system, whatever its faults, made women's labour visible and public in most aspects. The initial erosion of women's social position was brought on by the shift to a household-based production with household contract system and then the collapse of the cooperatives. Women bore the burdens of the shift, as their household-centred work—housework, reproductive duties and household-based agricultural production—become more intense and invisible and old patterns of patriarchal control over women's labour emerged. (Pham and Karadjis, 2003: 55)

In another case, Bush (2002) noted the dominance of men in newer fish trading systems among Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand, whereas women dominated the traditional fish trading system. The old system turned into an oligopolistic operation so that the big traders controlled supply soon after the government of Lao PDR implemented an export tax on fish. Unfortunately, Bush (2002) did not discuss the implications of this change on gender relations in the fishing communities covered by the study. Note also a similarity with findings of Kusakabe (2004) for handicraft exports between Lao PDR and Thailand (see Box 5). What is interesting about Kusakabe (2004) is that there is no simple and straightforward deduction that can be made.

Kusakabe (2004) studied the impact of the opening of borders between Lao PDR and Thailand on women's work and the trade of woven cloth from the village of Sayaboury and sticky rice boxes from the village of Kammoune. Laotian women worked and traded these goods across the border to Thai markets. Both activities are traditional (although sticky rice boxes used to be done by men) but depend heavily on technology and design from Thailand, reflecting a buyer driven production process for both activities. For the sticky rice box-producing village, the activity became women's work after the border opening. Although women felt an increase in self-esteem, their status in the households remained the same since the activity was considered "light" and

secondary. For the cloth-weaving villages, the opening of the border resulted in a commercialisation of their activities and a hierarchy of weavers arose. To quote: “With the opening of border trade, the women weavers in new commercial weaving and non-weaving villages also jumped scales from the household and community to border markets. They developed a ‘sense of place’ for themselves in the border market. Many women had earlier never been out of their own villages, but with the border trade they brought their woven materials to the Thai side of the border. The income from weaving also changed their ‘sense of place’ in the household; **but as the price for woven cloth fell and the export tax was levied, their place diminished to securing relations with the Lao Lum weaver-turned merchants.** Thus they retreated from the international border (Kusakabe, 2004: 590, emphasis provided).”

### **Box 5. Rural women’s dependence on men in cross border trade**

The export tax that was levied by the Lao PDR government on cross border trade could be paid per piece or in monthly instalments. If the latter mode was chosen, the tax was lower but it also meant that the women weaver-traders needed enough “capital” to pay the lump sum. It was only the merchants—mostly men or spouses that worked together—who could afford to do this so that the women weavers needed to enter into relations with these merchants, to take advantage of the benefits of monthly instalments (Kusakabe, 2004). Furthermore, women weavers-turned merchants who went with their husbands beyond the border into Thailand found themselves at an advantage compared to women who went to the borders alone. Kusakabe (2004) concludes that “it is not the mobility across the border that is important but men’s involvement in women’s cross-border long-distance trade activity that has made a difference in Lao women’s penetration of the Thai market between Sayaboury [where cloth weaving was done] and Kammoune [where sticky rice boxes were made] (Kusakabe, 2004: 591).”

A different case is presented to emphasize the need to understand the specific situation of a locality that is directly participating in trade if the impact of openness is to be understood. Tanchuling and Durano (2005) prepared a case study of the seaweed exports industry of the Philippines. The case study on seaweed farming in the Philippines found a conflict between coastal resource management and the gender distribution of property rights. Tanchuling and Durano (2005) described the export incentive structure of the Philippine government for seaweed production that led several local governments in coastal towns to become involved in the program. Since shorelines are common resources, a permit system for seaweed farming was implemented in order to minimize conflict in its use. Examples of conflicting user interests include fishers who need to go out into the sea but may be blocked by the seaweed farms near the shoreline, or pollution from passenger and cargo boats that affect the quality of the seaweed.

The permit scheme used for coastal resource management effectively creates a private usufruct property rights system. Permit holders are able to engage in seaweed farming in a specified area of the shore. Only men applied for permits even though the women were involved in seaweed production. The unintended consequence of the permit system was gender inequality in property rights. The women saw their

participation in seaweed farming as simply an extension of their household work. Tanchuling and Durano (2005) argue that “[b]y virtue of this viewpoint that women’s work is tied to household work, it is not surprising that women have not applied for a seaweed production permit. These women think that permits for seaweed production are in a realm outside of their socially designated authority (Tanchuling and Durano, 2005: 24).” Although the finding reflects only one locality and needs to be checked against the other communities that are promoting seaweed farming and implementing the permit system, the analysis is informative.

#### **Box 6. Gender inequality in access to coastal usufruct rights**

Policy-wise, there are no impediments towards women’s participation in seaweed cultivation for export. User rights are given by the local government unit to both men and women as long as they reside in the coastal town (Calatagan, south of Manila in the Philippines). And yet no woman has applied for a seaweed production permit. This is highly interesting in itself. Studies on the impact of trade liberalization on women in agriculture indicate that women are unable to benefit from shifts towards cash cropping because they did not have rights to own land, as in several African countries. This cannot be the case for Calatagan where no prior private ownership by an individual, whether male or female, of the coastal area existed. **When the permit system was implemented, which gave the holder private usufruct rights for designated coastal areas; it was the men who claimed the rights since none of the women applied for a permit.** Thus, the result is that women are not in a position to benefit from seaweed production except through her relationship with her husband who has the usufruct rights. (Tanchuling and Durano, 2005: 23-24, emphasis provided).

In sum, the following issues have been raised under the trade in agricultural products:

- Trade liberalization in agriculture and in non-agricultural products from rural people’s livelihoods poses possible threats to food security. The entry of cheaper food produced in other countries can compete with locally produced food crops that have been a source of sustenance and livelihood for women and their families and households.
- Women’s work in the rural sector is substantial and needs to become more visible. More often, however, women’s work is seen as an extension of her domestic work and is, therefore, unrecognized. Here as in other cases, women’s responsibilities in the reproductive sphere define the value of her contribution to the productive sphere.
- Further to the invisibility of women’s work in rural production is the limitation of her place of work to the immediate space of her household and community. The expansion of home-based work and local markets to the export markets do not translate automatically to benefits for women producers. Potential earnings are dependent on how men participate in the

expanded markets. The cases above show that men tend to control activities that entered the more organized market spheres.