

Women in Agriculture

Remarks by
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“Educational Challenges Facing Rural Women Worldwide”

General thanks for convening meeting and invitation and importance of topics to be discussed.

While they are often silent, hidden, and under-appreciated, rural women represent probably our worlds most powerful untapped natural resource, and they are surely more than ever before a key to world stability and understanding. Unequal access to education consigns women to lives of low status and large families. Their inability to read the instructions on a packet of contraceptive pills or a pesticide container, a seed catalogue or an invoice, a wages slip or a newspaper, excludes women from the full benefits of development and from making their full contribution as citizens. Research clearly shows educated women are more productive, and the economic rates of return to education are high. Education is vital for the development of and sustainability of not only a countries economy, but also civil society. Yet armed with these facts, in most developing countries, women remain relatively less educated than men. Girls do not receive the same quality and level of education as do boys. There is a continuing belief that there is little benefit in educating a girl when she could be working in the marketplace or fields. (Boys are affected by this thinking, too, though not to the same extent).

Greater equality in education between women and men means healthier families. If African women and men had more equal schooling, child mortality would have been 25% lower than it was in 1990. A cross-country study of 63 countries finds that gains in women's education made the single largest contribution to declines in malnutrition in 1970-95, accounting for 43% of the total. Women who are short-changed in this way pass on the disadvantages to their children. Better educated mothers also tend to have smaller families and this also benefits children. Studies in Thailand have shown that as the number of children per family drops, the proportion sent to school rises. Not all news is this discouraging, overall, girls and women have made significant progress in recent decades. For example, over the past 25 years girls' primary school enrollment rates doubled in the Middle East, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, even with this improvement in South Asia, women have only about half as many years of education as men, and female secondary school enrollment rates are only two-thirds of male rates.

Increasing women's primary schooling alone could increase agricultural output by 24 percent, and yet in South Asia, the level of school attendance by girls amounts to only 60 percent of that of boys. Female farmers receive only five percent of all agricultural extension services worldwide and only 15 percent of the world's extension agents are women. In Egypt, for example, only one percent of Egyptian extension officers are women. Extension programs often "forget" to include women in the target audience. And those same programs often fail to recognize the different roles and responsibilities that farm women hold vis a vis their husbands and menfolk. In other words, there's much to be done using more focused, targeted and gender sensitive programming.

Recent events in Afghanistan have clearly brought to the surface how inequities in the education of women can hinder a country from improving its standard of living. Since the fall of the Taliban it is clear that women will be called up to play a vital role in the

rebuilding of the country. They will be required to share responsibilities of assuring continuity of families and communities, including food production, processing and preservation just as women in other parts of the world are doing every day. Although rural women of Afghanistan apparently were not subjected to as strict a regimen as those in the cities, their education opportunities were also limited because of the remoteness and lack of training facilities. It is vital that women receive opportunities for education so that they can play a role in rebuilding. Afghanistan is in the headlines today but frankly women worldwide have been systematically undereducated relative to the needs of society, and compared to the educational levels of men. Hopefully as we continue with this roundtable discussion we can identify ways to deliver the educational needs including both classroom and extension (informal) learning for lifelong needs. One of our greatest challenges is to provide education for rural and isolated women and girls and to develop new innovative delivery methods. There are other important benefits that can be achieved through the development of education delivery systems....benefits that the United States has enjoyed for years and that are now being proposed for other countries around the world. The best example of the ancillary benefits are health and nutrition for girls where school lunch is paired with education. The U.S. Senate has moved to initiate the program suggested by former Senator McGovern. The availability of health care and other services through school centers are also key to progress.

Although I certainly realize the great need around the world that is yet to be fulfilled, I'm very proud of what USDA and our many partners are doing to reach rural women, and to provide them with educational tools. The Agency that I lead, the Cooperative State, Research, Education, and Extension Service, for example, funded a 1999 study through the National Research Initiative program which allowed scientists at The Pennsylvania State University to collect the information on the role women play in U.S. agriculture. This information is then used to change and adapt a programs that include women and recognize the roles they play in rural America.

At CSREES we work in partnership with colleagues from all of the Land-Grant universities and colleges around America to assist rural women at home - and increasingly, to help rural women overseas as well. This last point is really an important one. The USDA, and certainly the Agency which I lead, has a clear mandate to assist American farmers and ranchers. Increasingly we realize that helping farmers at home means that we need to engage around the world. I'm so pleased to be at this conference where the best of the best in thinking and activities is on display or being discussed from around the world.

In my mind, we must focus the plight and prospects of rural women around the world for at least two reasons. *First, rural women are community builders and stabilizers. And second, rural women are entrepreneurial leaders and real innovators in their communities.* **Much of the world is living in dire poverty and the gap between rich and poor widens. Inequality particularly in the area of human rights and especially for women and girls. Education - the leveler of the playing field in terms of economic stability and improved quality of life - is not available to many people. How can we make headway in a technology-driven world when so many have to access to or facility with those technologies?. And certainly, health concerns range from infant mortality, poor nutrition, lack of access to medical care. HIV/AIDS is having a devastating impact in Africa which is losing two or more generations and leaving children orphans.** I'd like to provide some examples of programs that are working and that we can discuss further in trying to reach some solutions to the daunting challenges faced by millions of women worldwide. We realize, of course, that what works in Iowa may not work in Malawi. And indeed, what works in one village in Kenya may not be suitable for a neighboring community 5 kilometers away. But we are also convinced that there are many, many tools in the toolkit. What's really needed now is the pledge and care to listen closely to rural women, the will to commit our efforts, and the guiding desire by us all to improve our world by improving

the prospects for rural women. As so many have done on other fronts, we should challenge ourselves with measurable indicators of success as we step into the 21st century.

In partnership with Rutgers University, CSREES is offering leadership training to young women community and village leaders in Armenia. We see this as a model approach for the kind of leadership skill building that is needed in many parts of Central Asia and the world. Using an extension approach of tapping into community based needs and opportunities, the program trains women in everything from public speaking, to coalition building, planning and budgeting, and time management. With these tools, women with the potential to lead are better able to advocate on behalf of their communities to improve living conditions locally.

Similarly, in Africa (Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa , specifically) CSREES is working with Land-Grant partners to offer farm business skills training to farmers who have traditionally not received such training - many of whom are women. Typically, women farmers are very astute at raising and selling farm products, but they are always looking for ways to increase their profitability. Through locally-offered skilled based training, we are providing very practical coaching that will help farmers - women and men - build their markets.

- The *High Rocks Academy*, a non-profit organization in rural West Virginia, is helping low income girls build self-esteem, stay in and succeed in school, and pursue higher education. Created in 1997 by a Susan Burt, a former Pocahontas County high school teacher, The High Rocks Academy targets high risk adolescent girls, works with them in an intensive summer camp experience, mentors them through the academic year, and prepares them for higher

education. The program draws support from the land-grant university and USDA. Rachel Tompkins, a West Virginia University Community Development specialist and former Director of Extension, helped establish the new organization.

Tompkins, a West Virginia native who graduated from West Virginia University and completed graduate degrees at Syracuse University and Harvard University, joins Burt and a dozen other female members of the Board of Directors in their determination to help young rural women succeed. West Virginia University Extension Service has also supported The High Rocks Academy by funding involvement by High Rocks girls at the 2000 Appalachian Studies Conference as conference facilitators and presenters. USDA field staff often help the program as volunteer teachers and mentors, including field staff for the Forest Service and Natural Resource and Conservation Service. High Rocks Academy graduates, once considered likely middle and high school drop outs, are now attending Harvard University, Hampshire College, Berea College, Transylvania College, Washington and Jefferson College, Marietta College, and Simons Rock College of Bard, as well as the public universities and colleges in the state. Those young women who are now High Rocks Academy alumni continue to work with the organization as members of an Alumni Council, as mentors for new students, and as advocates for rural women youth.

- In New Mexico, community development leaders and northern New Mexico producers are *mixing small-scale farming and value-added enterprises to reconnect rural communities and agriculture*. Women are central to the effort, participating as educators, entrepreneurial producers, value-added product experimenters, and owners of new small businesses. *Pati Martinson and Terrie Bad Hand* are co-directors of the *Taos County Economic Development (TCDE) Corporation*, committed to finding alternatives to structural poverty, dead end jobs, and unemployment affecting the people of northern New Mexico. TCED, with support from USDA, helped create a community center with a licensed food

processing unit, business incubator, day care program, community garden, and community-supported agriculture projects. Young women on welfare or in the Women, Infants and Children program produced and marketed vegetables in the community garden, supplementing household income. Tying food to local history and culture, other women developed specialty food products and started or expanded small food processing businesses, including “Teresa’s Famous Tamales!” now distributed in groceries in New Mexico and surrounding states.

- Examples of *women as community builders* from around the world are plentiful, but surely the well known example of micro-credit clubs such as the *Grameen Bank program* and others, which provide micro-credit to women entrepreneurs, teach an important lesson to us all: When given a chance, women are fiscally responsible, and share profits within the family and community system. As women make money, they make investments such as schools and health care that improve the life of their kids and their community’s kids.

- Our USDA program, in partnership with Texas A&M University and Rutgers University and many others, is providing *leadership training to rural women throughout Armenia*, is helping women to establish production *credit clubs* in their villages from which community leaders are emerging, and is providing *college education* in agricultural economics and business to bright, energetic young women from the rural regions of Armenia. These kinds of activities can lead to quiet but really dramatic changes in villages and communities. For example, in some villages where USDA and others are working, farmers - men and women - are making a profit for the first time in many years. Because of that, they are also starting to pay taxes for the first time. And as a result of that, schools are being built. New schools as we all know, are a powerful signal of progress.

- In South Africa, *Mrs. Thandi Mhlongo is the principal a small elementary school near Richard's Bay.* She received the Nelson Mandela Premier Award in 1997 for Community Development. She is the founder and leader of a group of women called *Ikusasa lethu (Our Future)*. The group began over thirteen years ago and now number 3000 women, primarily rural women. The group is actively working on income generating activities. They have recently received grant funds to purchase sewing machines and sergers, build an addition on a member's home to serve as a sewing center and are making uniforms for schools in the areas in addition to other projects. They have formed a cooperative to build housing - making their own bricks, hiring a mason to build the house and then raising funds to purchase roofing. Ikusasa lethu women engage in other project that include farming and preserving produce. The women meet regularly for fellowship and to share their projects and experiences as well as learn from one another. Staff how have had the chance to visit talk about the energy and inspiration that the women project.

- *Women as leaders and innovators in entrepreneurial and sustainable agriculture*

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- *Kim K. Tait, Owner/Operator of Tait Farm Foods, Centre Hall, Pennsylvania is one of many women in the United States who are pioneering a new entrepreneurial agriculture. Widowed early in life, Tait took the small, community-supported berry farm that she and her husband had run and grew it into a large diversified operation with a national distribution system and retail sales ventures. Through research and experimentation, Tait developed diverse value-added agricultural products on her farm and encouraged others in her area to follow her lead. Today she partners with other producers to create new markets and meet the growing demand and high quality and safe food produced in ways that sustain a healthy environment. A respected "business" leader in*

agriculture, Tait conducts workshops on farm diversification, new markets, sustainable production methods, and farm-community ties.

- In *West Africa*, our work with *Ghanian and Nigerian small holder farmers* - most of whom are women - has been rewarding and humbling. With support from USAID and others, we listened and learned that the best help we could provide would be to extend business planning skills to rural, small holder women farmers. These women - who have traditionally been ignored by their governments and the assistance community - creatively guided us beyond our traditional thinking and, instead of the typical advice on growing crops that development officers might provide, we offered training in post production issues such as farm management, post production processing and community and youth development. Our audience ate the training up, and have asked for more. And they are putting it to use. In the *former Soviet Union*, we've seen women managers of dairy processing plants light up as they think with us about being the first producers of yogurt in their country, or the first producer of delicious smoked cheese. Women can, and are blazing these kinds of trails as well as anyone else!

In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity to network with you and to seriously face the challenge of offering workable solutions to serious problems. It is my hope that when this meeting convenes next year and every year after, there are indications of progress that can be built upon to provide a bright future for our world for decades ahead.