



WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

Women, Trade Liberalization and Food Security

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ABSTRACT *Josefa Francisco argues that we need to look at the impact of globalization on national food security. First by understanding how export-oriented agriculture and trade liberalization are contributing to aggregate growth, and how these provide adequate incomes so that the poor can acquire basic necessities. And second by evaluating in a more serious way how the global trade market is impacting on social reproduction and women's work.*

KEYWORDS *agriculture; hunger; social reproduction; subsistence economies; women's networking*

The importance of women's work for food security

The views of development of poor women in the South are critical because they stand at the crossroads of both production and reproduction. Women's relationship with the market, either as consumers or producers, is inextricably linked to the welfare of their families. A woman villager very often will be engaged in a productive activity at the same time that she is taking care of children. Women's livelihoods, such as tending animals or vegetable gardens, are mainly for subsistence, with the excess vended within the village itself. In larger farms or in family waged labour, women participate in more intensive productive work even while they are at the same time caring for the children or attending to the sick. Furthermore, women are responsible for food security – they make sure there is food to nourish the family.

Women's meagre incomes are almost entirely spent for family needs. Through women's incomes spent on the family, social reproduction is able to lay a 100 percent claim on the surplus of her petty production, depriving the producer (woman) of her rightful share in it. Such is not the case with male incomes. It is common for the producer (male) to claim his share of the surplus and only after to give the remaining share to the family. Negotiations on the distribution of labour inputs, products, and surplus occur at various levels of

society, including within the family unit. Antonella Picchio Kidder states:

There are tensions between these 'shares' of product, and about the time women and men spend on wage labour versus social reproduction. Fundamentally, there are deep potential conflicts between commodity production for profit and social reproduction. (Francisco and Vitan, 1999)

At the macro level, where domestic labour is not valued as contributing to production in much the same way that waged labour does, the distribution of surplus is only between profit and waged labour. It does not include, as it should, social reproduction or domestic work.

In many poor places, there is an informal, unrecognized and undervalued market carved out of the non-monetized exchange of services and goods among poor women who try to help one another, particularly in times of crisis and extreme deprivation arising from marked fluctuations in incomes. These women's reciprocity networks and relationships of cooperation and mutual help enable women to carry out their social reproduction responsibilities and to keep food on the table. At the community level, a viable way to ensure food security is to support women's activities.

Export-oriented agricultural production that is aimed at raising income levels, on the other hand, neither leads to food security nor does it always deliver the expected income increase. This approach is often translated into a production area strategy that promotes the cultivation of only one export crop. With this strategy, farmers who grow other crops are penalized by being denied subsidies and other domestic support. The farmers' income has also become more vulnerable as it is now dependent on the vagaries of the global market that the small farmers are less able to influence. The global market can drastically fluctuate and financial and currency markets are extremely volatile. For instance, international rice trading is an area where there may be steep fluctuations adversely affecting exporting southern countries, the Philippines included. We also experienced very recently how cash incomes were dramatically depressed by the Asian financial and economic crisis.

Two stories

In the 1970s when global demand for and price of Philippine sugar fell, many seasonal workers in the sugar plantations were left without incomes. A major factor why the *sakadas* survived their most difficult period was the fact that womenfolk utilized their informal exchange of goods and services to acquire income or obtain food for their families. The women decided to collectivize child care and cooking in order to free the time and labour of some women to do laundry work, petty vending and gather food crops. These activities ensured that the families did not go hungry.

At a women's roundtable discussion on the impact of the financial crisis, an Indonesian woman described how when the devaluation was at its depths, poor rural women began to substitute foodstuff for some basic commodities that could no longer be subsidized by their bankrupt government. She said that rural women, utilizing their traditional reciprocal networks, helped one another in identifying which crop to substitute for what food items. Or the story of some Indonesian women who walked together in groups, knocked on the doors of the middle class and offered their labour for domestic work, in return for food for their hungry children.

Survival in the South

In many parts of the economic South, there are communities of semi-subsistence production households and small farmers, small fisherfolk and indigenous peoples whose productive activities are enabling families to survive and are contributing to national food security. Many of the enterprises are supported by local capital and the produce consumed by the local people. In one UNDP report, it was stated that 'money is of limited utility' in the semi-subsistence localities in the Pacific. Why? Because the essentials are locally produced or acquired by exchange, and there were no expensive electronic items which characterize our consumerist society. More than the modern society, these villages were found to have many features in their lifestyle that is life sustaining and environmentally re-generating. The people in these places also operate on norms, mechanisms, and processes

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that combine both cash and non-cash transactions. They are, if you like, operating in a different kind of market, or local trading system.

But current practices of export-oriented agricultural production and trade liberalization are rapidly instituting a global market that is based on a completely different set of goals and processes. It is based on competition, accumulation, and growth. It universalizes monetized transactions and introduces more rigid labour and trading arrangements. And most of all, it is being pursued at a pace in which there is insufficient time to evaluate results and repair damages, and through an approach that excludes and penalizes other types of so-called inefficient markets and economics.

If we are to examine more fully the impact it has on national food security, we will not only have to interrogate how export-oriented agriculture and trade liberalization are contributing to aggregate growth, or how these were able to provide adequate

incomes so that the poor can now acquire basic necessities. We will also have to begin to evaluate in a more serious way how the global trade market is in fact impacting on social reproduction and women's work. The global trade market needs to be interrogated from the consideration on how this impacts on a nation's social capital, in general, and gender relations in particular.

Towards a new paradigm

This is not to say, however, that small farmers and fishers should not be assisted to increase their productivity or even to engage in international trade. This is not the main point being driven at. What we need is to shift economic development framework away from 'competition and growth' toward 'sufficiency and sustainability'. We can do this by locating social reproduction at the centre of an alternative economic development paradigm that is both critical and feminist.

Note

- 1 This paper was presented at the CI ROAP Training Workshop on WTO Agreements, 19 October 1999, Quezon City, Philippines. Most of the authors quoted in the paper are found in Francisco and Vitan (1999).

Reference

- Francisco, J. and S. Vitan (1999)
Gender Equity in Economic Reforms: Engendering Philippine NGO Analysis and Advocacy. Manila: Oxfam GB.