



# Agriculture + Food Security Network Brief No 1

## Targeting Women in Rural Advisory Services (RAS)

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### Executive Summary

Targeting women in rural advisory services (RAS) was chosen by members of SDC's Agriculture and Food Security (A+FS) network as an important challenge that needs to be addressed. This short paper takes this challenge as a starting point and identifies ways forward - drawing from the inputs of A+FS network members to an e-discussion held in September 2011.

The paper highlights practical gender issues to consider when planning and implementing RAS. Five key questions examined are: Who needs to receive the message? What message and why? Where is the message given? When is the message given? How is the message communicated? It then assesses whether resources should be invested in promoting women extension workers. Reasons in favour include that in some contexts this is the only feasible way to talk directly with women farmers; in many societies women simply feel more comfortable interacting with other women; and that women extension workers can be very important role models. Nevertheless, reality shows that most extension workers are men. Some ways to address barriers to women becoming

extension workers are examined. The paper also outlines other important aspects in the design and implementation of gender sensitive RAS programmes, such as working through existing social networks (e.g. existing women's groups, farmer's groups) and making conscious choices of partner agencies.

The paper provides an overview of key issues to consider in reaching women through RAS, but also warns that women are not a homogeneous group. Like the men in any community, they may belong to different ethnic groups, religions, castes and have different geographic origins or economic circumstances. Consequently, there are many power dynamics and differences in capacity at play of which it is important to be aware, given that RAS can reinforce existing power relations, or seek to cut across them in favour of the disadvantaged. In conclusion, in a world of growing food insecurity and related potential for conflict, it is not enough to work with richer, innovative farmers. Supporting disadvantaged women (and men) to farm more productively is an important development objective.

## A. Why target women?

Targeting women in rural advisory services (RAS) was chosen by A+FS members as a topic of common interest because it is seen as a challenge. Why, though, is it a challenge – and does this actually matter? It matters because women farmers have as much right to agricultural information as men – but also because better RAS for women would likely result in better production and productivity. A recent review of global statistics showed that there are clear gender differences in the productivity of male and female-headed farming households, with the yield of the latter often being 20-30% lower<sup>1</sup>. This does not mean that women are intrinsically worse farmers; the yield differences are explained by women in general cultivating smaller (and often poorer quality) plots, having insecure land rights, and being constrained in their access to credit, agricultural inputs and technology. Indeed, gender differences in agricultural productivity “almost always disappear when access to land and productive inputs are taken into account”<sup>2</sup>. The need to target women farmers is reinforced by an apparent “feminisation of agriculture” in many countries, with numbers of female-headed households increasing due to male out-migration. At the same time, many women provide their agricultural labour within male-headed households, and thus it is insufficient to focus on differences between households headed by men or women. Whatever the status of women farmers, it is widely recognised that RAS rarely focus on their needs<sup>3</sup>. Yet this is not always due to the way in which the extension agents operate; it may also be linked to wider perceptions in society regarding men’s and women’s roles (see the tomato story).

### **A mutual learning process: the tomato story from Madagascar**

*“In 2005, I was impressed to see a major change amongst a group of male farmers producing tomatoes in the rural commune of Talatanampano, not far from the capital of the Upper Matsiatra region. I had really tried earlier in my support activities to integrate gender awareness, but despite my best efforts I had failed to convince either the men or the women that training should be for them both. Not a single woman attended the long training process, despite the fact that it was women who were responsible for tending the tomatoes. Then we really had a major surprise; 75% of the tomato crop was lost because the women didn’t understand the watering system properly! From that moment onwards, the men became convinced that the women needed technical training, and encouraged them to undertake it. Things didn’t stop there – now the men also accept that women should participate in financial decisions, accessing and even controlling the household funds.”*

*Madagascar: Evelyne Marie Davy  
RAZANABAO, SAHA Programme (SDC-  
Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation)*

This short paper does not attempt to explore the significant problems of poor access to land and credit faced by women farmers<sup>4</sup>. Rather, it takes the challenge of targeting women in RAS as a starting point, and identifies ways forward – drawing from the inputs to the A+FS e-discussion.



## B. Facing the challenge: Practical gender issues in planning and implementing RAS

When planning and implementing an agricultural extension programme, it is helpful to consider the following questions.

### Who needs to receive the message?

*Gender analysis during project planning is a useful tool to identify the gender division of labour, the demand for extension services on the part of men and women, and the ways in which this could be provided. A project in Honduras found that such an approach promoted mutual respect and collaboration between men and women.*

*Gender Mainstreaming in Rural Extension Services: A Case Study from the Honduras PAAR Project*

In many countries, certain crops are more associated with men and others with women – with the common division being that men are more involved in cash crops, and women in crops for domestic consumption. Thus extension agents specialising in coffee, cocoa, cotton, sugar cane and similar cash crops may feel justified in focusing on men, given that it is they who make the main agricultural decisions, buy the inputs, and act as the main interlocutors with the outside world. Yet as illustrated by the case of the (cash) tomato crop in Madagascar and rice cultivation in Benin, women are often involved in cultivation operations – and it should not be assumed that men will communicate technical information to women.

*“The RAS often targets the male farmers who are the owners of the fields. But...certain activities in rice production are specifically made by women [employees]....If we sum it up, to improve production techniques it is essential to target the women who will actually do them.”*

*Benin and Togo: Thierry Pleines, Brücke - Le Pont*

If no gender analysis has been done and a major gender imbalance is observed in persons attending training, it is important to find out why this is – to explore all aspects of crop cultivation and identify what tasks are taken up by men and women. Extension messages may then be targeted accordingly - stressing the importance of good communication and mutual respect between all actors.

*“Recent field visits in Central Bhutan showed that in most farmer groups female and male membership is more or less balanced. But during discussions men always strongly dominated.”*

*Bhutan: Walter Roder, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation*

It may be appropriate to further support women's participation through various means such as

- setting quotas on the number of women versus men who should receive training, and who should be in executive positions in farmer groups<sup>5</sup>
- conducting specific training for women in leadership and similar skills
- training extension staff in gender sensitivity, and promoting this actively (in performance assessment, etc).



Another option is to target women separately, especially if the crop or activity concerned is one that is the main preserve of women such as backyard poultry, goat-rearing, and home-garden vegetable cultivation. This is of course particularly required in cultural settings in which women and men are uncomfortable interacting in public spaces (see section C).

### What message and why?

As noted above, women and men often have very different roles in agriculture – so it is important to be clear what message is to be conveyed to whom and why. For example, an outbreak of disease amongst backyard poultry may need to focus on women with regard to the way they care for their chickens, but may also need to involve men if it is they who buy replacement birds in the market (which may be a source of infection). There may also be gendered differences in interest in techniques; the experience of a watershed project in India was that women were more interested in learning about biological forms of pest control, whereas men were more interested in chemical pesticides.<sup>6</sup>

### Where the message is given?

This is relevant where women and men are expected to maintain such separation in public that separate approaches are needed; for women, mobility (being unable to travel outside the settlement) may be a further constraint. This is particularly likely in more conservative Islamic societies, such as Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan and Bangladesh— although careful discussions with clerics and opinion leaders can result in mixed meetings being accepted.

*"In the case of Pakistan, women are more easily accessed by women in the field. However we have both experiences in Pakistan, depending on geographical region. Female extension workers in the government set up are rather rare, except in the case of livestock. In socially conservative geographical areas it is difficult to have men accepted as extension workers to access women. Only in few areas if male extension workers are from the same ethnic background, can they access women. Important is to figure out beforehand, based on good context analyses, what RAS may be required by women, whether services for women are available and whether they can reach them. If they cannot for any reason, the project design should already include the necessary elements for a sustainable remedy."*

*Pakistan: Arjumand Nizami, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation*

### When the message is given?

Agricultural training sessions are often timed according to the seasonal agricultural calendar, but they may also need to be timed to fit with the availability of men and women according to seasonal migration. More specifically, the time of day that meetings are held can have a big impact on male or female attendance. A meeting held in the middle of the day may only attract men participants, whereas women may be more readily available early in the morning or evening. Such aspects need to be discussed and determined locally before setting schedules.



*“If you want to reach farmer women at home, meetings often happen in the evenings due to labour work during the day.”*

*Vietnam: Hans Schaltenbrand, Swiss College of Agriculture*

### How the message is communicated

Due to poorer access to education, women are often less literate than men, and find formally presented material (especially graphs and charts) difficult to follow. They may find material that is “packaged” in pictures, plays, songs and human stories much easier to grasp. Extension material intended for women or for women as well as men should thus be carefully tailored not only in its message, but in the way in which it is put across.

The purpose of listing these issues is not only that they require different responses, but also that the approach needed may involve working with men just as much as with women. Nevertheless, of all the issues, those of “who and what?” are generally the most obvious – and for this reason, the issue of women extension workers is one that preoccupies many RAS providers.

### C. Should resources be invested in promoting women extension workers?

From the point of view of gender equity, promoting a balanced number of women and men in a RAS workforce has clear merit. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to find women who wish to take up this

career option. Unfortunately, the more marked the gender differences in society, the greater the perceived need for women extension workers, and the greater the difficulty in recruiting them and ensuring their effective operation. Reasons for employing female extension workers include the following.

- In some societies, especially conservative Islamic ones, there are major constraints to outside men interacting with women who are not related to them. In this situation, working with women extension workers is the only feasible way to talk directly with women.
- In many societies, women simply feel more comfortable interacting with other women. This is reported by practitioners in quite different religious and cultural settings, including Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, India, Mali, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal and Vietnam. It may be particularly true amongst communities that have had little exposure to outside interventions. Given that roles in agriculture are often strongly gender determined, it is generally easier for women extension workers to raise certain “women’s subjects” and speak on them with personal experience.
- Women extension workers can be very important role models. Breaking stereotypes in which women are perceived as being passive, less knowledgeable and less technically skilled than men can have significant “knock-on” effects - both in encouraging other women, and in increasing the respect accorded them by men.



*“We realised that women farmer extension workers (paysannes formatrices) validate and reinforce the capacities of women leaders. They also help reduce the negative stereotype against women... and encourage other women to take responsibility.”*

*Madagascar: Aimee Randrianarisoa, SAHA Programme (SDC-Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation)*

Nevertheless, it is a fact that most extension agents are men. Only 15% of extension agents globally are women; in Africa, the figure drops to 7%.<sup>7</sup> Reasons for this include the following.

- **Recruitment criteria:** The selection of formal extension agents is based at least in part on formal qualifications in agriculture, and relatively few women have such qualifications. If they do, they may be unlikely to have a rural background, and thus lack the “grassroots understanding” needed to interact successfully with farmers.
- **Mobility issues:** Women extension workers often face difficulties travelling alone and/or returning home late. The only form of transport available may be bicycles or motorcycles, which are considered unsuitable for women. Often women extension workers risk societal disapproval for stepping beyond social norms; they may also risk physical violence.
- **Reliability:** Experience in some countries shows that trained women extension workers do not stay long in post, as they must defer to their husband’s career path. If he is

transferred to another region, his wife naturally follows. She may also cease work once she becomes a mother.

- **Acceptance:** In many African countries in particular, women extension workers have difficulty in gaining acceptance from men farmers – whereas men are accepted by both men and women farmers.

*“Gender barriers seem to be high in extension services. Yet it also seems that the barriers are higher for female extension services. Whereas male extension workers assist men and women farmers alike, it does not appear to be the case for female extension workers. According to our partners, they seem to be little accepted by male farmers as they lack the sort of “natural authority” men have in front of other men, even if the women are technically and methodologically better trained.”*

*Benin: Simon Zbinden, SDC*

Ways to address these problems include the following.

- **Reconsider recruitment criteria.** Sometimes the need for formal qualifications is over-emphasised compared to communication skills and practical experience, which are also important for the job. Simply adjusting recruitment criteria to reflect the latter skills can encourage many more women to apply. Another option is to train local women – such as particularly respected individuals, local service providers, and school teachers – in extension skills, as for example reported in Pakistan.



*"Women with some experience in the required field were trained to serve as onward trainers/service providers in their village. These were women who enjoyed a lot of mobility, were socially acceptable and could convey the message easily"*

*Pakistan: Arjumand Nizami, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation*

- **Adopt gender sensitive working conditions.** These include measures such as ensuring that female colleagues are provided transport home (especially after dark), allowing flexible working hours, making provision for child care, introducing parental leave (so that men and women have equal rights to leave for child care). A working atmosphere of support and respect between male and female colleagues is essential.
- **Consider working with couples.** In one example from India, training married couples to provide extension services was reportedly successful, although this of course depends on both individuals having aptitude and interest. Another less radical strategy is to encourage husbands of female extension workers to participate in office events and to stress appreciation of their wife's work.
- **Promote gender-sensitivity in male extension workers:** Although it is context-dependent, often male extension agents can reach women farmers by being particularly attuned to their needs and interests. This requires aptitude (which should be assessed at recruitment) as well as training. At the same time, male extension workers can do much to support and validate their female colleagues.

## D. Working through social networks: mixed or single sex groups?

Human beings share much knowledge and information through their social networks, whether formal or informal. It is important for RAS agents to consider fully the implications of working through different networks.

- Existing women's groups (for saving and credit, maternal and child health, etc) can be a good entry point for spreading extension messages

*"Concerning the role of womens' groups/peer support, we have often made the experience that women organise themselves in networks to ensure that they all have enough input materials for processing (groundnut, rice) and when selling their products on the market. These solidarity systems allow them to overcome certain barriers (funding, bargaining power). In Senegal it is empirically shown (many cases confirm this) that women are more likely and capable to develop networks or systems of economic solidarity."*

*Senegal: Pape Assane Diop, Appui Technique FONG*

- In some cases it may be appropriate to facilitate the formation of farmer groups for sharing knowledge, as in specific approaches such as Participatory Technology Development (PTD) and Farmer Field Schools (FFS). Here the choice of forming single or mixed sex groups must be assessed according to the local context.



*“Women farmer-to-farmer exchanges can be particularly beneficial for the disadvantaged, building confidence and capacities, and sharing experiences. Once they start to succeed and have confidence, working in mixed sex groups can be particularly advantageous in developing commercially [as men have better links with markets].”*

*Madagascar: Aimee Randrianarisoa, SAHA Programme (SDC-Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation)*

- Some RAS interventions operate through fostering farmer’s associations – both single sex and mixed. Here an important issue is to build capacities for sustainability once support ends.

## E. Choice of partner agency

In different countries, rural advisory services provided by the government, NGOs, private companies – or on a voluntary or paid basis by local individuals – have differing relative weight and importance. They also tend to have different organisational cultures with regard to gender.

- Government extensions agencies are not only predominately staffed by men – they also tend to exhibit more masculine ways of working, with an emphasis on facts, figures and quantitative results.
- Individual NGOs can be far more varied in their approach, with some making particular efforts to employ women and emphasise more

feminine approaches such as social inclusion and good communication skills.

- The private sector can also be “gender variable”, although large agro-chemical companies are often mainly concerned with (male-oriented) cash crops and production targets.

*In some cases, the “gender culture” of an organisation is highly significant in influencing the behaviour of individual employees. “There would be more in common between men and women extension workers working for a government system than between two women, one working for an NGO and the other for the government”*

*India: Rupa Mukerji, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation*

However, this is not an argument to work solely with “women-friendly” NGOs; ignoring the government would mean ignoring the possibility to contribute to policy discussions, whilst the private sector may in some cases have far more outreach than other agencies. The point is simply to recognise different organisational cultures, and work with them in a constructive manner.

*“It is...essential that some key staff have access to government policy design via sitting in advising or working groups helping improve concerned RAS policies.”*

*Hans Schaltenbrand, Swiss College of Agriculture*





## F. Final words

This paper provides an overview of key issues to consider in reaching women through RAS. However, it should also be remembered that women are not a homogeneous group – like the men in any community, they are of different ages, some are wealthier and some poorer than others; they may also belong to different ethnic groups, religions, castes, and have different geographical origins (particularly as rural women tend to leave their natal home to marry into new communities). In short, there are many power dynamics and differences of capacity at play, and the likelihood of different women seeking out RAS is varied. It is important to be aware of these dynamics, as RAS, like other development interventions, can reinforce existing power relations, or seek to cut across them in favour of the disadvantaged. The way in which an extension agent – woman or man – chooses to act, and in some cases, their own background, can send clear signals in this regard.

*“We’ve been told about a case of an NGO that wanted to assist women of the Peul, an ethnic group of transhumant animal breeders. They are predominantly Muslim although there is also a small proportion of Christians and Animists. From the beginning it was clear it had to be a woman as the Peul male family heads would not allow male extension workers to assist their women. The NGO hired a woman, but it turned out that as a Christian Peul she would not be accepted by Muslim Peul women. They had to replace her by a woman of the same ethnic group and the same religion. Yet even among the Peul Muslims, there are ethnic subgroups with different social status. The Muslim Peul Gando, for example, where for centuries slaves of other Peul. Although slavery is long since abolished, the inherited and persisting different social status would still impede a Muslim Peul Gando to become an extension agent for other Muslim Peul.”*

*Benin: Simon Zbinden, SDC*

In a world of growing food insecurity, some would argue that simply increasing yields should be the main aim of RAS, and that this will be achieved most effectively by working with innovative, richer farmers – who also tend to be men. Yet supporting disadvantaged women (and men) to enhance their skills and capacities to farm more productively is without doubt an important development objective – even if not always an easy one to achieve.

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> World Bank, 2011 World Development Report 2012 Gender Equality and Development:201
- <sup>2</sup> World Bank, 2011 World Development Report 2012 Gender Equality and Development:203
- <sup>3</sup> FAO, 2011 The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011 Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development. Rome.
- <sup>4</sup> However, SDC provides support for equitable land ownership and more information may be found at: <http://www.landcoalition.org/news/sdc-ilc-promote-secure-and-equitable-access-land>. More information on gender and access to land can also be found in the discussion paper [The Gender Implications of Large-Scale Land Deals](#) published by the International Food Policy Research Institute.
- <sup>5</sup> There is statistical evidence from a number of countries that the use of quotas and other forms of affirmative action to ensure participation/representation by women and other disadvantaged groups has a positive long term effect, both through encouraging others and increasing overall social acceptability. World Bank, 2011 World Development Report 2012 Gender Equality and Development: 29-30.
- <sup>6</sup> ISPWDK Programme Series 2 Integrating Gender in Watershed Management
- <sup>7</sup> World Bank, 2011 World Development Report 2012 Gender Equality and Development:234

### Photos:

- p. 2: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation/Nicolas Merky
- p. 3: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation/Stephanie Keller
- p. 4: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation
- p. 5: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation/Flurina Rothenberger
- p. 6: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation/Serge R.T. Boya
- p. 7: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation/Tanja Demarmels
- p. 8: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation/Matthew Bennett
- p. 9: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation/Anmole Prasad

