

## **"Role of Egyptian Women in Farming and Rural Activities"**

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### Abstract

In response to the world wide growing interest in the role of women in human welfare, this study focused on conditions of the Egyptian rural women and the potentials of their role progress. Most of their activities were revealed home or field stationed. Raising poultry and cottage dairy production are major female activities. Women field work, though contributing almost 81% for the small farms, is confined to practicing the simplest and least hazardous techniques. According to characteristics of the Egyptian farm women governed by both traditions and level of education, they are expected to constantly require male assistance in marketing activities, especially off-village. Moreover, efforts paid to solve animal production domestic problems, with special reference to animal diseases such as the Birds Flu and cattle sterilization, would indirectly sustain women mentioned above major economic activities.

### Introduction

During the last two decades, a growing world wide interest in the role of women in society has taken place. Both international and national efforts have been activated to reinforce such role, especially in developing countries. It was argued that in Africa about 60-80% of food is produced by women (Fresco, 1998)<sup>(5)</sup>. In Egypt, a strong movement has occurred to strengthen the position and role of women in the society. "The National Committee for Women" was established in 1987, replaced by "The National Council for Women" in 2000, in order to support and help organizing the activities targeting women development. Likewise, a much higher percent of women are appointed for high governmental administrative posts, such as heads of departments and vice presidents. Numerous projects, especially sponsored by NGOs, were initiated for sake of women development, mostly in rural areas.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the prevalent conditions of women participation in rural aspects of life, especially those of economic nature, the influential factors, and potentials of progress.

### Major characteristics of Egyptian rural women:

Females constitute nearly one-half the rural population in Egypt. About 70% fall within the active age range (6-60 years)<sup>(11)</sup>. Considering education, there has been a gradual rise in percentage of females able to read and write from an average of about 36.8% (1996)<sup>(2)</sup> approaching a maximum of about 46.5% for females in areas in vicinity of big cities, such as "Giza" governorate tangent to Cairo (2005). Coinciding with the education status, females joining formal labor force fall in range of 1.5-18% with an average of about 7.6% vs. nearly 28%<sup>(11)</sup> for urban areas where percent of women finishing high school reach 4 times that of rural regions. As such, women constitute nearly 43% of total formal employment while exceeding the male percent in big cities, reaching 59.2% and 57.8% in Cairo and Alexandria, respectively<sup>(9)</sup>.

Regarding involvement in public social activities, such as rural development societies, voluntary action is hardly initiated by rural women. They may only respond to seek health services delivered by public clinics staged in principal villages whenever their needs call for it, and only till their health problems are solved. They may also respond to call for participation in women development projects focusing on economic activities such as cottage industries involving dairy production, pickling, vegetables and fruits preservation, sewing and embroidery. Hence, Egyptian rural women involvement in general social activities may be safely considered poor.

### Influential factors of women active participation in the rural community:

The degree of women participation in village development, all aspects concerned, is governed by several factors, mostly interrelated.

#### 1. Religion and traditional aspects:

In general, rural parts of any country, especially in under developed societies, are strongly governed by religion beliefs and strongly conserved by established traditions. The rural community is hardly flexible in these matters and fiercely reluctant to any change attempts. There prevails a strong belief that women are inferior to men and that they should –as far as possible- stick to their home activities. Any deviation from such rule, whatever slight, is considered shameful and strongly criticized. Such belief is erroneously referred to religion, while in fact mostly inherited from old underdeveloped and Bedouin culture which strongly penetrated the religion legacy. As evidence, hardly any difference in this matter is detected between Muslims and Copts. Ironically, in some of the Bedouin communities in Sinai, women undertake most of the farm field work, while males seek other kinds of work, even on part-time basis. Likewise, in many rural areas, especially in the northern parts, male household heads usually seek their wives opinion whenever making decisions with respect to their economic or social life aspects. However, this is mostly practiced with discretion in order to preserve appearances of man ego and superiority.

#### 2. Geographical location:

As geographical aspects are mostly connected with environmental conditions, impact on habitual conduct is expected. In this respect, the behavior toward women activities differs along with the geographic properties of the rural community. As such, in northern regions farmers are not too keen to keep women indoors, and the last participate in both field work and local marketing activities. In more conserved areas, such as of Upper Egypt, and desert communities such as in Sinai and "Matrouh", most marketing tasks are practiced by males. That is since dealing in markets and bargaining involve direct constant contact with other dealers, mostly males is hardly accepted for a female by either fathers, brothers or husbands, whoever is considered guardian. This may explain why marketing of eggs, chicken and dairy production is widely observed in village markets practiced by women in northern areas while they are hardly practiced in the conserved southern regions of Upper Egypt.

#### 3. Level of education:

As earlier mentioned, female school enrollment registration has increased in rural Egypt since the mid 1990s, ranging between 46-87%. Likewise, the percent of women obtaining high school degrees or over remarkably increased to 22-34% (2005)<sup>(11)</sup>, while had been less than 8% in the previous period. As for those who can only read and write, they represented 60-77%. Logically expected, such percentage is noticeably lower than the corresponding estimates for urban areas which mount to almost 1.4 times the rural figures in average. In this respect, although relatively high percentages enroll for basic education reaching 70% in most cases, withdrawal occurs, as indicated by a drop of percent of females finishing high school to an average of 12%, widely dispersed as ranging between 5-21.2% among the different governorates. However, less favorable estimates are given by other specialized surveys ( table 1). Their data indicates a percentage of illiteracy in range of 54-68%. Such surveys show that females able to read and write

fall in range of 22-24%, and those obtaining less than high school degrees fall in range of 12-14%.

Table (1)- Relative importance of major women socioeconomic characteristics in selected upper and lower Egypt rural communities (%)

Attribute	Lower Egypt	Upper Egypt
Illiteracy	54	68
Read & write	24	20
Lower than high school	14	12
High school or over	8	0
Married	44	58
Unmarried	48	36
Divorced	8	6

Source: El-Ashmawy, K.H. ; L.M. El-Sherif & A. I. El-Khafif .(2007). " Socioeconomic and environmental aspects of women labor in the Egyptian agricultural sector: case study of sugar crops . " American- \_Aurasian J. Agr. & Environ. Sci, 2(3):255-260,2007. ISSN 1818-6769 IDOSI Publications, 2007.

#### 4. Type of activities:

Data show that female land holders represent 10-25% of total landholders. Their landholdings are mostly below 1.2 feddans/each. Due to education improvement achievements, females involved in public work reached an average of 20% with a minimum of nearly 12% in Asuit (Upper Egypt) and a maximum of 40% in Menofia (lower Egypt). Women participating in non-farm private activities represent a scarce situation of 3% or less. As such, it is safe to state that the major activity of rural women remains within farming.

#### Women involvement in rural activities:

Farming decision making: although female landholders constitute a minority in Egypt, as previously mentioned, they are remarkably involved in decision-making with respect to farming activities. As shown in table ( 2 ), for some areas in almost 90% and 60% of cases, women are consulted in matters of cropping structures and choice of operations timing, respectively. On the other hand, consulting women in choice of marketing outlets is detected in less than 10% of surveyed farms. In 24-40% of farms, women are consulted in technical matters of farming operations. Once again, the specific conserved traditions of Upper Egypt dictated a relatively lower involvement of women in farming decision-making.

Farming operations execution: as a remarkable phenomenon, women are strongly involved in farming field work, even more than males for specific operations. As presented in table (3), females in Lower Egypt seem to carry out about 86% of seeds sowing, 80% of thinning and replanting and 50% of output cleaning and hauling. Their involvement in mechanized operations is dramatically poor, dropping to almost nil in land preparation and reaching a maximum of about 12.5% in irrigation. As for Upper Egypt, women participation is lower, as expected. However, some similarities exist with respect to the low rate of involvement in mechanized operations and chemical pest control, and vivid participation in output cleaning and hauling. Due to the lower wage rates for women ( about 67% of the

male rate) women labor are hired to accomplish about 43.7% of farming practices in other farms, with a maximum of nearly 58% of the thinning operation, 33.3% for harvest and 16.7% for planting <sup>(9)</sup>. As expected, women family labor contribution diminishes for bigger farms, as reaching almost 81% for farms of less than one feddan (0.4 ha), and drop to only 11% in farms of more than two hectares in size <sup>(9)</sup>.

Considering livestock activities, females entirely undertake poultry raising and milking of cattle, in addition to the following processing in production of butter, ghee and white cheese.

#### Potentials of women's role development:

Despite the prevalent unfavorable conditions, whether traditional or educational, there exist strong potentials for development of the Egyptian rural women's role, especially economic wise. Any effort paid to encourage women active participation in economic activities within the farm borders is mostly accepted by family members. Nevertheless, success of such efforts and their sustainability demand considering the prevalent level of education and its impact on the ability to cope with the adopted

Table (2) – Areas of women participation in decision making (%)

Item	Lower Egypt	Upper Egypt
Cropping structure	90	16
Date of planting	20	30
Adopted method	24	16
Operation timing	60	20
Fertilization: method and quantity	44	10
Marketing channels	10	10
Marketing timing	10	16

Source: Ibid.

Table (3) - Women contribution to variant farming cropping operations (%)

Operation	Lower Egypt	Upper Egypt
Seeding and land preparation	0	25
Manure application	18	25
Sowing	86	30
Irrigation	13	0
Chemical fertilization	75	10
Thinning and replanting	80	0
Pest control	25	10
Harvest	40	20
Output cleaning and loading	50	75
Waste and leftovers dispose	0	10

Source: Ibid.

techniques which should be as simple as possible. Likewise, reliance on the environment's available resources along with the least expensive tools is an effective factor enhancing adoption of the suggested activities. Accordingly, dairy production, vegetables pickling, and producing fruits juice and marmalade are the activities expected to be the most successful under the foregoing socioeconomic conditions.

It is true that several corps, either public or private, have executed training programs for activities of sewing and embroidery, but their success was limited by the existing

personal qualifications, need of specific skills upgrading and relatively expensive equipment. It is also clearly established that male assistance is constantly required for marketing procedures, especially off village. This is mostly due to the nature of most rural women governed by all surrounding environmental conditions. The most effective program to promote women economic activities would be through marketing corps which may supervise training, monitor production performance, and mainly handle all marketing activities. Finance and providing loans at low or even interest free rates is a crucial matter since limited capital and difficult access to credit facilities is a common factor hindering farmer women support in many African countries such as Nigeria (Fabiya et al, 2007) <sup>(3)</sup>.

Considering social activities, promoting the role of women requires women education advancement along with her male sponsor (father or husband). That is since involvement of women, especially in non-explicit economic returns activities, may not be approved by a male head of the family who is narrow-minded, and of poor social awareness, as mainly connected with poor education. Conversely, as logically expected, women involvement in economic activities from which the household receives direct economic benefits advantages the best chances. This is explicitly revealed through exploring women's actual participation in rural social activities. Most of those women are non-farm residents, living in major rural cities "marakes" and are wives or daughters of public employees.

### Conclusions

All efforts, public or private, paid to exploit the unused capacity of Egyptian rural women should concentrate on economic activities of the simplest technologies, relying as far as possible on local resources, whether natural or synthesized. Under all conditions, the marketing activities, especially out of village, should be organized and handled by either males or the sponsoring institutions per se.

It is worth mentioning that the most common rural economic activity of women, i.e. raising poultry, has faced a drastic drawback since the early 2007 due to the outspread of the Birds Flu crisis resulting in almost 90% destruction of the poultry raising activity in rural Egypt. Likewise, the livestock endemic diseases have been more active during the last few years, strongly affecting the bulk of milk production. As such, the dairy cottage industry, in which rural women are specialized, is dramatically jeopardized. Accordingly, efforts paid to solve animal production problems shall indirectly sustain the active role of women in most Egyptian rural regions.

In general, progress in women education conditions in rural regions is a key factor in promoting their livelihood matters including all types of activities.

### Summary

With regard to the worldwide growing interest in women role development in the society, this study's interest focused on the conditions and potentials of the Egyptian rural women development. The study relied upon analysis of data collected for the national human development reports beside other empirical surveys. In general, the last two decades witnessed a strong state support for the women role, as a specialized supreme national council for women was established to support all efforts paid in this area. Additionally, a much higher percent of women are appointed for high governmental administrative posts. The study showed that the role of women is governed principally by both the prevalent level of education and the dominant traditions. Accordingly, it was found that women in Lower Egypt are more socially active than women of Upper Egypt who are governed by more strict and conserved

traditions. As for farming, although women land holders constitute no more than 25% of total landholders their contribution to field work reaches 81% for the smallest farms. Under the said conditions, it is concluded that best opportunities for women development lie in the economic activities of the simplest technologies and the least cost. However, marketing activities will constantly require male assistance, especially for off-village marketing. It was also concluded that solving the domestic problems of animal production would positively influence the effectiveness of women major economic activities, i.e. raising poultry and dairy processing. Moreover, women active participation in absolute social activities requires not only higher level of education for women, but also for their male heads of the family.

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