

Communication and Rural Women: Voices for Change

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of rural women is a key to achieving sustainable and inclusive development, and communication can play a key role as a stimulus for the same. This article examines how gender-sensitive and participatory communication strategies can overcome the serious socioeconomic and cultural limitations that rural women face. Contributing significantly to agriculture, food security, and natural resources management, their roles are often undervalued. The essay stresses the necessity of empowering rural women with the knowledge, voice, and competence to bring about change through existing and new channels of communication that are accessible, appropriate, and culturally acceptable. It emphasizes the need of training, traditional knowledge, and participatory media planning in addressing the disparities caused by illiteracy, digital exclusion, and mobility restrictions. Lastly, the article calls for communication strategies that engage rural women as dynamic agents of development and social change, not merely as recipients.

INTRODUCTION

Communication can play a decisive role in promoting food security and rural development in today's climate of political and socio-economic change (Deka,

Kumar, & Sah, 2003). By fostering a dialogue between rural people and other sectors of society, communication processes can empower both women and men to provide

information and knowledge as a basis for change and innovation. They can enable people to take decisions concerning their own livelihood and thereby increase their overall involvement in development. More specifically, gender-sensitive communication processes can give rural women a voice to advocate changes in policies, attitudes and social behaviour or customs that negatively affect them. The same processes can help women to exchange experiences, find common ground for decisions, take more control of their lives and add value to their role as active partners in rural and sustainable development.

INVISIBLE CONTRIBUTORS

While both women and men make significant contributions to agricultural and rural development, women are taking on an increasingly prominent role. Women farmers now account for half of the world's food production, and in many developing countries, they produce 60 to 80 percent of the food consumed within households. Recent studies reaffirm that women constitute about 43% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries, yet continue to face barriers in accessing resources and information (FAO, IFAD & UN Women, 2022). In addition to their central role in food production, women are actively involved in fisheries, forestry, and serve as a vital labor force in cash crop cultivation. They also bear primary responsibility for feeding their families, making them essential to both household and national food security.

The "feminization of agriculture" has placed a considerable burden on women's capacity to produce, provide and prepare food in the face of already considerable social, economic and cultural constraints. Despite their essential role in achieving global food security, the contributions of women are often underestimated and overlooked in

development strategies - they remain the "invisible" partners in development (Singh, 2003).

Rural women play a vital role in addressing the major development challenges of the coming century. These include sustainably managing the environment, coping with rapid population growth and urbanization, ensuring food security, meeting essential health, education, and literacy needs, and eradicating poverty. Luthra (2016) sheds light on how Southern women reclaim their voices, navigating silence and resistance through traditional and modern communication, as they reshape narratives and confront barriers on their path toward meaningful empowerment and social transformation.

Women are vital economic contributors, yet their work often goes unrecognized, leading to a significant underestimation of their development potential. In rural areas, women play a key role in environmental conservation due to their close relationship with the land. Their deep understanding of local biodiversity enables them to protect natural resources through sustainable practices in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Like men, women have consistently demonstrated their effectiveness and indispensability as partners in development. Empowering them through access to knowledge and information is essential for improving rural livelihoods and achieving sustainable development goals.

QUESTIONS OF DISPARITY

Efforts should be made to overcome the following critical issues for improving the socio-economic and cultural status of women.

Increasing poverty and declining food security: Women constitute the majority of the world's poor. Information, knowledge and skills can help decrease women's vulnerability to poverty in crisis situation.

Unequal access to land, credit and agricultural support services: Women are denied both ownership and effective use of productive resources. Knowledge of their rights and opportunities can enhance women's contribution to production.

Unequal access to agricultural inputs, tools and technologies: New technologies and inputs are channelled primarily towards cash crops, the domain of men, and women lack the money required to purchase inputs as well as the knowledge and skills to apply them.

Unequal access to education, training and extension: Women receive less education than men and constitute the majority of the illiterate population. Their vocational and technical training is even more neglected than their general education, and extension is primarily directed towards men.

Insufficient knowledge about access to marketing outlets: Illiteracy as well as capital and legal constraints limit women's access to modern markets. Women need to acquire skills in marketing, accounting and business management.

Negative impacts of structural adjustment policies and economic globalization: Globalization and structural adjustment policies have brought unemployment and undermined social services. Information on their rights and opportunities can help women to overcome the negative impact of these policies (Sharma and Jhamtani, 1996).

Statistical invisibility: A lack of gender-disaggregated data from rural areas prevents policy-makers from including women's concerns in development programmes (Tyagi, 2003). Accurate gender information is crucial in the formulation of agricultural development and food security strategies.

Poor working conditions and unequal wages: Women tend to work longer hours than men, and for less or no reward. Women need to be informed of their right to organize themselves and take advantage of social services, training and other opportunities.

Ignorance of women's indigenous knowledge: Women farmers' wealth of accumulated experience and knowledge often passes unnoticed. Planners and policy-makers need information about women's potential and actual contribution to agriculture.

Problems related to nutrition, health and violence: Women and girls are subject to food discrimination and damaging cultural practices such as genital mutilation, and they lack information on nutrition and health. Information and education to promote changes in social and cultural behaviour are crucial to help overcome these problems.

Environmental degradation: Resource-poor women farmers are driven to adopt practices that are harmful to the environment. They must be alerted to the threats that environmental degradation poses to food security, and need to learn to use technologies and inputs that are less damaging to natural resources.

To overcome these "questions of difference", and thus improve the status and living conditions of rural women, there must be a change in attitudes and behaviour at all levels - above all, through the sharing of knowledge, information and skills.

GIVING A VOICE TO RURAL WOMEN

HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNICATION

The shift in development thinking and practice towards people-centered programmes and the participation of people and communities in

decisions concerning their own lives is creating new opportunities for social change and the empowerment of both women and men in rural areas (Kumar, 1995). Nevertheless, it is vital to stimulate their awareness, involvement and capabilities further.

Different methods of communication and media can facilitate development by encouraging dialogue and debate. Furthermore, they can give a voice to rural women, thus enabling them to articulate their own development agendas. Similarly, by fostering the exchange of knowledge and information, communication can stimulate women's awareness and motivation, allowing them to take informed decisions on the crucial issues affecting their lives.

Communication can promote changes in attitudes and social behaviour and help communities to identify sustainable opportunities and development solutions that are within their reach. In addition to putting development planners in a position to respect women's traditional knowledge, communication processes can improve the management and effectiveness of new social organizations and institutions, ensuring that they provide services to women in a participatory and democratic manner. They can be powerful tools for advising women about new ideas and practices and improving training. The majority of rural women are illiterate and live in remote, isolated areas where access to information, lack of transportation, a scarcity of trainers, and cultural and language differences are common problems - problems, however, that can be overcome through the use of appropriate communication technologies.

WOMEN'S COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Participatory audience research is an essential prerequisite for the planning of successful communication strategies, the selection of

appropriate media and the design of creative messages. In developing countries, the communication requirements of women in rural areas are different from those of women and men in urban centres and developed countries. Rural women do not have equal access to information, for reasons such as their restricted mobility outside the home, lack of education and, in some cases, men's control over information and media.

Special attention should be paid to selecting the communication channels that are most appropriate for women and to producing materials in local languages. Because women are involved in many aspects of rural life, their traditional knowledge systems are complex and holistic. Consequently, communication programmes must deal with the various economic and social issues affecting women, including agriculture, habitat, health, nutrition, family planning, population growth, the environment and education and illiteracy.

TRAINING IN COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The training of women as rural communication specialists at all levels - from fieldworkers to trainers and planners - is an essential requirement for successful communication efforts carried out by women for the benefit of women.

Women can only have access to communication media if they have the skills and training to use them. In the past, training was often theoretical and primarily concentrated on media production and technology. New participatory communication approaches require innovative and interactive learning processes, preferably field-based approach (Arya & Jamal, 1996; Bhagat, 1996). Women can learn more effectively through field experience and practice rather than through traditional classroom training.

Video, audio and computer technologies have become smaller, cheaper and more user-friendly. Easy-to-use equipment as well as participatory approaches and methods have given rural women the opportunity to become skilled in using media and to have access to, and control over, the necessary tools for information generation and exchange.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

COMMUNICATION - A PRE-REQUISITE FOR SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT

Women play key roles in the development of their communities. If lasting progress is to be achieved, women and men must have equal access to the resources needed for development and to the benefits it produces.

There is no simple recipe to ensure successful communication in development efforts or for the advancement of rural women. Nevertheless, from best practices and lessons learned in communication for development over the past decades, the following guiding principles have emerged.

Listening to rural women

Communication efforts should begin with development planners listening to women and carefully considering their perceptions and needs, their knowledge and experience and their culture and traditions. Planners must take into account the reality of rural areas and the changes required to improve the livelihoods of rural women in ways that can be sustained.

A holistic approach

Communication efforts should cover all the multifaceted aspects of life in rural areas affecting women, including agriculture, the environment, health, sanitation, family planning, education and literacy. A holistic approach should be used to ensure that women's concerns are integrated into research

and extension programmes. Success in achieving sustainable and equitable development is increasingly dependent on the acquisition of information and knowledge.

Multichannel approach

Communication programmes should make use of all modern and traditional media infrastructure and channels available in a country, and appropriate technologies and media should be applied according to the prevailing cultural, social and economic conditions. Programmes should be participatory and interactive, and special attention should be given to the communication channels most suited to women.

Access to new information and communication technologies

A concerted effort should be made to harness the potential of the new communication technologies for sharing information and knowledge with women in rural areas. Essential tasks include improving the quantity and accessibility of infrastructure, increasing the relevance of information to the needs of rural women, and training women in computer skills. Despite increased mobile phone penetration, women in low- and middle-income countries remain 7% less likely than men to own a mobile device, limiting their access to digital tools for agriculture and information sharing (GSMA, 2023). Communication practitioners must act as information brokers, selecting the most appropriate channels for the transmission of information to rural audiences that do not have access to the new information technologies.

Training in participatory communication skills

The training of women as communication specialists at all levels - from fieldworkers to

trainers and planners - is an essential requirement for successful communication efforts carried out by and for women. Training in the production and use of communication tools should be provided to rural women's organizations and community groups so that they can participate in programmes for women and effectively communicate their own messages and concerns.

Change agents should be trained in participatory communication skills and the use of audiovisual training methodologies in the aim of establishing a dialogue with rural women, learning from their experience and improving the quality and outreach of training activities.

Monitoring and evaluation

More applied research and evaluation studies should be carried out on the visual perception and understanding of audiences composed of illiterate rural women. The advent of new information technologies opens up a vast new field for evaluating the impact of communication programmes. Studies should include an evaluation of the impact of these technologies at the grassroots level, for communities that are without any form of connectivity and, especially, for female audiences that are hard to reach.

Advocating gender-sensitive communication policies

The use of communication for development must be placed on the agenda of governments, development planners and decision-makers, who need to promote an active and visible policy to mainstream gender perspectives and the requirements of women in rural communication policies and programmes. If the full potential of communication, and especially the new information technologies, is to be exploited for sustainable development, policy-makers must take rural women's

specific needs into account and involve them in decisions regarding application of such technologies.

AN AGENT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Communication is thus a powerful force for fostering learning, positive change and empowerment in the process of rural development. It has the potential to enhance people's quality of life, help protect fragile environments and create a knowledge-based society that is more responsive to change and development issues.

Effective communication can empower women, enabling them to take control of their lives and participate equally with men in advancing food security and rural development. However, unlocking the full potential of communication to help rural women improve their living conditions remains a global challenge. Without it, the voices of rural women advocating for change risk going unheard.

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