Footballs, almond blossoms and blue chickens: forestry extension with rural women in Pakistan

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Experiences of the Balochistan, Pakistan, component of the FAO Interregional Project for Participatory Upland Conservation and Development, involving women in natural resource management.

A group promoter - local women do not permit their picture to be taken

In Pakistan, *purdah*, the social segregation of men and women, is the cultural norm. The government forest service in general and the extension service in particular are exclusively staffed by men. Moreover, development efforts including social or community forestry projects have not yet developed approaches that are culturally compatible with the participation of women. This has resulted in the virtual exclusion of women from forestry and watershed management development efforts, despite the fact that women are responsible for many activities that have a direct bearing on natural resource conservation and use. In an article in *Aurat* (a Pakistani journal), del Nevo (1992) identifies two main factors to be considered when involving women in social forestry in Pakistan: "there are only a handful of women extension workers in the whole of Pakistan and also a great shortage of male and female development workers and foresters who can train them" and "social forestry programmes must be compatible with the cultural norms of the communities involved". In addition, development activities have lacked approaches and methodologies with which to promote women's participation. The Balochistan pilot effort of the FAO Interregional Project for Participatory Upland Conservation and Development, established in Mastung District in the subwatershed of Noza in the Kanak valley in 1992, has experimented with methods designed to promote the involvement of local women in sustainable natural resource management (see Box).

WOMEN'S ROLE

A Brahui woman works an average of 17 hours each day during the productive season. Gender analysis of women's routines reveals that from April to October, most women in Noza spend over 60 percent of their time in productive work and the rest of their time is divided between domestic chores and social obligations.

According to participants from Balochistan in the First National Conference of Peasant Women (the Haryali Conference), held in Lahore in 1991, "our work includes domestic work like cooking, washing clothes, fetching water and fuelwood and making dung cakes. Our work also

includes looking after farm animals, cutting grass and cleaning up the place of the animals, giving them fodder and water and finally milking them. In the fields we tend the wheat crop - pulling out onions and putting them into sacks - weed the fields, pick and cut vegetables and then take meals to the men working in the fields. Not only do we do this, some of our women also do sewing and wage labour."

Although Brahui women and children use natural resources and significantly affect their sustainability, they have little or no say in the decision-making process. For example, wells and land are owned by men. In some tribes, women are not allowed to plant trees, especially fruit-trees, because it is believed that if a woman plants a tree, the tree will wither and die or it will be barren and not produce fruit.

Therefore, the challenge is to involve women, who already have a full workload, limited mobility and little decision-making power, in watershed management. How can the curtain be lifted and women become full partners in the management of the natural resource base?

IDENTIFYING AND TRAINING TRAINERS

Since custom dictates that women must be separated from men, it is necessary to train and prepare two teams of extension agents to do field work. Although these teams of men and women cannot work directly together, they are jointly responsible for integrating gender issues in overall village planning and development.

In Balochistan, the Forestry and Wildlife Department has not as a rule employed professional women or women forestry extension agents. Women in Balochistan who pursue professional careers tend to go into medicine or education, professions that are traditionally more acceptable for women. There are almost no role models of women working in forestry, agriculture or with livestock and the problem is compounded by the few positions reserved for women in the provincial government overall. Moreover, for the few professional women who are in government service, it is much more acceptable and desirable to work in an office than to go out into villages. Families will only allow women members to travel to rural areas in controlled conditions and then only in project or department vehicles.

To reach women, the Pakistan pilot project has had to hire women "group promoters" from outside the Forestry and Wildlife Department. Instead of advertising in the province for candidates with advanced degrees, who would come from urban centres such as the provincial capital, Quetta, local Brahui-speaking women without advanced degrees were hired as group promoters. Project management upgraded the skills of these women group promoters to ensure professional equity between men and women working under the project.

For women group promoters, learning to use participatory approaches requires putting aside considerations of social status and conventional attitudes while learning to listen to and cultivate an "openness" to village women. Changing attitudes is a difficult and complicated process, and the project drew on experiences by trainers in Shirkat Gah, a non-governmental organization (NGO) working for the empowerment of women in Sindh Province (Shirkat Gah, 1994). While training women group promoters to work in urban low-income areas in the city of Karachi, these trainers encountered resistance from trainees that seems to be common in Pakistan. Although the women being trained were "themselves middle-class, they appeared to resist identifying with low-income commu-nities. Symbols of an 'educated middle-class' status were evident in their cloth-ing, and the carrying of large bags and files on field visits emphasized differ-ences and perhaps reflected a fear of poverty and rigid class consciousness". The project had to emphasize the need not to make these class distinctions.

Critical to reaching rural women is the ability to organize meetings. However, the target group, the village women in Noza, had no experience of holding meetings or doing exercises as a

group. Most of them had never been visited by female group promoters or government extension workers before the advent of the project. "First meetings are always noisy and chaotic, with everyone speaking at once, babies crying and children crowding into the room to see what's happening" (in FAO, 1993). In one village, young boys on nearby rooftops started pelting stones at women meeting with project staff because the women tried to keep them out of the meetings. The next visit, group promoters brought footballs to the village, keeping the boys busy and allowing the women to meet in peace. The footballs were an effective way to buy time until the women's meetings were no longer perceived to be an unusual occurrence.

PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL

The first step in the process of involving women in natural resource management was to conduct a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) with the village women. This was conceptually difficult, as the traditional hierarchy and culture provides individuals and groups with a stylized forum for communicating needs to traditional leaders and to outsiders such as project staff. PRA, on the other hand, depends on people speaking for themselves. A good deal of time and effort was devoted to developing interactive tools for a PRA that could be utilized by the women, nearly all of whom were illiterate (the official literacy rate for women in the project area is 1.2 percent but even this low figure is probably overstated).

One productive PRA exercise was the preparation of a map of the village. It is noteworthy that this activity drew a good response at least in part owing to the "privilege" of using pens and paper, usually restricted to the world of the "literate" - in this case the exclusive domain of a few village men. A particularly interesting result of the mapping exercise was that the women, in contrast to village men who participated in similar exercises, consistently include natural resources in the village map. They consistently draw the wells, the fields and the uplands, reflecting the importance of these areas. This confirms that "women's perspective about their environment is often more multidimensional and multifunctional than that of other members of society" (Dankleman, 1993), an element crucial to the sustainable management of the watershed.

Another PRA tool adapted for use by the village women was the "daily time profile". This tool was used to promote discussions of women's daily routines and seasonal activities. Given that the seclusion of women within the family compound is associated with a higher economic standing, women are often reluctant to speak about tasks they perform outside the home. Village women experienced difficulty in listing all the different activities they carry out, so the group promoters designed a series of colour pictures depicting what rural Brahui women might do during a day. In fact, the village women found it easier to talk about their daily routines when holding the pictures. If women identified additional activities that were not represented by the pictures, new images were drawn up by the group promoter.

After identifying the various activities they undertook, the next step was to calculate how much time was spent on each. At first, this was difficult for the women. They do not measure time in hours, but traditionally by counting the sections of the day. To simplify the exercise, group promoters photocopied the time profile pictures in three different sizes to get a better comparative approximation of time spent on various activities. Although they were still able to participate in the exercise and this interactive tool allowed women to create a visual documentation of their daily lives, the transformation of the images from colour to black and white in the photocopying process made it sig-nificantly harder for the village women to interpret and use the drawings.

Example of the daily time profile cards used by the project

The priority needs identified by women in Noza through the PRA focused on infrastructure development (clinics, schools, etc.) and not on conserving natural resources. Given their

responsibility for a wide variety of labour-intensive household and village tasks, and given that they are excluded from the decision-making process concerning natural resources, this seemed logical. Like rural women in many parts of the world, they want access to piped water in the village, they want access to schools and health facilities and they want to increase their family income. However, a pilot project for upland conservation and development can seldom justify the establishment of health facilities or schools. On the other hand, income-generating activities help build the skills, organizations, etc. necessary for long-term sustainable management of natural resources. Therefore, project entry point activities with women have centred on income generation.

PROMISING TECHNIQUES

Women's organizations

The project strategy was to develop income-generating "packages" while, considering cultural norms, looking for ways of involving women in managing the environment. Project staff assisted women to create self-help organizations through which they could learn to hold meetings, make group decisions and manage credit.

Women need to build up their self-confidence and ability to express themselves. They need to be able to discuss ideas and to have access to information. Organizations provide them with a forum for developing these skills and for receiving training in other skills.

At first it was difficult for the women to decide what they wanted to do because they have had little exposure to most income-generating activities and they are not involved in marketing. After doing a simple feasibility study, women select income-generating activities such as raising chickens for egg production, lamb fattening or tailoring. A women's organization was built around these activities. In each case, an activity is selected by the group and group decisions are recorded by group promoters until a local community member who can keep written documentation for the organization (often a husband or a son) is identified. If the village is large, two or three women's organizations are created. Women are also asked to agree to start a savings programme where each member contributes to a cash box on a monthly basis until a minimum amount is reached and a bank account can be opened.

Office bearers such as the chairperson, deputy chairperson and treasurer are elected by the group for a one-year term. The group also gives the organization a name. A spontaneous competition has emerged in Noza to find the most original name of a plant or wild flower growing in the watershed, so organizations have names such as Wild Tulip, Wild Iris or Wild Almond Blossom.

Initially, group promoters try to hold two well-planned and interesting meetings a month with each organization. Village women often dress up on meeting days, which is a sign of the importance accorded to them. Attendance is checked to stress that regular participation is important and that decisions cannot be made unless all members are present and a consensus is reached. Group office bearers also learn to record monthly savings in members' passbooks. Although meetings are geared around income-generating activities, the purpose is to train women in leadership and managerial skills so that they can eventually manage their organizations independently and play a bigger role in natural resource management.

Training courses

All project activities are supported by short training courses. All participants are invited to attend training and, after an initial hesitation, women seem particularly to enjoy and benefit from the courses. The courses are designed to maximize participation and often involve the use of picture cards, group discussions and practical demonstrations. Children and young girls are encouraged to take part in training with their mothers.

The project's policy has been to contract women extension agents and trainers from Mastung District when possible rather than to rely on urban areas. It is easier to find women extension health workers in Mastung District. For example, village women wanted to construct pit latrines so the project contracted a Lady Health Visitor to give basic hygiene training. She used existing training materials produced by UNICEF and adapted to the project area. However, all extension agents required a financial incentive from the project because working under a project in rural areas was considered to be outside their normal departmental duties.

Another problem related to the organization of training courses was that cultural norms dictate that women must not travel without another woman. Therefore, since a group promoter always has to accompany a trainer, the project had to hire an additional vehicle for transport. Moreover, project staff have had to prepare the training courses for chicken raising, egg marketing and lamb fattening because there were no women extension agents with this experience. The creation of an organization is an advantage because it is easier to introduce staff from government agencies or NGOs to groups of women willing and ready to learn. For example, women from an agricultural office in Quetta, experts in "jam making" who had never been in villages before, could come to organizations in several villages where the women wanted to learn how to use excess fruit from the orchards.

As women's self-confidence grew, they started taking the initiative and solving their own problems. The first women who took part in chicken raising for egg production from the Jasmine organization were keen to manage their own chickens and not to get their chickens mixed up with others in their compounds. Their solution: they took the initiative to dye the chickens vivid colours like cobalt blue, chartreuse and magenta.

A drawing used by the project to promote chicken raising activities for women

Exposure trips

Early in the project, the practice of taking women on exposure trips and exchanges was initiated. Rural women are often isolated and cut off from information. Through exposure trips they have an opportunity to see and learn and exchange ideas. For this purpose, the project hires a van or a bus for women only and group promoters accompany them on short day trips. Women must have permission from their husbands or families to leave the village and, at first, only the old women were allowed out with the project, but gradually more and more women of different ages were granted permission to travel.

The first exposure trip brought 14 women from three villages to visit demonstration plots of "salt bush" (*Atriplex* sp.) at the Arid Zone Research Institute (AZRI) in Quetta. As a result, one woman convinced men in her village to give a plot of land to be planted with salt bush in cooperation with the Forestry Department. Other trips have been made to the well-known annual Sibi livestock fair. On one occasion, the hired bus broke down in the Bolan pass and some of the women did not reach home until after midnight. That women were allowed to participate on subsequent trips was an indication of the level of trust that had been established with project staff. Another trip permitted 35 women from six organizations in Noza to participate in the International Women's Day Celebration on 8 March 1995 in Quetta.

Exposure trips have also been organized to bring together the leaders of the newly created local women's organizations. During the visits, the women find themselves in the position of having to describe their organizations and activities to other persons who, although women, are strangers. This strengthens their ability to make concise, sequential presentations, think logically and comprehensively about their activities and develop a professional capacity for leadership. For example, Zer Bibi, who is deputy chairperson of the "Almond Blossom" women's organization in Raza Mohammad village, recently visited the chairperson of a

Balochistan Rural Support Programme-assisted organization in Dasht. Zer Bibi had to explain how Almond Blossom organization worked and what major activities had been carried out in the village through the organization.

In turn, with this experience, Zer Bibi was able to provide a model for other village officers to follow at a Village Area Convention for farmers and their wives, organized by the project in 1995. Nineteen village women from six villages attended this convention. There were only five women from a single village who attended the first project convention in 1993. Zer Bibi was asked to present the Almond Blossom organization first during a general presentation by officers of organizations, and she therefore provided a model for other women to follow when making their presentations.

MOVING TO NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION

The women and the project are actively seeking ways to address the critical fuelwood situation. In one village in the project area, the mullah's wife has a solar cooking stove. She knows exactly how long it takes to boil water, cook meat or rice or lentils and even bread. Her husband will not give her permission to travel outside her village but he has allowed project staff to organize an exchange visit to her house for other village women who are interested in learning the advantages of a solar stove and how to use it. The fact that project staff can now organize a demonstration by a village woman of a solar cooking stove, which will highlight fuel conservation in Noza, to a group of women from the area illustrates the progress that has been made in facilitating the participation of women in their local development and in natural resource conservation. A student from the Brahui Department of Balochistan University, who recorded comments made by village women during the project area's Farmers' Convention on 14 June 1995, put it simply: "This is the first time I have seen village women out of their compounds. Noza is a backward area and women observe purdah. But I saw all these women talking freely and sincerely taking part in the development of their local area" (Niaz, 1995).

A mullah shows his wife's solar cooker

The project has begun to involve village women in the planning and implementation of tree planting in compounds - although the trees are actually planted by children to avoid conflicting with the social taboos. This activity has been carried out at the same time that village men are planting trees along water channels and in some uplands. In three villages, the project has persuaded a husband to permit his wife to take care of demonstrations of dwarf apple trees on their household land - a significant accomplishment. One of these women has planted vegetables between the rows of trees and now holds a multipurpose demonstration.

Dwarf apple trees planted on grazing land..

...and in a home garden with vegetable crops

THE FUTURE

In the most recent phase of the project, strategies have been adjusted. As new villages are involved, one of the first activities is to draw a map of how villagers would like to regenerate common lands or uplands with assistance from the Forestry Department. Village women have been asked to decide which shrub species they would like for fuel and which medicinal plants they would grow on the uplands. Conversations have been tape-recorded so that local knowledge about medicinal plants can be passed on to all the villages, although some women refuse to allow their voices to be taped. The Forestry Department has agreed to assist in developing a seed collection activity. Women will collect the seeds of preferred medicinal plants and sell them to the Forestry Department for planting on the uplands. Implementing this programme calls for closer cooperation between men's and women's field teams and between village men and women. In order to strengthen this cooperation, project staff are planning to

do village-level "gender sensitization" training later in the year with assistance from the Aurat Foundation (an indigenous NGO promoting the empowerment of women in Pakistan).

The project has demonstrated the possibility of including women who have limited mobility and decision-making power in social forestry programmes and in natural resource conservation. It has also shown the necessity and potential of adjusting programmes to existing cultural norms. In Balochistan the process has taken time. Rural women need first to gain confidence through working in a group. They need training in developing leadership and managerial skills and functional literacy. They need to learn how to use credit and to operate bank accounts. When they are organized, they provide an easy setting for women extension agents to teach additional skills.

The Balochistan Forestry Department appears satisfied with women's participation in the Upland Conservation and Development project but, in order to sustain this sort of action, it will be necessary for the department to create permanent posts for strengthening women's involvement in social forestry and management of the environment. It is not easy to convince policy-makers and provincial financial departments to create new posts for women in extension. One suggestion would be for the Forestry Department to allow the group promoters, who are in the process of finishing advanced degrees, to compete for posts as "social forestry extension agents".

Obviously the experience of a single project cannot provide the drawstrings that totally lift the curtain on ideal participation and integration of women in forest and watershed management. However, the Balochistan pilot project has demonstrated that progress, although fragile, can be made even under what might appear to be particularly difficult conditions. It may be useful to attempt to single out several lessons learned from these recent efforts within the framework of better integration of women in natural resource management:

- In situations where women are isolated and unable to work with men from outside their families, women must be hired and trained as extensionagents and group promoters if women resource users are to be reached;
- simple techniques and opportunities can be found to overcome the small hurdles and social taboos hindering the better organization of women, allowing what was once seen as exceptional to become ordinary;
- keys to sustainable natural resource management by women include capacity and confidence building (which can unleash initiative) and the development of organizations and organizational skills.

In summary, the approach of extension for women in this situation differs from that for men. It appears that men's characteristics, including mobility, control over the means of production, education and general level of confidence, allow for an extension approach that is closer to a transfer of technology. At least until women gain many of these attributes, partially through the efforts of a group promotion extension approach, the transfer-of-technology approach will lack sustainability. It is necessary to con-solidate the small advances so that what was unthinkable a few years ago becomes not only thinkable and possible but ordin-ary. This requires an approach that is re-spectful of cultural norms and of all mem-bers of society.

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