

**Justified and Urgent to Improve Rural Women's Innovative Access to and
Benefits from Rural Advisory Services**

Presented at International Day of Rural Women

Theme: Investing in Rural Women to Achieve Sustainable Food Systems

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Introduction

I start by taking a position that it is indeed justified and urgent to improve rural women's innovative access to and benefits from rural advisory services considering the unique characteristics of Rural Women in their gender categories coupled with related disparities and vulnerabilities to Agricultural development. In this presentation, GFRAS advocates for urgent efforts, support and investments for innovative platforms of action in order for rural women to have access to and benefit from Rural Advisory Services for sustainable food systems and livelihoods. In order to come up with such innovative platforms of action, it is important to understand rural women's profile.

Who is the Rural Woman?

A profile for rural women is needed in order to open up to the justification and areas needing improvements for rural women to innovatively have access to and benefit from rural advisory services.

- **Demographic Characteristics:**

Firstly, a rural woman, presented in varied demographics, ranges from:

- (i) Youth, mainly school dropouts taking care of fatherless children,
- (ii) The Young headed household taking care of each other as orphans
- (iii) The Single headed households with middle aged taking care of their own children and the elderly.
- (iv) Those from Male Headed Households taking care of own family and other extended family members
- (v) The Elderly Women taking care of themselves and some sets of orphans;

- **Rural Social Characteristics:**

Significant numbers of women in rural settings, mainly in Africa, are characterized by lower prerequisites to development such as lower literacy and educational levels which are major set-backs to have access and benefits from Agricultural advisory services.

- Being rural may also entail living in isolation where populations are scanty with limited social amenities' such as schools, markets, resource centers aggravated by in accessible road net works, challenging radio, TV and telephone networks and critical life essentials such as health and safe water facilities.
- What therefore commonly puts the rural women at stake is hardship from multi- roles responsibilities with limited resources under harsh weather conditions and many limited opportunities to have access to and exposure to modern technologies.
- With such gender disparities worsened by the advent of HIV and AIDS the Rural women may also not be fully equipped to handle issues of equity, domestic violence, stigma and discrimination. Additionally, most rural women are expected to take care

of the sick, funerals for some African cultures that believe in original home burials that are mainly in rural areas. The plight of such rural women is voiced by one of the rural women I interviewed in my early 2000 studies as:

“We are turning more sick and dead bodies than we turning soil!!!!...Please God help us.....”

This entails no time for economic empowerment activities hence caught in vicious cycle of poverty and hunger.

Justification

Is it therefore justified and urgent to improve Rural Women’s innovative access to and benefits from Rural Advisory Services? It is a big yes, more so in Africa, where rural women’s participation and contribution to Agriculture is very significant including rural household food and nutrition security and the rural economy in general.

In our Southern African countries it is often stated that up to 80% of farm labor is provided by women and girls. Yet, the opportunities for women to improve their agricultural production are still constrained by limitations in access to education, inputs and services as well as rights to natural resources. It is therefore urgent that the opportunities for women farmers to prosper are enhanced.

An important key to increasing innovation and agricultural productivity is therefore to increase women’s participation in rural organizations such as farmer organizations and their access to rural information and advisory services that effectively serve their needs.

It is estimated that if women had equal access to productive agricultural resources, they could increase their yields on their farms by 20 to 30%, which would potentially raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4% and reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 12 to 17%. As an example of the enhancement of productivity, the World Development Report for 2012 presents the calculation from Malawi and Ghana that equal access to inputs and services would increase maize yields alone by 11 to 17%¹.

In Malawi about 85 percent are smallholder farmers, cultivating less than 1 hectare of land. Women constitute 70 percent of full time farmers, do 70 percent of the agricultural work and produce 80 percent of food for household consumption. However, according to NACAL report 2007, access to credit is low for both male and female farmers (4% and 2% respectively). None the less more male farmers (56%) apply inorganic fertilizers than female farmers (45%). Livestock than provide manure is owned more by male than female farmers that is 61% and 42% respectively. According to FAO 2004, women receive less than 15% of the extension.

¹ For Ghana: 11 to 16% and for Malawi 17%

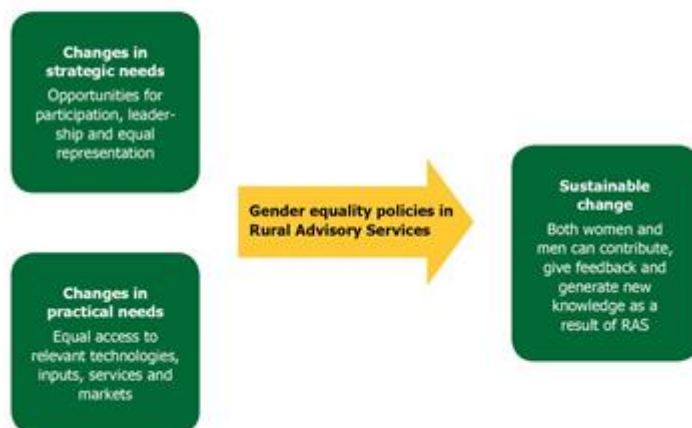
It is therefore unfortunate that at the moment many farmer organizations are rather male dominated and most extension services mainly approach male farmers and address male farmers' needs. It is more or less automatically assumed that farmers are men and extension concepts are designed along this assumption both in terms of employment of staff and the content of the services.

How Innovative can Rural Advisory Services be?

Platforms of innovative action with appropriate strategies for the various gender categories need to be urgently in place in order to attain sustainable change for rural women. Two main frontiers are considered to pursue with such innovative platforms of action:

1. To deploy innovative methodologies which impact on meeting practical needs such as effective group organization to access agricultural inputs and services and life changing practices. This means using effective service systems, well packaged technologies with emphasis on labor – saving and accompanied with appropriate information, skills, communication strategy with multi-media that is appropriate to rural women's varied demographics, needs aspirations.
2. To increase the opportunities for women to participate in leadership of the organizations, so that the above needs will be well communicated by the rural women themselves with increased ownership and commitment with support from various strategic organizations.

The route to sustainable change



The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services considers these innovative platforms of action extremely urgent. GFRAS has recently established a working group for gender equality in rural advisory services with the purpose of increasing awareness and knowledge about how this can be achieved and also to support the organizations in the network in their efforts to improve Rural Advisory Services. This together will lead to increased gender equality in the rural advisory services whereby both men and women can contribute to innovation, give feedback and generate new knowledge as a result of these same services.

In the same vein, it is extremely encouraging to see that some of the leading African farmer organizations are taking important steps to eliminate discriminating structures and practices and increase participation of rural women in the organizations.

We wish you all the best for this continued development.