

## **Introducing Gender Awareness to Elementary School Teachers in Rural Bahia, Brazil<sup>1</sup>**

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The introduction of gender equity analysis in rural development projects is not only a very recent public policy being implemented in Brazil, but also one that is bound to face major drawbacks. While state agencies, extension workers, and rural communities are ready to support programs that tend to women's "practical needs" (cf. Moser 1989), resistance mounts when it comes to fostering their "strategic needs" (ibid.), that is, to actions geared towards women's empowerment. In these circumstances, those responsible for implementing the new policies in rural development projects must work on different 'fronts' simultaneously: gender awareness must be introduced not just to project staff and women and men in target communities, but also to key figures in the project area who can be influential in the building of favorable public opinion.

In rural Brazil, where illiteracy rates still run rampant, school teachers tend to be regarded highly and should be engaged in the fostering of women's empowerment. In addition to their direct participation in instilling new values to children in classrooms—and thus to the future generations of local producers—they often are also persons who hold leadership positions in their communities. 'Educating' rural teachers on gender issues, therefore, should be regarded as an important strategy in working towards gender equity in rural development projects.

In this paper, I will discuss these issues further while sharing my experience as part of a group of external consultants on gender issues in a major rural development project in Bahia-- the first one in the state to incorporate a gender perspective.<sup>2</sup> Funded by IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) and implemented by CAR, an agency linked to the Planning Bureau of the State of Bahia, this project is a very ambitious development effort; it aims to improve the quality of life in rural communities of 13 counties covering an area of approximately 4,580 square miles in one of the most deprived, driest, and poorest regions of the state. Project plans call for a series of actions within three major components: production development, community development, and rural credit services. They include the construction of dams and irrigation systems, provision of special credit and agricultural extension services to small producers, devising more effective means of marketing products, and strengthening local producers associations and their management skills.

First implemented in December of 1997, the project is now on its third year and should last for another three. However, gender analysis was not included in the original plans. Actually, it was only under much pressuring on the part of IFAD, and only six months after the project was under course, that our group of consultants was contacted and a gender equity perspective finally introduced.<sup>3</sup>

Agricultural extension services can contribute to women's empowerment by providing them with training on production techniques, management skills, access to land and credit services, as well as to community decision-making spheres. However, as we insisted from the outset, to achieve gender equity it is necessary to mainstream a full analysis of gendered power relations between women and men in all the planned activities of the project.<sup>4</sup> Women's gender specific needs – i.e, those arising from gender divisions and women's roles, as well as those which pertain to challenging the existing structure of power relations between the sexes-- must be tended to so that women can participate and benefit on equal footing to men.

With this in mind, we devised a multifaceted gender program based on two lines of action: one directed specifically to women's empowerment which, among other actions, has included the creation and/or strengthening of local women's associations as well as by offering gender awareness and leadership training for women community leaders; and another line which aims at building support to these actions. It is within this second line of action that gender sensitivity training has been provided to project staff, as well as special gender awareness workshops held to rural elementary teachers in all of the 13 counties of the project.

### **The Project Area**

In this paper, I shall refer to the project in question as Eagle Project and to the region it covers as the Eagle River Region.<sup>5</sup> Situated in the center-south area of the state, this is one of the least hospitable regions of Bahia. Several of the counties it covers fall within the so-called 'Draught Polygon', which is known for long dry seasons that often occur year after year. Even though the area includes different ecological sub-regions, some of which are considerably more humid and more fertile than others, agricultural production is generally limited due to lack of water.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the Eagle River Region is not attractive to major agricultural and industrial enterprises. On the contrary, it is characterized by small land-holdings (*minifundia*), the majority not larger than 100 hectares; indeed, a great number of them do not exceed 10 hectares.

These small properties are worked by the owners themselves with the help of family members. They plant corn, beans, manioc and sugarcane, and also raise cattle and small farm animals, including goats, pigs, and chickens. Yet, due to the adverse ecological conditions, the small size of the properties, and the lack of available credit to small farmers and peasants in the region, production returns tend to be low, barely covering family needs. As a result, families are forced to resort to migration strategies, many surviving on the income earned by family members working in São Paulo and other southern states.

Surveys conducted by the project field staff have shown that most rural families in the area live without the services and facilities associated with modern living: less than 35% of the rural communities in the project area have electricity, and only a few have a local health facility with an attending nurse. In addition, though there is an average of 5-6 children per family, rural elementary schools (taking children up to the fifth grade) have only been set up in recent years, together with transport to enable older children to attend high schools in the main county-towns. Not surprisingly, the surveys have shown that 49% of the rural population in the area is illiterate: this corresponds to one of the highest rates in Bahia.

### **Gender Relations in the Project Area**

Gender relations in the Eagle River Region do not differ much from other rural areas throughout Brazil: traditional attitudes and values regarding the division of labor, women's domestic roles and gender hierarchies are still predominant. In comparison to women in urban areas, rural women not only have less access to education, health care and employment opportunities, but also are much more dependent upon the men in their families and caught within a structure of more unequal gender relations. Indeed, in line with other poverty-stricken rural areas throughout the world, in the Eagle River region 'patriarchal family and social structure deny women real property rights in land, limit women's access to and control over the proceeds of their own labor, and constrain their decision-making roles' (Jiggings 1989, 953).

Marriage comes early for most women in the region; yet, from an early age, they are entrusted primarily with the care of children and the performance of so-called domestic activities. Nevertheless, women also play important roles in production: it is expected of them to 'help' their husbands and fathers in the field, care for small animals raised in the farm, and prepare manioc flour and cheese for home consumption and sale in the fairs. Their production activities do become crucial in face of migration. It is usually the 'men of the house' who migrate south, leaving their properties in charge of the women who stay behind. Not surprisingly, during the dry season, most households in the area are headed by women: they are known locally as "drought widows".

Yet, because women's production activities in the family are usually performed as part of their duties as wives and mothers and thus do not involve wages in return, their role in production and crucial contribution to household survival are largely minimized, devalued or even made 'invisible'. The women themselves do not recognize their own importance in production: they identify themselves primarily as wives and mothers, and only rarely will admit on their own that they are also producers. As a result, prior to our involvement in the project, few women participated in local producers' associations and in project activities geared towards improving production techniques, raising returns and the like. Those who did attend project sponsored 'field days' and workshops, were usually there to cook and serve meals. But since we started the gender program, this has been changing considerably. More and more women are participating; indeed, in one of the last field days held, out of 200 participants, 80 were women.

### **Actions Specific to Women**

The program we have developed aims at: a) widening and increasing women's participation in activities related to technical assistance and training in agricultural and husbandry technologies, as well as to the appropriate use of soils and water resources; b) guaranteeing women's access to productive resources such as credit systems, water holes and irrigation systems, and legal ownership of land; and c) guaranteeing greater gender equity in community associations and local decision-making structures. In general terms, it relies on the criteria devised by C. Moser (1989): it is based on the notion that guaranteeing gender equity implies working two lines of action simultaneously: one that tends to the practical needs of women - i.e. those needs arising from women's roles within the existing patterns of gender relations, and which are identified by the women involved; and, another geared to their strategic needs - that is to say, women's need to challenge the unequal balance of power between women and men.

### a) *Women's Production Groups*

In arguing in favor of a change of focus from 'women in development' to the much more encompassing 'gender and development' perspective in planning, feminists have stressed that the implementation of parallel programs for women --*as and end in themselves*-- tends to reinforce rather than eradicate existing gender divisions, such that women continue to be excluded from the development process. While we fully agree that this has often been the case, we also firmly believe that programs specifically geared to women can be a fundamental *means* in building greater gender equity, as *affirmative actions* towards this major goal.

In accordance with this position, we worked in the formation of fifteen women's production groups distributed throughout the thirteen counties included in the project area, totaling approximately 400 women.<sup>7</sup> Original plans called for training to these groups in production activities, to be offered by the project staff, while we became in charge of strengthening associative ties among the participants, and providing gender awareness training through monthly workshops.<sup>8</sup> Based on 'gender pedagogy' methodologies (c.f. Büttner et al 1997)—which, in turn, are adaptations of techniques developed in feminist consciousness-raising groups—these workshops focused on different topics, building upon women's individual experiences and practical knowledge towards a collective reflection on gender relations and women's condition and ways of transforming them.<sup>9</sup> One of the aims was to raise women's self-esteem by helping them to become conscious of their own importance and crucial contribution to their households. For this purpose, different group dynamics techniques were employed, such as games, dramatizations, drawings and collages, etc. Considering the high rates of illiteracy in the region, particularly among older women, special care was taken in the use of materials and techniques that did not demand reading ability.

The series of workshops were held over a nine-month period, after which the women were asked to evaluate them., in any manner they wished. Most groups chose to do so through dramatizations that emphasized their sense of personal growth and group solidarity, and greater self-esteem. Yet they complained of the slowness on the part of the project staff in providing them with the needed technical training and material resources to carry out their production activities.

Working directly with these groups we were able to: 1) gather more qualitative information about gender relations and women's roles in the project area, not included in the basic studies conducted earlier by planners; 2) learn in greater depth their special needs and expectations about development, and formulate future programs and/or adjust the existing ones in a manner that will better address them; 3) train groups of women to act as multiplying agents in disseminating new production techniques as well as new values and attitudes regarding women's participation in production and community development; 4) strengthen existing women's organizations and networks and offer incentive to the formation of women's groups in communities where they are absent; 5) support women's income-generating initiatives, by providing them with the needed technical assistance, management training, and credit lines; and 6) provide to the staff on-the-field gender awareness training, as well as training in group dynamics techniques and methodologies geared towards fostering gender awareness.

***b) Gender Awareness Workshops for Women Community Leaders:***

Significant support and appreciation for the gender program on the part of the communities tended by the Eagle Project during the past year, have come by way of the promotion of the Gender Awareness Workshops for women community leaders. Also included in the line of actions geared specifically to Women, these workshops have been conducted for the purpose of sensitizing community leaders to the gender program, granting it greater visibility, while also offering them basic gender awareness training for participation in formal decision-making structures.

During 1999, a series of thirteen one-day workshops were held in the county seats within the project area, reaching a total of 687 women. Though the greatest majority of participants comprised rural community leaders, a significant number of women residing in the county seats were also present. They included local school directors, county education secretaries, county health secretaries, councilwomen, county mayors' wives, and union leaders, that is to say, women who hold positions that enable them to have a say in local government, and thus to support the implementation of public policies geared towards achieving greater gender equity. Certainly, it was important for them to listen to what rural women had to say. Thus, in all of the workshops we have followed 'gender pedagogy' methodologies that promote close interaction among the participants.<sup>10</sup> One of the major aims in bringing them together is to foster the creation of women's organizations in the region, so that efforts towards achieving gender equity in the area will not die out after project activities come to an end.

**Gender Awareness Training for Project Staff**

Since joining the project, good part of our work has been dedicated to sensitizing and training the staff on gender analysis. As it is well known, this is a fundamental step in any effort to mainstream gender equity in development: without a sympathetic staff keen to gender equity issues, it is practically impossible to 'engender' a project. Ideally, gender awareness training should come prior to the implementation of a project in a given area. However, in the case of the Eagle Project, we have been forced to deal not only with a disadvantage of more than six months delay in this respect, but also with a numerically male-dominated staff and the patriarchal structure of power relations internal to the project.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, at present, out of 32 people in the field staff, only 7 are women, and all but one are social workers. Besides, men hold all but two of the top positions in the head and field offices. All of these men are agronomists and tend to value much more-- and thus concentrate their major efforts on--the so-called 'technological components' of the project, at the expense of the 'social' ones. Though gender analysis should transverse all project activities, the agronomists tend to see the gender program as part of the social component, and thus to give it less attention.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, contrary to our initial fears and expectations, most of the men in the lower echelons of the project power structure have shown a high degree of perception and sensitivity towards the existing pattern of gender relations in the rural areas covered by the project, contributing significantly to the formulation of a more specific plan of action for the gender program. These men were trained as agricultural extension workers in special schools, and have the equivalent to a high school degree: many are natives of the region and have grown up in small farms, such as the ones within the project's

beneficiaries. But they too have shown resistance to actions which aim to challenge the local gender order, that is to say, the structure of power relations between women and men. Indeed, all the men in the project are only willing to go along with the gender program because of external pressure from the funding agency, and not out of any real concern for women's condition.<sup>13</sup>

Over the past two years, we have held four three-day special workshops for the staff on gender awareness and training on gender analysis. However, we are keen to the fact that the development of 'gender equity consciousness' is a process that individuals undergo at their own pace. As such, training in this direction must also be a continuous process. To this effect, we have held monthly discussion sessions in each of the project local offices, not only to clarify some of the more theoretical and methodological aspects of the gender program, but also to evaluate along with the staff, the activities underway from a gender perspective. In this manner, we have been able to monitor more closely the difficulties encountered, as well as the different forms and degrees of resistance manifested: the resistance they themselves manifest and that which they face in the communities they work.

### **Gender Awareness Training for Elementary School Teachers**

Work towards women's empowerment involves 'tampering' with the traditional pattern of gender relations in these communities and, as such, it also involves dealing with the different forms of local resistance that are certain to follow, and not only on the part of the men involved. Indeed, women also fear and resist changes in gender relations even when these changes can benefit them. Gender awareness workshops for women in these communities can facilitate and foster their 'consciousness raising' process, so that they will not only better understand but actually demand these changes. However, to that effect, it is also important to build the necessary community support.

With this in mind, we conducted 13 one-day gender awareness workshops--one for each county in the project area—specially geared for rural elementary school teachers. In this activity, we had the support of the local education bureaus, and were thus able to gather nearly 800 teachers in the project area. But it came as a surprise that, contrary to what happens in major cities in Brazil where men represent less than 5.0% of elementary school teachers, among the workshop participants 35% were men. Ages among all participants ranged from 18 to 55, but the great majority (60%) fell between the 20 to 30 age bracket.

Prior to the start of the workshops, we asked the participants to fill a questionnaire which, in addition to gathering their sociodemographic data, aimed at evaluating their level of gender awareness. More specifically, the questions raised pertained to the nature of gender relations in the class room, focusing in particular on the extent to which the participants 'naturalized' gender differences and treated boys and girls differently. The results confirmed the importance of holding special gender awareness training for teachers: more than 85% of the respondents tended to sustain gender stereotypes and to treat boys and girls differently in the classroom environment, thus reinforcing gender divisions. As expected, this was more pronounced among the men, specially those over 40. However, women in this age bracket also showed greater tendency to 'naturalize' gender differences more so than both younger women and men. This suggests that 'generation' weighs more than 'sex' when it comes to

gender stereotyping. Such a factor is particularly significant considering the fact that local community leaders also tend to be middle-aged.

Regardless of age or sex, however, teachers present in the workshops showed interest in the matters discussed in the workshop, joining in the discussions and games staged. We began the morning sessions by showing a videotape depicting a 'normal' family day in which gender roles are reversed: while the 'man of the house' cooks, cleans, sews, cares for the children and even gets pregnant, the wife goes to work, drinks in a bar with her girlfriends, comes home late, complains about everything and beats up the husband. Besides bringing many laughs and thus a relaxed atmosphere, this tape gave room to a discussion on gender relations and women's roles, in which the participants spoke openly from their own experience. This gave us the opportunity to discuss how the process of socialization molds children to become 'women' and 'men', and the need to deconstruct gender differences and inequalities. In the afternoon session, we concentrated on working towards a non-discriminating education for children in school, using for this purpose sing-a-longs, dramatization techniques, and written materials specially elaborated for the workshops. Finally, we focused on the role of schools in training both boys and girls in production techniques, stressing the need for women's and girl's participation in project activities.

Since the series of 13 workshops was concluded only recently, we have yet to evaluate its impact on project activities. However, we had warm responses not only from the participating teachers, but also from the local school bureaus. Indeed, we were asked by all to return for more workshops, and even to develop a special gender program for local teachers.

### **Final Considerations**

The relative 'newness' of the incorporation of a gender perspective in state-sponsored rural development projects in Brazil makes it difficult to share and compare notes with others developing similar programs in the country. Nevertheless, I would speculate that they too have had much warmer responses from the communities involved than from people in the project staff. In our case, we have faced lack of support specially from local coordinators. Actually, it will not come as a surprise to us if our participation in future project activities are severely curtailed or even terminated. If this is the case, we would still sustain the program we devised. Through it, we were able to work directly with over 1000 women from different communities in the project area, who, we believe, will 'spread the word'. This is certainly significant because 'real changes' on the way of gender equity in project activities and beyond, will only come through when the women involved in the process begin to demand equal participation. And there are reports that in some communities, women are already demanding equal space; for instance, when a community has to choose a given number of residents to participate in project activities, they insist that at least half of the 'chosen few' must be women.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Published in Teherani-Kröner, Parto; Schmidtt, Matilde; Hoffmann-Altman, Uta (eds.). *Knowledge, Education and Extension for Women in Rural reas*, Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> July 2000 of the Centre for Women in Rural Development, Humboldt Universitat, Berlin, 2000. Portions of this paper were extracted from a

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previous article written with the collaboration of Ana Alice Costa e Elizete Passos (cf. Sardenberg, Costa & Passos 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The State of Bahia is located in Brazil's Northeast coast; its capital city is Salvador.

<sup>3</sup> This group is formed by two other women in addition to myself: Ana Alice Costa and Elizete Passos. Our involvement in the project came through a services contract established between CAR and the 'Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher' (Center for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia), known as NEIM, where we work as researchers and faculty members. It should also be added that we are self-proclaimed feminists, active in women's movements in Brazil. For a more detailed discussion of how we became involved in the project, see Sardenberg, Costa & Passos 1999.

<sup>4</sup> This was stressed in the first document we submitted as gender consultants; it provided a critical analysis of the project from a gender perspective, which included a detailed discussion of the project components, and how one should proceed in order to guarantee gender equity (Sardenberg, Costa & Passos 1998).

<sup>5</sup> In Bahia, the project is known as 'Projeto de Desenvolvimento Comunitário da Região do Rio Gavião', or simply 'Pró-Gavião' for short. It takes its name from the 'Gavião' River, which is a local large rapine bird similar to an eagle.

<sup>6</sup> There are waterways throughout the area, (including the Eagle River itself, which runs throughout the thirteen counties), but most rivers are seasonal and almost completely dry up during the drought periods. Furthermore, dams and waterholes are scarce and unevenly distributed, and access to them is difficult for many local producers.

<sup>7</sup> The groups vary considerably in the number of participants (anywhere from 15 to 60 Women), as well as in terms of their age-brackets, marital status, and level of formal education.

<sup>8</sup> The original plans called for working with one group per county, preferably in rural communities where the field-staff was already involved. Firstly, they were asked to identify pre-existing women's groups, independent of their nature (i.e., women's associations, income-generating groups, religious groups, etc.), and then those communities where such groups were either embryonic or showed greater organizational potential. Visits were paid to all the communities thus identified, and fifteen were finally chosen: one in which there was a goat keepers women's collective; two in each women had well developed income-generating activities (embroidering and ceramics, respectively), but pursued individually, with no history of formal association; two in each there were long established women's groups, but none geared to income-generating activities; and the other ten where there were strong women's networks either kin-related or associated with local Catholic Pastoral activities, and showed significant production and organizational potential. Together, these groups comprehend a total of approximately 450 Women, though varying considerably in the number of participants (anywhere from 15 to 60 Women), as well as in terms of their age-brackets, marital status, and level of formal education.

<sup>9</sup> The topics covered were the following: gender roles, women's organisations and struggles, women's rights, women's health, and women and work.

<sup>10</sup> They complained of the 'invisibility' of women's work, even when working side by side their male counterparts in production activities, caring for the land, planting or tending to the animals, let alone when as 'drought widows', they must carry the property on their own. Yet, they lamented, what they do is usually regarded as a mere 'help', not real work. This situation was further depicted in a contest in which the participants had to team-up and make up limericks focusing on these issues and the desired changes. In one of the workshops, the women demonstrated their creativity skills, coming up with more than fifty limericks. During the afternoon sessions, similar techniques and games were employed to open discussions on women's historical exclusion from the public sphere, women's long battles to conquer constitutional rights, and the important role of female leadership in these struggles. This led to the final session of the workshops whereupon the need for women to assume leadership in the community and take an active role in formal decision-making structures was emphasized. It was also stressed that women leaders should have the support of women's organizations in order to advance initiatives on the way of building gender equity.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the project power structure, see Sardenberg, Costa & Passos 1999.

<sup>12</sup> In point of fact, local coordinators have shown resistance to the formation and development of the women's production groups by failing to assist them as planned. They tend to identify these groups as 'NEIM's groups' and regard them as part of the 'community development' component, and thus, as 'less important' than the other activities under their responsibility. Claiming that the field-staff is overworked (which is true), they have not, thus far, followed through in carrying out the viability studies regarding the specific production activities pursued by the groups, nor taken all the necessary steps in offering them the needed training. This attitude has had a negative effect in the groups, de-mobilizing the women, and thus making it necessary for us to double our efforts in organizing them.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to point out that even the consultant from the international funding agency is a man, an agronomist, who also does not hold very highly the idea of women's empowerment. Actually, we only met him once (after we had been in the project for over 12 months) and, in this occasion, he showed little interest in listening to us and learning about the problems we faced. However, he did make clear that the gender program should be aimed primarily at increasing women's participation in the project, and not necessarily to contributing to their empowerment.

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