

Why gender matters for farming within the Limpopo River Basin

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Within the Limpopo River basin, as in sub-Saharan Africa at large, agriculture is being feminized for several reasons. In the Guyu-Chelesa Irrigation Scheme in Zimbabwe for instance, about two-thirds of the plot owners are women. The remaining one third are male owned plots. Even in the male owned plots, women are largely the *de facto* plot owners and provide the labour required for the cultivation of the irrigated plots. In this dry agro-ecological region of Zimbabwe with an average annual rainfall below 500mm, there are several reasons for such a scenario. Firstly, migration from this dry area has seen most men moving to urban areas within Zimbabwe with the majority migrating across the border to South Africa and Botswana where there are better employment opportunities. Secondly, HIV and AIDs have seen husbands dying first leaving widows to look after remaining household members. Thirdly, men in the drier agro-ecological region tend to focus more on livestock production rather than crop production.

The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) as part of the CPWF's Limpopo Basin Development Challenge is looking at ways of using a gender lens in order to address the challenges facing female farmers. There are a number of ways to address the feminization of agriculture in the study areas within the Limpopo River Basin. Firstly, agriculture extension services should stop assuming that only men are 'farmers' or 'irrigators.' Despite evidence showing that women are the majority of the farmers on the ground, extension information and training is still targeted towards male farmers. As part of the project we are engaging the extension services to help them understand that the composition of their clients has significantly changed so they too must change to better target their clients. What is now needed is to make sure that training is not reserved for male farmers but also to be specifically designed for female farmers as well. This calls for a participatory approach where the competing demands on women's time and resources are well understood and factored into the scheduling and content of training materials and approaches.

In Matebeleland South, where Guyu- Chelesa Irrigation Scheme is, a provincial agricultural extension officer, Mr Sibanda, has started looking at challenges keeping women from attending agricultural training lessons and meetings. Firewood collection, for instance, was highlighted as one of the major issues affecting female farmers' participation in extension training. To address such challenges and increase women' participation, a scheme was created to help ease women's access and collection of firewood. This reduced time spent on firewood collection. This frees time for women to be able to participate in other activities including training and meetings which aim to increase agricultural production.

The other innovative approach was to identify the barriers to attendance by looking at the most convenient times which were likely to increase women's participation. In Gwanda, for instance, the Agricultural and Extension Services (Agritex) has been promoting flexible meeting times which take into account women's daily routines such as preparation of children for school, farming and food preparation. This limits training sessions and meetings to certain times to ensure they do not interfere with the other responsibilities of women.

In the Zhulube Irrigation Scheme in Insiza, one of the ways of addressing gender requirements is by including women in decisions on crop choice to be grown under irrigation. Married women contribute

significant labour in agricultural production with little time left for production of crops of their choice such as vegetables. An innovative approach was for extension staff to address the need for complementary crops to meet the various food requirements of the household. During the winter wheat crop in 2012, a small plot was allocated to vegetable production so that households could meet their cash crop production goals whilst meeting the daily vegetable requirements, with any excess being sold for income (see accompanying photograph).

IWMI is encouraging an overall change in perception of gender issues—not only in farming, but in society as whole—by promoting equal educational opportunities for both the boy and girl child. *This can only be done in partnership with other actors.* This is seen as a key driver of change for gender relationships within the agricultural sector and beyond. The project aims to recognize female farmers' vast contributions to agricultural production in the Limpopo River Basin countries, as well as ensuring their control of the fruits harvested as a result of their effort. Practical evidence shows that if women are empowered and have control of benefits from farming, household livelihoods will improve.

Legislation promoting gender equity in agriculture and other spheres exists to varying degrees across Limpopo Basin countries. Within the region, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) has a Protocol on Gender and Development of 2008. Yet the major challenge is how to transform the ideals and legislation into practical realities that benefit the livelihoods of women and men in rural areas. To address gender challenges researchers, civil society and policy makers need to work together at local, national, regional and international levels in order to see tangible results.



Gender sensitive crop choice: Zhulube Irrigation Scheme (Photo by Everisto Mapedza September 2012)

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