

Rural women in development: Slovenia

ABSTRACT

Rural and farm women are generally among the most disadvantaged groups of a population, yet they play a key role in agriculture and rural development. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been supporting countries in formulating national action plans for the integration of rural women in development. Its own FAO Plan of Action for Women in Development (1996-2001) is being followed. This plan was a response to the challenges of the 1990s and the recommendations of international fora. As a result, the needs of rural women, who are often “invisible”, are being brought to the forefront of development worldwide.

The innovative experience described here concerns the encounters and lessons learned while preparing and implementing the National Action Plan for the Integration of Rural Women in Development in Slovenia, one of the first such plans in Europe.

Slovenia, like many Central and Eastern European countries in transition, has undergone social changes which have highlighted issues such as poverty, social security, unemployment, traditional values and social rights. These have important implications for rural and farm women, who have in general been marginalized, with priority given to so-called working women. There has been a lack of support for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with women.

The five objectives of the National Action Plan for the Integration of Rural Women in Development in Slovenia are to:

- improve farm women’s quality of life and empower them through increased access to information, education, action research and institutional support;
- provide equal access to employment and natural resources;
- improve farm women’s access to social and health resources;
- promote gender equality as a basis for relations in private and public life;
- promote a holistic concept of gender issues in the political system.

The plan can be divided into five parts:

1. a summary of Slovenia’s present socio-economic and political situation;
2. a description of the socio-economic position of farm and rural women,

focusing on education and training, the health system, reproductive work, productive employment and extension services;

3. the political arena in a period of transition, emphasizing the social and legal status of farm and rural women, their access to government machinery, their opportunities to participate in politics and the role of NGOs;

4. areas of concern – social, economic and political issues;

5. recommendations on approaches to problems related to women's integration into development, complemented by a list of stakeholders and a time schedule for implementation of the plan.

Preparation of the National Action Plan took almost two years and involved identifying areas of concern, defining objectives, choosing methods, organizing resources and support for research and identifying stakeholders. This was followed by the challenge of increasing public and political awareness in order to implement the plan. Negotiations for implementation began in 1996.

The formulation process was participatory, involving farm and rural women, government offices and institutions involved in women's issues and/or development of rural areas and NGOs in identifying areas of concern and future actions. The process was not without difficulties, notably lack of interest among rural and farm women, little holistic thinking about gender issues, absence of gender-sensitive statistical data and limited access to sources of information. Most problems were overcome and negotiations on implementation of the national plan took place with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food. Negotiations were held on appointing a monitor to oversee implementation of a more gender-sensitive policy at the ministry. The National Office for Statistics was considering inclusion of gender-sensitive data in its reorganization.

The unique nature of the experience consisted of detailed analysis of issues affecting integration of rural and farm women in development and involving all segments of the population. Important lessons were learned from the experience. First, it is vital to obtain access to data and knowledgeable informants involved with decision making and policy formulation. Collecting data to formulate the plan was an important step, since it contributed to increasing awareness among all stakeholders, including farm and rural women themselves. Second, implementation of the plan will be a long process. Third, despite positive response to the plan in many quarters, much more remains to be done. Fourth, lobbying will be a powerful tool in raising women's issues and implementing the plan. Perhaps the most important lesson from the experience in Slovenia was the need to raise self-esteem and assertiveness among farm and rural women.

INTRODUCTION

The involvement of women as contributors and beneficiaries of economic, social and political development was addressed at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The latter produced a global blueprint of actions promoting the advancement of women. Its Platform of Action, as the document became known, called for development of national strategies for improving women's access to education, employment, health and social services and for measures to ensure women's equal access to, and full participation in, decision-making.

These events and others related to women and their social position influenced ways in which gender issues are addressed in relation to agriculture and rural development. Worldwide, rural and farm⁶⁶ women play a major role in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, livestock and rural development, producing more than 50 percent of food. Yet farm and rural women in developing and transition countries are among the most disadvantaged population groups.

It is suggested that farm and rural women's lifestyles and participation in public and political activities are influenced by variables that make their position different from that of other women. The issue requires attention.

FAO has played a significant role as stimulator and facilitator supporting formulation of national action plans for integration of rural women in development, along the lines of its 1989-95 and 1996-2001 Plans of Action for Women in Development. As a result of FAO's efforts, problems, interests and needs of farm and rural women are becoming more visible.

In Europe today, the life and position of women in society have changed most drastically in Central and Eastern Europe, where socio-economic transition and moves towards democratic political systems have been taking place since the late 1980s. To create a place for themselves in the new Europe, governments in the region have been formulating new policies on all aspects of national life. It seems, however, that governments have been most concerned with economic and political issues such as democratization and privatization and have neglected

⁶⁵ "... A nation's progress depends on the progress of women, the strength of the political system depends on the inclusion of women, the vibrancy of an economy depends on the contribution of women ..." (Beijing Conference, 1995).

⁶⁶ Research has shown that in Slovenia, rural and farm women are not necessarily the same social group. In this report the term "farm women" is used to refer to women who are actively involved in agricultural production or are supported by an agriculturally active person, while the term "rural women" is used to refer to all women living in rural areas, regardless of occupation or social status.

to consider the effects of transition on social development.

The literature shows that recent social changes in Central and Eastern Europe have led to new problems such as increasing poverty, especially among women, children and the elderly, deterioration of the social security system, growing unemployment, a revival of traditionalist values and ways of life and the reduction of existing social rights. These effects of transition have put additional pressure on rural and farm women.

PRE-INNOVATION

Before the innovative experience was implemented in Slovenia, farm and rural women were a marginal issue on political and research agendas. Integration of women in development was not a priority for the Government of Slovenia, which had to deal with political and economic changes.

There was a lack of holistic thinking about gender issues in the government and additional drawbacks for farm and rural women relating to their traditional social status. Slovenians still have a low image of the farming and rural population. In many farm and rural families, traditions still place women in inferior positions. It was not surprising, therefore, that many farm women had low self-esteem and were unassertive. It was observed that there was no awareness of potential regarding their position in private and public life.

Politically and institutionally, other factors contributed to the invisibility of farm and rural women. In government offices responsible for improving the position of women in society, such as the Office for Women's Politics, there was no interest in farm and rural women; so-called working women were the priority.

There was little cooperation among government institutions involved with women, such as the Office for Women's Politics, the Ministry of Work, Social Affairs and Family, and those involved in rural development, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry.

As formulation of the action plan proceeded, different interests in political parties, most of which have women's factions, often prevented common action for farm and rural women. Attempts to reach consensus on how to help women to participate in development were thus limited.

There was little public or political support for NGOs working with women. Many NGOs kept a low profile and did not publicize their work. Government agencies responsible for issues related to farm and rural women did not cooperate with NGOs and cooperation was weak among NGOs dealing with farm and rural women.

There was little or no gender-sensitive statistical information related to agriculture and rural development, which further complicated preparation of the plan.

Despite these problems, the situation prior to the innovative experience was not hopeless. Since the early 1970's, an Agricultural Advisory Service had been working with farm and rural women, advising on the development of supplementary activities such as agritourism, training courses and the transfer of technologies. The service continued to support farm women during the changes in rural Slovenia. To keep up with the demands of rural diversification, the Agricultural Advisory Service organizes annual training courses for its staff. Since 1995, it has worked with the Farm Women's Association to identify their needs, although the level of cooperation varies among regions.

INTRODUCING INNOVATION

This innovative experience concerns experiences and lessons learned during preparation and implementation of the National Action Plan for the Integration of Rural Women in Development in Slovenia, one of the first countries in Europe to formulate such a plan. Negotiations for implementation of the plan started in 1996; preparation took almost two years.

In the first phase, problems included identifying areas of concern to reflect the situation in the field, since the population of farm and rural women was not homogeneous, defining objectives, choosing appropriate methods, organizing research resources and identifying stakeholders.

The five objectives of the National Action Plan were to:

- improve **farm** women's quality of life and empower them through increased access to information, education and institutional support;
- provide equal access to employment and natural resources;
- improve farm women's access to social and health resources;
- promote gender equality in relations in private and public life;
- promote a holistic concept of gender issues in the political system.

In the latter phase, the problem was to increase political and public awareness of the need for technical and political support.

The first phase focused on finding answers to the questions: why, what, who, how, when and where? The answers represent the nucleus of Slovenia's National Action Plan. The first part of the plan briefly describes the past and present socio-economic and political situation and determinants of the status of farm and rural women.

The overview **is** followed **by** a detailed description of the socio-economic position of farm and rural women, with the main focus on education and training, the

⁶⁷ Since 1990, the Agricultural Advisory Service has been part of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food.

health system, reproductive work, productive work and extension services.

The third part looks at the political situation in the transition period, focusing on the social and legal status of farm and rural women. This is followed by an investigation of government machinery and women's access to it and analysis of opportunities for women to participate in politics. The role of NGOs is discussed.

The fourth and most important part of the plan outlines areas of concern. In Slovenia, these were social, economic and political issues. According to farm and rural women and NGOs, social issues should have priority. Economic issues emerged as less important. Solving these women's economic problems – inequality of access to natural resources and economic dependence – would contribute to an improvement in their quality of life only if combined with programmes that increase self-esteem and assertiveness.

The National Action Plan concludes with recommendations on approaches to problems related to women's integration in development. The recommendations are complemented by a list of the stakeholders who will play an important role in resolving the problems. This is followed by a time schedule for implementation.

The implementation process

Searching for a means of gaining insight into the problems, dynamics and interests of gender issues and rural development led to adoption of a participatory approach to formulating the national action plan. The process canvassed those involved in identifying areas of concern and future actions. Data were collected using qualitative methods and relevant literature.

Informal interviews were conducted either by the author or her research assistant with different stakeholders to collect their ideas and needs in relation to the position of farm and rural women in Slovenia. These included farm and rural women, agricultural extension officers, staff of NGOs established by women to improve their quality of life, such as the Advisory Office for Women, members of political parties, farm women's NGOs, such as the Farm Women's Association, and farmers' unions.

Further interviews were conducted with staff of government offices involved with women's issues, such as the Office for Women's Politics, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food and the Ministry for Family, Work and Social Affairs.

Literature on women and rural development and women and agriculture and the relevant legislation were studied, for example laws regulating health care and health insurance. The National Office for Statistics was contacted when data were not available. Some unpublished statistical data were obtained with the help of staff in various ministries. Using informant networks proved a helpful tool, as it had in some cases provided the researcher with insights into relationships between stakeholders.

Areas of concern

The following notes give areas for action identified on the basis of research and data collected during interviews with farm women.

Education and training

- Develop new curricula for home economics, for example, to fit the needs of and evident demand by modern farm women.
- Provide more information regarding educational programmes of interest to young farm women.
- Upgrade the image of farm women in society to promote interest in farming.
- Establish scholarships for farm children; deteriorating economic conditions mean there will be less money to educate children.

Health system for farm and rural women

- Carry out research on the health situation of farm and rural women.
- Enact legislation to ensure farm women's rights to pensions and disability insurance.
- Reduce insurance costs for each additionally insured farm family member.

Reproductive work

- Eliminate traditions that relegate women to inferior positions.
- Eliminate inequality in the sharing of power and decision-making at household and farm level.

Productive work

- Stimulate an increase in the number of female farm owners or co-owners.
- Eliminate the passiveness of farm women and increase their self-esteem.
- Empower women to participate in decision-making.
- Ensure off-farm employment for farm women who want such work.

Extension services

- Give attention to general and professional education of farm women to enable them to manage farms and develop supplementary activities, such as agri-tourism, and gain economic independence.
- **Create diversified strategies for farm women, since their needs and problems vary significantly.**

Social and legal status

- Protect rights and benefits that Slovenian women have obtained in the past.

- Develop a more holistic way of thinking about gender issues in the political framework.
- Encourage women's participation in decision-making at local and national levels.

Government organizations and women

- Improve cooperation among government bodies dealing with issues concerning farm women.
- Increase gender awareness in the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food to draw attention to the needs of rural women.
- Incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective into rural development projects, an important component of future project planning.

Non-governmental groups and organizations

- Increase cooperation between NGOs and the Office for Women's Politics.
- Increase institutional support for farm women.
- Increase visibility of NGOs working with farm women.
- Increase cooperation among NGOs working with farm women.

Women's factions and groups in political parties

- Stimulate cooperation among women's factions.
- Increase lobbying for women.

POST-INNOVATION

Throughout implementation, government interest developed and farm women's involvement in grassroots organizations became stronger. In particular, the Office for Women's Politics, an independent governmental advisory service on women's issues, showed increased interest and included a section on farm and rural women in its publication, *The position of women in Slovenia in the 1990s*.

In 1997, on the initiative of this office, Slovenia celebrated World Rural Women's Day for the first time. Issues relevant to rural women were discussed at a round table attended by researchers, policy makers and representatives of the strongest farm women's NGO – the Farm Women's Association. The event was given full media coverage.

In October 1997, Slovenia hosted the FAO workshop Implementation of the National Action Plan for Women in Development, which involved greater state participation in the issue.

Negotiations on the implementation of Slovenia's National Action Plan are currently taking place with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food. At the

time of writing, discussions were under way on preparing working material for debate in the Slovenian parliament and negotiations are taking place on the appointment of a monitor to oversee implementation of more gender-sensitive policies at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food.

The National Office for Statistics is prepared to consider introduction of more gender-sensitive data in its reorganization.

These positive experiences do not imply that a National Action Plan will be implemented overnight. It is believed that implementation of the plan will be a long-term process. The time schedule is tentative and can be used only for orientation, since the plan has not been fully explored by relevant government institutions.

Rural and farm women are not priorities for the Government of Slovenia. Although interest has been raised in some government institutions, it does not mean that a national platform for farm and rural women will be established immediately. Political lobbying for farm and rural women seems to be one way to raise the issues. It is hoped that political parties will resolve conflicts and support implementation of the action plan for women in development. As the Farm Women's Association develops, it may be able to apply pressure on institutions to address the problems of farm and rural women.

LESSONS LEARNED

It is vital to have access to data and knowledgeable people, some of whom might avoid researchers involved in the action plan. Researchers' negotiation and communication skills play an important role in attempts to access information. Alternative strategies must be used if necessary. For example, it was difficult to obtain data on farm women's old-age pensions. In the end, data were obtained using formal channels of information. In other cases, constant pressure needed to be exercised to arrange meetings with policy makers.

The collection of interview data to formulate the plan is very important. It can be seen as the first step towards increased awareness in the government, the public and among farm and rural women themselves.

The involvement of farm and rural women and NGOs in preparation increased the possibility that they would accept the innovative experience as their own project, and not as something imposed on them.

Farm and rural women do not form a homogeneous group in terms of access to resources, problems, needs and interests. For example, two distinct groups could be identified among farm women: traditional farm women and independent farm women. An action plan must address this.

Further research into the position and role of farm and rural women in Slovenia

is needed, since most of the information dates back to the mid and late-1980s.

Lobbying proved to be a powerful tool during the implementation phase of the National Action Plan. In some cases, implementation is a problem because it is necessary to overcome conflicts of interest between the powerful stakeholders.

There is a need for full communication and cooperation among women themselves, NGOs, state institutions and organizations.

There is a major need to increase self-esteem and assertiveness among farm and rural women. As their self-esteem increased, so did their creativity and the determination to take action themselves. One of the farm women interviewed best expressed this in her own words: "That someone wants to see us, wants to know what we want to do and wants to listen to us ... that is, for us farm women, very important. This gives us strength, the strength to hold out and to go on ...".

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