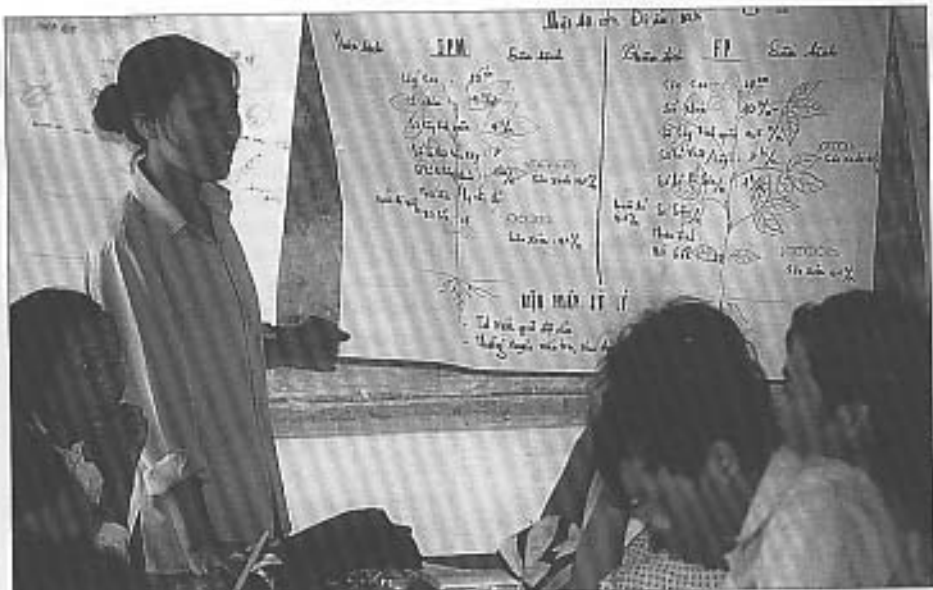


This article discusses the role of women in agriculture in Vietnam and focuses on the participation of women farmers in IPM Farmer Field Schools (FFS). The article is based on the findings of a study 'Women and IPM in Vietnam' carried out in 1994 by the Hanoi-based Centre for Family and Women Studies on behalf of the FAO.



Women farmers and IPM Farmer Field Schools in Vietnam

Nguyen Nhat Tuyen

Since the early 1990s, the Vietnam government has participated in FAO's Inter-country Programme on Integrated Pest Management in rice in South and Southeast Asia. After the agrarian reforms of the late 1980s, the Vietnam government became increasingly interested in renewing the role of its plant protection and extension agencies, and in handing over more responsibility to farmers. It also wished to cut subsidies on such agricultural inputs as pesticides and fertilisers. Farmer Field Schools (FFS) - where farmers re-discover the agro-ecosystem of their fields - were introduced in Vietnam on a national scale in 1992.

Agriculture and gender

The major food crop in Vietnam is rice. Rice production is practised in almost all Vietnam. The deltas of the Red River in the north and the Mekong in the south account for more than 50 percent of all cultivated land. Eighty percent of Vietnam's 75 million population live in the rural areas and 70 percent make a livelihood from agriculture. While there are roughly the same number of men as women in the total labour force, the largest proportion of female labour (72 percent) is to be found in the agricultural sector. Although traditionally women are supposed to perform only 'light' agricultural work and men the 'heavier' jobs, in practice this is little more than a stereotype. Women actually perform almost all the work done in agriculture. Nearly twenty years of war has only served to exacerbate this situation.

In the post-war period, the collectivisation model was introduced into Vietnam, and men and women became members of cooperatives. During this period, women were pushed back into their traditional roles and the work done by women was valued much less than the jobs carried out by men. Various studies show that the payment for a day's ploughing (done by men) was twice as much as that paid for a day of transplanting, watering and weeding (done by women) (Hong Hai, 1988). By the end of the 1980s, the collective model had been succeeded by an individual household-based form of production, and families had been given title to their land for 25 years.

A survey carried out in southern Vietnam in 1993 (CFWS, 1994) showed that women do a larger proportion of the farm work than men. Also, many women work as day labourers and as such have to carry out tasks that include harmful activities like spraying pesticides. Another study by Cantho Agricultural University confirms that women form the largest part of the labour force and are involved in transplanting, weeding, harvesting and drying rice. In households where male members are absent, women also undertake most of the winnowing, watering and pesticide spraying. Finally, we should note that in the country as a whole there are 12 million households, 3 million of which are headed by women.

In general, studies of the division of labour between men and women in the rural areas show clearly that labour is not divided simply according to sex on the basis of health conditions or physiological characteristics. Rather, the division of labour between genders is social in nature

and depends on long-standing habits, customs and superstitions.

Women's access to knowledge

Despite the fact that women take part directly in many stages of the agricultural production process, women are neglected in the field of agricultural training. This is largely due to the widespread bias that training supposedly deals with 'technical' knowledge and technology is supposed to be a male domain. Women learn about agriculture from their neighbours, husbands, parents, the radio or the newspapers and to a very small extent (3.5 percent) from extension staff. (Thai, 1994).

When IPM Farmer Field Schools were introduced into Vietnam, the bias favouring male farmer participation was still prevalent. It was present in the selection criteria used to determine who to admit into FFSs. Criteria included the completion of lower secondary school, farming experience, and the ability to communicate knowledge to others. Although useful in themselves - especially as far as ensuring the dissemination of knowledge was concerned - these criteria, if formally and rigidly applied, restrict women's access to FFSs.

In Vietnam there are not enough extension workers at grass roots level. Extension workers are usually male, and 100 percent of the senior positions are occupied by men. In countries where high input Green Revolution agriculture has become the dominant agricultural practice, the use of pesticides, including highly toxic products, is common. Extension and plant protection agencies have become the major vehicle promoting the use of these inputs, and generally there is very little discussion about

their impact on health and the environment. Prior to the introduction of IPM Farmer Field Schools in Vietnam, pesticides were widely used and were stored in the farmers' houses - even in their kitchens. Women did not use any protective clothing when they sprayed their crops, and even lactating women handled and sprayed pesticides.

The introduction of IPM Farmer Field Schools a few years after the agrarian reform laws came into force was at just the right time. Men and women farmers were eager to know more about how to cultivate their crops in a sound and economic way. Women farmers, however, did not automatically benefit from the Field Schools and were under-represented from the start, as the following data shows. Up to the autumn of 1995 only 13 percent of the 37,000 farmers who attended FFS were women. Women were better represented in the training of trainers programme for IPM: by the autumn of 1995, some 1,250 trainers/facilitators had completed a Training of Trainers course and 422 of these were women. However, as 50 percent of all farmers are women, there is clearly still room for improvement.

What are the factors that prevent women from participating in IPM FFS? The greatest constraint experienced by women is time. Women have to divide their time between tasks in the home and in agriculture. A woman farmer: "In the evening, before going to the Field School, I have to prepare the feed for the pigs for the next day. Although my children can help me, I don't want them to work while I am out studying". Time is also more 'costly' for the poor, for widows, and for women with small children. Besides their farm activities and housework, these women often work to earn the extra income they need by doing off-farm activities such as trading or wage labour. If this time spent on earning additional income could be compensated, then the lowest income groups would be better represented in the Farmer Field Schools.

Family backing

Men usually take part in training activities because they decided to do so. Women often have to seek their husband's or family's approval first. In a discussion with women in Thanh Binh, one woman said: "Whether or not a woman comes to this training depends on the attitude of her husband. I am lucky. My husband understands me and my desire for 'improvements' and when I go to the course my mother and sister help me with the household work. If they didn't I would not be able to go each time".

Local leadership

Village leadership, including village administration and cooperative management, plays an important - if not essential - role in organising IPM training courses. They are the ones who interpret and apply the selec-

tion criteria. If men dominate village leadership, as is often the case, this can easily lead to male bias in selection. Although there is a set quota for women's participation, the number of female trainees has always been smaller than required. The main reason for this is that there has not been enough detailed discussion with women. Insufficient information is given about what goes on in Farmer Field Schools, or about how important they are for women.

Trainers

Trainers have a major role to play in organising a training event such that it meet the requirements of both male and female farmers. When introducing a training course to local leaders, trainers often lack information or knowledge about the way gender operates in the division of labour in the locality concerned. Because of this, they do not have the negotiating capacity to ensure a fair representation of women in the FFS, and often trainers themselves are not convinced that such equality of representation is important. The degree to which women have participated in FFS up to now has depended on the perception and initiative of individual staff and trainers.

However, there is also a positive side to the story. The fact that there are a reasonable number of female trainers in Vietnam (of course there is always room for improvement) has influenced the way local leaders perceive women's capabilities. Also, women farmers tend to take female trainers as their example, and become more self-confident as a result. They find it easier to communicate and talk openly with trainers who are also women.

Training curriculum

The 1994 study by the Centre for Family and Women Studies revealed that, generally speaking, trainers lacked the practical skills to integrate gender awareness in the concrete activities of the training programme. The FFS takes up one growing season. Is it possible to cover the gender inequalities that women experience in the household, the community and their agricultural labour in one short growing season of 12-14 weeks? The answer is, of course, no. A quota for female representation in the FFS is not sufficient to address - let alone to redress - gender biases and the problems confronting women in their households and agricultural work.

Although women play an essential and important role in agriculture in Vietnam, they rarely have a chance to participate in any formal or informal agricultural learning programmes. The IPM Farmer Field Schools have certainly enabled some women to participate more fully, but in future FFSs should focus more strongly on redressing inequality by critically evaluating those selection criteria that have so far hindered the admittance of women. A closer look should also be taken at the stereotypes involved in the gender division of labour,

and special attention should be paid to local traditions and customs that constrain women's equality in agriculture. A gender quota for field school training is not an adequate long-term solution. It is more important to raise gender awareness among social organisations, government agencies, extension and other agricultural departments, the local community and its institutions - and amongst women themselves. This should be done in a culturally sensitive way, building on women's own achievements in their own society and locality.

Since 1995, the national IPM programme has done much to address the issues raised in the Women in IPM study discussed here. The Women's Union has become more involved, especially at a local level. More effort has been put into encouraging local leaders to facilitate women's participation. In addition, there have been several initiatives to draw public attention to the problem of women and pesticide use. A national contest was organised and broadcast on TV, and a selection was made of those farmers' groups whose songs and poems most eloquently expressed the importance of preserving natural conditions in the rice fields.

General concern about the importance of women in agriculture at a national level (Ministry of Agriculture, Women's Union) and at international level (FAO) is still not fully reflected in the specific activities of the IPM programme. This is because of the way FFS are linked institutionally to plant protection agencies, and, to some degree, to the extension service. As a result, they tend to be more technical than holistic in their approach to agriculture.

With the introduction of FFS, the Vietnamese government has made an important step forward, and has enabled farmers, both men and women, to gain access to the most recent scientific insights into agro-ecosystem analyses and to more information on how to care for their health and their fields. At the same time, however, the FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture should try to develop a vision of more sustainable and healthy agriculture which will secure a lasting livelihood for future generations of farmers.

** A longer version of this paper will be published in 'Women in IPM' (forthcoming) edited by Elske van de Fliert.*

Nguyen Nhat Tuyen, Social scientist, Centre for Family and Women Studies, 6 Dinh Cong Trang Str., Hanoi, Vietnam

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