

TRAINING TO SUIT RURAL WOMEN'S NEEDS

Supported by the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, groups of rural women are identifying their training needs and embarking on a 3-phase training programme in agriculture and much more. A consultant and a training officer with ZWB outline this programme designed for women.

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For generations in colonial Africa, the need to provide education and skills training for women was ignored. This was due partly to colonial emphasis on male Africans as a source of labour and partly to the cultural mores that assumed women need not be educated in order to fulfil their roles as wife and mother. With independence in Zimbabwe, a new awareness of the need to upgrade the education and skills of women has emerged. But what kind of education and skills are appropriate and needed? The answers are not simple. Successful education of women relies on two assumptions: 1) women want the education and skills; 2) the training is appropriate to what they need to learn and is offered at the level which suits their present capacity.

"We carry a heavy load"

To find out what rural women want and need -something that had never been asked until then- the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau (ZWB) made a study of rural women's perspectives on economic and social issues. The study was published in 1981 under the title "We Carry a Heavy Load". The study provided the information on which to build both governmental and non-governmental programmes for women in the rural areas of the newly independent Zimbabwe. The situation for women in Zimbabwe has some unique features. Firstly, about 70% of the women live in rural areas on communally owned land. This is a vestige of the system of Reserves set up by the colonial regime. The Reserves were the lands set aside for indigenous black people -often the most marginal and least arable areas. These were called Tribal Trust Lands or Communal Lands after Independence. Before Independence, Zimbabwe had a highly developed economy based on large-scale commercial farming and secondary industry. This was unique among adjacent countries (except South Africa), as a large number of immigrants from Europe had settled here during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Both the agricultural and industrial sectors were dependent on a pool of labour drawn from the Reserves. Since Independence this process has continued, although with more freedom of movement than before. The implication for women is two-fold. Those remaining in the rural areas are often on their own without a husband who may or may not provide support from his urban employment. For those women able to get some education and move to the city, there are now more opportunities. The Government elected at Independence in 1980 has a policy of equity for women. By 1982 they had passed legislation giving black women the right to vote and to become legally independent at 18 years of age, as well as other protection of women's rights. Some of this new legislation conflicts directly with traditional law, which is also still in effect, and these contradictions need to be addressed. Nevertheless, the legislation is on the books and it remains for women to understand their rights and opportunities. During 1991, ZWB is doing an update of the 1981 survey of rural women's perspectives, with some additional questions on their knowledge of the new laws affecting women and their understanding of environmental interrelations. The results of that survey should be available by the end of the year.

Is training for women different?

Out of its experience gained since 1978, the ZWB has developed a process which appears to be providing education and training that is appropriate to both the needs and the capacity of the women with whom it works.

In the process, it has also come to realise in what ways training women is different from training men. The skills expected of women may differ but, where they overlap, the kind of training is much the same. For example, making wire-link fences, carpentry and improved agricultural practices are taught in the same way to both men and women. Other activities such as brick making, welding and oil pressing, that used to be reserved for men, are now being undertaken by women as well. Here, also, the training is basically no different. However, men find it "easier to work without thinking backwards", according to one ZWB fieldworker. This means that men do not rise to prepare food for the family, carry the infant on their back to the training and return home to complete the day's domestic chores. If the training is away from home and does not provide secure facilities, the woman also needs to be concerned about where she can stay safely. Thus, while technically the training information may be the same for men and women, sensitivity to the multiple demands on women must be built into the planning of the training.

Training groups for self-reliance

In its efforts to meet women's needs, ZWB focuses first on groups, so that there is mutual support and reinforcement for implementing activities. To receive ZWB assistance, the group members must have demonstrated that they are serious about developing self-reliance of the group. The group then starts a 3-phase training programme. In Phase I, groups identify their needs and begin planning, including assessing the feasibility of whatever project they have in mind. Initially, the concentration is on literacy, organisational and awareness-raising training. Included are such subjects as writing a constitution, participation in village and ward development activities, developing leadership skills, understanding protective legal rights, understanding land ownership rights, learning record-keeping, and identifying local resource assistance. This phase is on an elementary level, and generally lasts at least 2 years. Phase II is an intensification of the training in Phase I. The subjects are treated in more depth, and group projects are initiated and implemented. Technical support and financial aid are made available, where appropriate. Participatory evaluations of the progress of the groups are carried out with the fieldworkers. This phase may last 2-5 years. By Phase III the groups have completed one or more production cycles of the project. The ZWB fieldworker organises participatory evaluations and helps plan the group's future development and activities. During this phase, groups are introduced to a revolving fund. Thus, they learn the process of borrowing and repayment, and become able to seek outside loans or grants. The whole process can take up to 8 years. About one-third of the 106 ZWB groups are in Phase III.

Slow but sure

The emphasis of the process is to provide training that meets needs at an appropriate level. This is particularly important in the agricultural sector. ZWB is part of the Natural Farming Network of Zimbabwe, a coalition of non-governmental organisations, and has introduced training in organic and **Permaculture** techniques to its community groups. About one-third of the ZWB projects provide such demonstrations for the whole community. They also provide environmental consciousness-raising throughout the organisation. Training for sustainable agriculture is a slow process. The 3-phase group development approach of ZWB is developing an understanding of ecosystems and environmental interrelations in its agricultural training at the capacity level of its participating groups. It is a functional approach to environmental awareness and sustainable agriculture that bears watching.

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