

Gender and commodities in developing countries

DRAFT

NOT TO BE QUOTED

Comments can be sent to:
genderDITC@unctad.org
or to the authors
amos.taporaie@unctad.org
mehmet.arda@unctad.org

Amos Taporaie and Mehmet Arda

Disclaimer:

This document is being distributed in the form in which it was received.

The views are solely those of the authors.

May 2004

**Division on International Trade in
Goods and Services, and Commodities**

www.unctad.org/trade_env/genderDITC.htm

Gender and commodities in developing countries

Amos Taporai and Mehmet Arda

1 Introduction

Although commodity production, processing and trade are generally perceived as male dominated activities, women's role is very significant not only in agriculture but also in forestry, fishing and mining. This is particularly the case in small-scale operations in developing countries. Production and international trade patterns for commodities are rapidly being transformed under the influence of domestic and international policies, as well as the in response to changes in market structures. These have very important impacts on the quality of life and welfare of everyone engaged in commodity production and trade. These impacts have a gender dimension depending on the role that women and men play in the supply chains.

Women's position in all of these sectors display similarities, defined by factors such as restrictions on property rights which limit their role as owners of land and other productive resources, access to credit, and, consequently, the control they have within the family structure and over the revenues that are generated. Restricted access to education, technology, training and extension services, as well as general absence from leadership and decision-making positions impose important limitations on women's ability to improve their livelihoods and their families. In most cases, economic opportunities, employment conditions and wage disparities favor male labour.

An important trend with far reaching implications, particularly on rural women engaged in commodity related activities is the growing number of households being headed by women, which currently ranges between a low of 4% in the Caribbean to as high as 60% in some Sub-Saharan African countries. This has a tendency to escalate with the spread and rising mortalities attributed to communicable diseases such malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/Aids, incidence of war, and emigration of male populations away from rural areas. The upshot of this is the additional constraints placed on women to produce, provide, and prepare food, and accomplish various other chores. For example, women predominate in Lake Victoria fisheries, representing 70% to 87% of fish-workers involved in this activity especially in the artisanal fish trade. The migration of men to other parts of the lake and urban centers has left women to take up duties traditionally performed by men. Consequently, they have taken up fish trading and processing as a source of income (Medard et. al).

When men migrate in search of wages, the primary responsibility for day-to-day household sustenance shifts to women's shoulders, working in the commodity sector. The social and cultural perceptions of gender roles within the community also change, with provision of food for household sustenance being considered only women's responsibility, and men's earnings allocated only to major expenditures such as construction (Centre for Symbiosis of Technology, Environment and Management).

The nature of the primary product has an impact on gender roles in the supply chain. Thus, women can be producers of the commodity in its initial form, or they can process the raw material and act as traders of commodities. Normally, but not exclusively, women participate in domestic and local commodity trade rather than in export or import of commodities.

In some cases, women are involved in the production stage but do not have a role in selling the product. For these products women are engaged in production in a manner similar to men, normally as casual wage laborers (for example for cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, and occasionally in large scale mining operations), without any participation in trading. In other cases the situation is the contrary and women process and sell (or trade) the products of an exclusively male dominated production stage, mostly because of physical effort involved in the process and sometimes social taboos preventing women from taking part, for example, fish. In some others, women undertake a significant, if not exclusive, part in the whole commodity chain, producing, processing – when relevant – and selling commodities, such as horticultural and non-timber forest products, and sometimes small-scale mining.

In this paper, the role of, and the particular difficulties faced by, women in each of the subsectors of primary commodities, namely agriculture, forestry, fisheries and mining will be briefly reviewed and some conclusions will be made regarding the improvement of gender balance in the commodity economy.

2 Agriculture ¹

In agricultural production, women do just about everything that men do (see Box 1). They undertake much of the productive tasks, which include preparing soils, planting, weeding, applying agro-chemicals, harvesting, packing, sorting and grading, processing and stockpiling food crops, and marketing. In the livestock sector, women feed and milk larger animals, while raising poultry and small animals such as goats and sheep. They work as agricultural workers, or on family owned farms. In many cases, women's access to land titles is severely limited and this acts as an important constraint to accessing credit and finance. Therefore their dependence on the male members of the household is very significant. It has been observed that once an activity, such as horticulture, becomes commercialized it is men who take control of production, output and income. Hence, even though women are traditionally responsible for household food production and are the main actors in rural agro-processing and marketing of raw and processed food, they have to overcome considerable constraints in order to fully participate in commercial horticulture (see section 2.1). Similarly, women may be unwilling to upgrade the products that they produce or process, because once a certain level of sophistication and income is reached, men take over the activity. In some cases, women do not have the autonomy to cultivate what they want even if they had the means to do so. For example, some crops, often cash crops, may be considered male crops and will not be cultivated by women (UNCATD, *forthcoming*).

In spite of this, women in many developing countries, carry out much of the food processing and trade. In many cases, the know-how and skills are embedded in women. If market access and entry barriers² as well as gender inequalities mentioned above are overcome, and particularly if this know-how and traditional knowledge can

¹ Please see also contributions by Dent and FAO in this volume that deal exclusively with agriculture.

² For a discussion of market access and entry barriers, see UNCTAD, "Export diversification, market access and competitiveness", TD/B/COM.1/54, 26 November 2002, "Market entry conditions affecting competitiveness and exports of goods and services of developing countries: large distribution networks, taking into account the special needs of LDCs", TD/B/COM.1/EM.23/2 28 August 2003, "Market Access, Market Entry and Competitiveness", TD/B/COM.1/65, 19 December 2003