

“Rural women don’t eat eggs – they sell them to the city”

By Atle Hetland

In Pakistan, 2/3 of the people live in rural areas, 2/3 of them are farmers, and 2/3 of the farmers are women. On top of that, more than eighty percent of the farm work is done by women – and yet, a much higher percentage of the farms are owned by men, which has prompted the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) to make a poster stating that “dowry is not the substitute of inheritance”.

Women are up at dawn, before *Fajr*, and work continuously till hours after *Isha*, into the late evening hours. Women work on the fields and in the animal sheds. They collect water, wash clothes, clean the house and make food. They bring the children into this world, feed and care for them and the adult and old members of the household. Women are the organizers of everyday life for all, and that also includes being the social worker of the family.

“But if you ask a rural woman what she is doing, she will say she is not doing anything”, Sameena Nazir says, and she adds that in our society we only consider salaried work ‘real work’. Sometimes, rural women carry out salaried work, too, as teachers, nurses, doctors and so on. They still have the chores in the home to look after, unless they are wealthy and can have hired help. And then, if that is the case, a woman still has a number of duties in the home, which a man is usually exempted from.”

Sameena Nazir is the head of Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA) and is the dynamic coordinator of the annual conference for rural women in Islamabad, which is held in connection with the International Rural Women’s Days on the fifteenth of October. The event brings together hundreds of rural women leaders from all over the country. “This year, there were more than a thousand women, and some men, attending the two-day meetings and exhibitions at Lok Virsa in the capital city”, Sameena says.

At the gathering, Patrick T. Evans, the new country representative of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) promised his continued support and partnership to the activity. He also promised to strengthen FAO’s assistance to rural women.

“I am glad that FAO is with us”, says M. Wasif Bashir Babar from Faisalabad, who is doing his Master’s degree in water, sanitation and health development at COMSATS University in Abbottabad, with an online component provided by the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, UMT.

“But does it really matter?” asked another young man taking development studies. “It is not the international organizations that prompt change, and sometimes they come with ‘hidden agendas’ that have negative side-effect, such as advocating too much reliance on fertilizers and new hybrid crops. Then it may be the businessmen, not the farmers who gain.”

“I believe in the rural communities to rise and work for change themselves. And, there many more women must be included”, the student added. “It is important that our own government with NGOs,

especially at the local levels, work actively for change”, he said, “and FAO and the other UN agencies can chip in under our own policies.”

Aqeela Naz in the Peasant Women Society, Khanewal, stressed that it is essential that when new policies are made, women’s interests must always be considered.

“Often, men ignore women’s interests when new policies are made, new machines are introduced and agriculture becomes more mechanized”, she said. “The yields may be higher, but the women often become worse off than before.”

“Rural and urban women have many struggles and difficulties in their daily lives” Maryam Bibi said. And it is often true that rural women don’t eat eggs, they have to sell them to the city. Women sacrifice for the children and men.”

“Gender-based violence is still quite widespread. Family planning services are rudimentary. Girls get married off early, especially in rural areas, and that is a major worry for mothers. Statistics show that a large proportion of children suffer from malnutrition and stunting, which is a worry not only for mothers, but also fathers. I believe that we in Pakistan must focus more on poverty reduction in the years to come”, said Maryam Bibi, who comes from North Waziristan but has lived most of her life in Peshawar as head of Khwendo Khor, an NGO supporting rural and girls and women – and boys and men. A few years ago, at 60, she received an honorary doctorate from University of York in the UK. Who says that a rural background is a total hindrance for a rural woman to succeed?

“True, a rural woman from a backward area can also succeed. But then I would also say that there are many unknown heroines in every village all over Pakistan, but we don’t see them or hear about them. They succeed against all odds. There are many ‘Malalas’, to put it that way, in rural areas and in the cities of Pakistan”, Maryam Bibi underlines.

“Pakistan scores very low on the index made by the Global Gender Gap Report. I hope we can soon do better. And it is the women who must lead the work themselves. If we wait for the men to come around, I think it will take too long. But men will also benefit from greater gender equality”, says Zarina Salamat from Rawalpindi. She is a historian and the coordinator of the Council of Social Sciences (COSS) in Islamabad.

“I believe that it is essential that we carry out much more research on the work and life of rural women. That will help the government, NGOs, donors and the rural communities to make the right decisions based on research-based knowledge”, Zarina Salamat says.



Top: Aqeela Naz and Sameena Nazir, PODA, organizer of the annual conference marking the International Rural Women's Day held at Lok Virsa in Islamabad recently; in the background, Ujala Sahar, a trainer and activist from Mardan.

Bottom (two photos): Colourfully dressed urban and rural women at the annual conference marking the International Rural Women's Day in Islamabad recently.

(Photo by the writer)