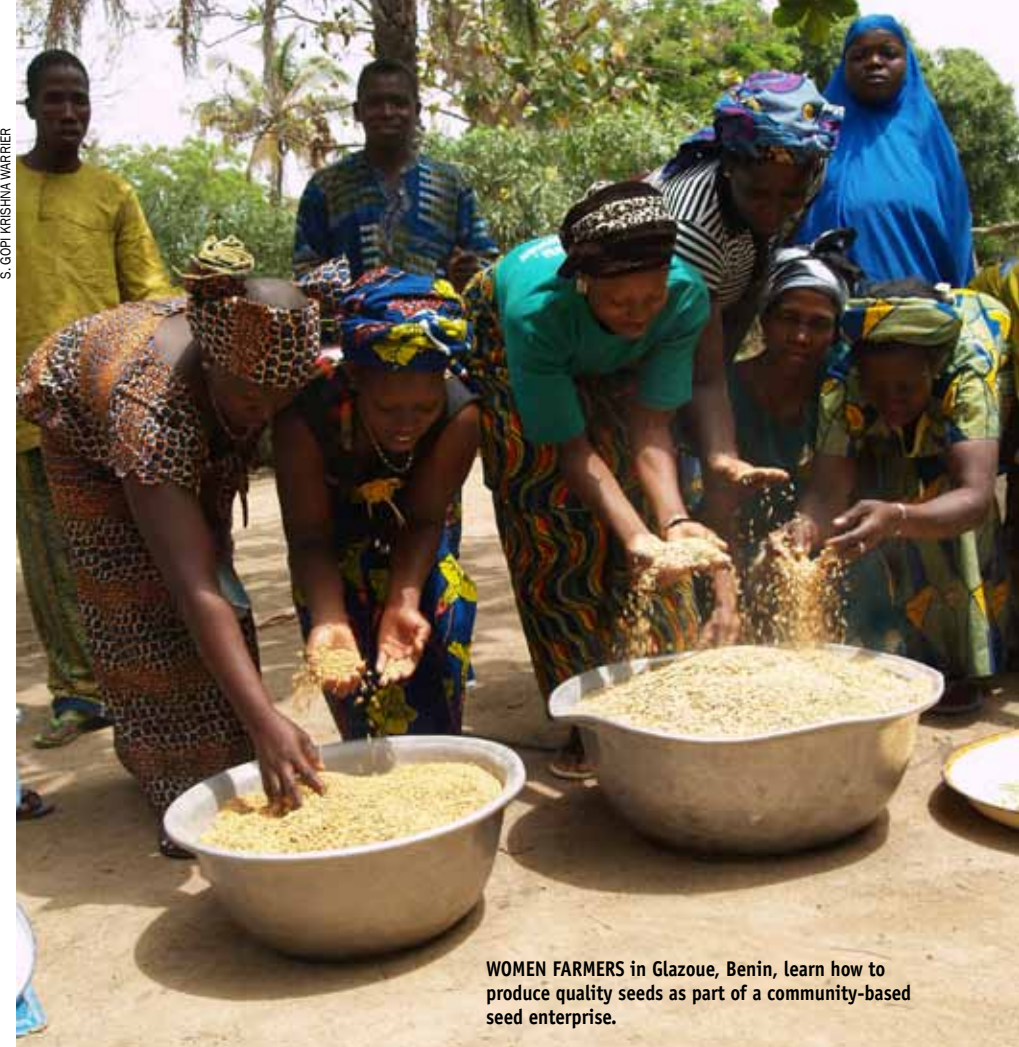




R. RAMANI (5)

S. GOPI KRISHNA WARRIER



WOMEN FARMERS in Glazoue, Benin, learn how to produce quality seeds as part of a community-based seed enterprise.

THE PILLARS OF AFRICA'S AGRICULTURE

by Savitri Mohapatra

As more men seek greener pastures in the city, the women are left to farm and feed not just their families but the whole region

“When you educate a girl, you educate a nation.” Nowhere is this saying more true than in the farming sector in Africa, according to Peinda Cissé, chair of a 35,000-strong farming women’s group in Senegal.

Mrs. Cissé has been a vital conduit for moving agricultural research from scientists to farmers. She has spearheaded the production of foundation seed of improved rice varieties in Senegal, imparting to her group the knowledge she gained from researchers to ensure high yields and high-quality grain.

Praising women farmers, such as Mrs. Cissé, Rita Agboh-Noameshie, the focal person for gender research at the Africa Rice Center (AfricaRice), said that research has shown that, when women generate income through farming, processing, and marketing their goods, they produce high returns that benefit their families and communities as well.

“We have seen that women’s incomes are the most important determinant of

children’s development and thus of future generations,” Dr. Agboh-Noameshie explained. “Therefore, targeting women in agricultural technology dissemination can have a greater impact on poverty than targeting men.”

African women in farming

More than in Asia, women in Africa play a central role in farming as they serve as pillars of the region’s agriculture. Almost eight out of ten farmers that produce staple food in Africa are women, which means that women virtually feed the region. The high rate of male migration from villages to cities has left many women to play a bigger role in farming.

Despite women’s significant contribution, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations noted that rural women have less access than men to land, credit, labor-saving technologies, and resources such as fertilizer and improved seeds.

“In addition, when a farm enterprise that is managed by women shows signs of becoming profitable, it is usually taken over by men,” Mrs. Cissé observed.

A study on gender inequity in irrigated rice systems by AfricaRice and its partners showed that women in the Senegal River Valley lack access to critical resources, such as land, training, credit, and machinery. More than 70% of the women surveyed did not know how to access land for personal use and 88% did not receive any training in rice production.

Similarly, a gender-mainstreaming analysis carried out as part of a project on inland valley-based rice and vegetable value chains in Benin and Mali showed that male farmers have more control over resources and access to training opportunities than women.

Listening to women farmers

In sub-Saharan African, rice is primarily a women’s crop in rainfed upland and lowland ecologies. For example, a majority of West and Central Africa’s 20 million upland rice farmers who grow rice are women.

Women provide the bulk of the labor in rice cultivation—sowing, weeding, bird scaring, harvesting, processing,

and marketing. Similarly, in East African countries such as Tanzania and Uganda, women play a major role in their respective country’s rice production.

Recognizing their importance, since the 1990s, AfricaRice has been focusing on the needs of this group of farmers that had been generally neglected by agricultural research until then. Women farmers are invited to be part of participatory varietal selection (PVS) activities and their views are especially sought regarding new genetic materials.

The PVS approach was adopted to identify NERICA varieties that are best suited to farmers, particularly women farmers, typified by Bintu, a composite West African woman farmer who has been featured in several publications and videos on NERICA. (See <http://snipurl.com/farmer-bintu>.)

PVS exercises revealed that women and men rank plant traits differently, which reflects their different roles. For instance, women particularly preferred tall plant height because it takes the backache out of harvesting, especially when they carry their babies with them.

They also preferred traits that indicate weed competitiveness, since they are mostly involved in sowing and weeding. Processing and cooking qualities were also of more interest to women than to men. The women liked the early maturity of the upland NERICA varieties, as this shortens the lean or hungry season before harvest, when women struggle to feed their families.

Recent impact studies in Benin have shown that the adoption of NERICA varieties reduces the household’s likelihood of being poor by 10%, with a higher reduction for female-headed households (14%) than for male-headed households (6%).

Empowering women farmers

To improve rural women’s access to learning, several thousand women farmers have been trained in rice cultivation, seed production, and postharvest techniques, particularly by the African Rice Initiative, with support from the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Common Fund for Commodities, the European Union (EU), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Rural women across Africa have also greatly benefited from learning about improved rice farming and postharvest techniques through innovative farmer-to-farmer training videos that have helped them improve the quality of their rice, increase their income, and gain empowerment.

In close association with the West and Central African Women Rice Farmer Group Association, AfricaRice is laying the foundation of a grass-roots seed enterprise in Benin, Togo, and Senegal. The project, funded by the New Field

Foundation, EU, and IFAD, aims to link smallholder women farmers to research, microfinance, and markets, opening up opportunities for them to become successful businesswomen in producing and marketing seeds.

Global support for women

With increasing focus on gender mainstreaming, the recently launched Global Rice Science Partnership gives attention to how gender will be tackled in all its research activities.

African countries have also realized the importance of including women-oriented strategies. The National Rice Development Strategies that have been developed in several African countries with the help of AfricaRice and the Coalition for African Rice Development have highlighted this need.

As Liberia’s Agriculture Minister Florence Chenoweth put it, “Helping female farmers is a good investment in the country’s future. We know that, when we support women, more food and money go into feeding children at home.”

