

GENDER AND AGRICULTURE AFTER NEOLIBERALISM

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Report of a Workshop organized by the
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and the
Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

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Acronyms

ADLI	Agricultural development-led industrialization
AGRA	African Green Revolution in Agriculture
FTLRP	Fast Track Land Reform Programme
GMO	Genetically modified organism
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IHEID	Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies
TNC	Transnational corporation
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front

Note

The workshop received funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Background

From the 1980s onwards neoliberal reforms instituted regimes of market-liberalizing governance that profoundly transformed agricultural production systems. New neoliberal-inspired policies took a variety of forms depending on the strength of ideological commitment, the size and structure of the farming sector, the organization of social forces in the countryside, and the degree of integration into the global economy. But international (and sometimes national) priorities converged around the need to reduce state involvement and “de-regulate” markets for agricultural products and inputs, finance and credit. The new policies were expected to launch agriculture on a path towards increased productivity.

By the mid-1990s, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that the hoped-for dynamism of the agricultural sector had not materialized. In sub-Saharan Africa, the region where agricultural policies had been most radically overhauled, growth rates remained low, and the impact in terms of poverty reduction was patchy, if not negligible. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s as markets continued to be liberalized, sub-Saharan Africa witnessed the steady decline of its agricultural exports as a share of world agricultural trade, while problems surrounding food production and food security remained unresolved (UNRISD 2005). In Latin America, after the “lost decade” of the 1980s, agricultural growth rates remained low throughout the 1990s while poverty indices improved at a laggardly pace. Economic reforms meanwhile reinforced existing divides between regions and producers: highly capitalized farmers with links to international agro-industry and export markets were able to enter markets for highly dynamic products, while small farmers were stuck growing products in decline (UNRISD 2005).

The differential impacts on women and men of market liberalization received some attention. Many observers pointed to the livelihood diversification that accompanied moves out of subsistence farming, which accelerated with deregulation. Diversification out of agriculture is a gendered process and shows different patterns in various parts of the world. In rapidly urbanizing Latin America, for example, women’s participation in agriculture seemed to intensify relative to men’s; agriculture became “feminized” (Deere 2005). Here research suggested that women were no longer merely “secondary” workers; they were emerging as farm managers, providing the bulk of family farm labour and taking on extra tasks as men migrated in search of alternative sources of income. In India where the proportion of agricultural workers declined, due largely to male workers moving out of agriculture, women remained in agriculture but comprised an increasingly large share of the casual agricultural labour force rather than being independent farmers (Jackson and Rao 2009; Garikipati and Pfaffenzeller 2012). In Zimbabwe, while both women and men were moving out of agriculture, women’s off-farm activities faced numerous social impediments related to gender ideologies and social norms at the centre of “gatekeeping institutions” (such as informal guilds and networks) stunted women’s off-farm enterprises (Gaidzanwa 1997).

These shifts in male and female labour have taken place in a context where there continue to be formidable challenges to successfully maintaining agricultural production systems that allow local populations to produce affordable and good-quality products. In many parts of the global South, a move out of agriculture and into the city has not signalled a transition of labour as in the stylized scenario of economic development. The poorest people, especially women, exit agriculture on the least favourable terms. Many

hold on to their small plots of land not necessarily to conserve an ancient way of life, but to back-stop economic strategies that involve family members seeking work far and wide, in a context where national economies, and the global capitalist system, fail to generate off-farm jobs that pay a living wage (Li 2011).

There are policy changes afoot, however, that are likely to make the strategy of falling back on a small plot of land to complement low wages increasingly difficult. Recent years have seen significant interest on the part of both national and transnational economic actors in land acquisitions that can serve as sites for fuel and food production (or merely speculation). The drivers behind these “land grabs” are multiple, including market forces such as the hike in food prices since 2008, increased production of biofuels (in part as a result of government incentives), and the “financialization” of agriculture and related interest in farmland on the part of investment funds. But public policies of both investor and receiving countries have also played a part. Investor countries, such as China and Saudi Arabia, encourage overseas land acquisitions in order to enhance food security. At the receiving end, many developing country governments are eager to attract foreign (and domestic) capital into their agricultural sectors in the hope of generating jobs and foreign exchange, and building infrastructure (Cotula 2012; GRAIN 2008).

In the 2008 *World Development Report* on agriculture, the World Bank recognizes that smallholder agriculture is in deep crisis, and sees the policy options in terms of “enterprising” peasant farmers having to either “upgrade” themselves or find a way out of agriculture (through work in the rural non-farm sector or migration to the cities). In parallel, and often in direct response to the corporate-led style of “rural development”, counter-initiatives are taking shape at the grassroots level. These are often connected to broader national, regional and global movements re-claiming rights to land and to food (van der Ploeg et al. 2012). In their different ways, these initiatives and movements defend the interests of smallholders and propose alternative ways for using land more productively, in ways that are both more equitable and more environmentally sustainable.

Workshop Aims

A workshop was organized on 19-20 July 2012 to help the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies (IHEID) assess knowledge gaps and define new perspectives to

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