

The impact of animal traction on women

by

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Abstract

Animal traction can alleviate the workload of women, especially in time-consuming, laborious tasks like water-carrying, milling and oil extraction. It can also be used to earn greatly-needed cash. There are several important constraints to the employment of animal traction by women. In many societies, women are not culturally associated with animals and technologies involving animal power may not be acceptable to the women themselves. More importantly, women often do not own animals and have no decision-making power over their use. Where animal usage is a male privilege, the introduction of animal power may even lead women to lose existing revenue sources. Animal traction usually leads to increases in cultivated areas. This means that weeding and harvesting needs are greater, which may impose a further burden on women if they are traditionally responsible for these operations. The introduction of animal traction should be within the social, economic and cultural context of the whole community, and its impact on women should be carefully considered.

Introduction to UNIFEM

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is a source of financial and technical support for activities that encourage the fullest participation of women in developing countries. The fund strives to facilitate access to resources which can make this participation most effective. UNIFEM gives priority to women in the least developed countries, particularly to those which are landlocked or islands. UNIFEM projects have covered a broad range of activities: from training nomad women to use sewing machines to high-level inter-institutional workshops on development planning; from instruc-

tion in business management supporting agricultural co-operatives, to providing lines of credit to individual business women; from financing a rural women's co-operative sweet factory, to adjusting medical curricula to meet changing health needs; from introducing appropriate new technologies that use less fuel and increase women's income, to using a revolving loan fund as collateral for more bank credit.

The areas of activity for which UNIFEM provides technical and financial support have several common dimensions. They are innovative; they are often experimental; they provide a direct, immediate benefit to low-income women, and they hold the promise of becoming self-sustaining and multiplying their benefits. The "Lagos Plan" of action concerned collective self-reliance in economic and social development to ensure that African women do not remain marginalized and separated from the development process. The UNIFEM African Investment Plan focuses on food and agriculture, which were accorded highest priority in the Lagos Plan.

At present UNIFEM does not have a project involving animal traction. However, given the scope of its activities, animal traction is an area of interest to UNIFEM especially in view of its impact on women. The introduction of any new improved technique or technology has an effect on both the male and female segments of society. Experience has proved that often the improved technology has a negative effect on the lives of women: rather than improving the situation for women, it worsens it. While animal traction may not be a new technology, the effects of its increased

use should be studied. This paper will briefly outline some of points to consider regarding the impact of animal traction on women.

Some advantages of animal traction for women

As a labour-saving technology, animal traction has a positive effect in that it alleviates women's workload. For example, in most rural developing countries there is no infrastructure for water distribution. People have to depend on unprotected and unreliable water sources, often at great distances from their homes. Moreover, population growth means that more, rather than fewer, people are having to carry water to their homes, often for longer distances. The burden of carrying the household's daily requirement of water falls overwhelmingly on women and children. This work is arduous, time-consuming, and can lead to injury, ill health and economic disadvantage. Making the transportation of water easier could thus have important economic and health benefits. In a study conducted in Kenya, donkeys were shown to be of great use for water carrying. Women felt they were versatile, cheap, easy to keep and could generate income. The time saved from water carrying could be used to earn cash, which women regard as their greatest need.

Milling is another labour- and time-consuming task that animal traction could significantly affect. The traditional method of milling cereals can take up to three to four hours of a woman's working day. Obviously motorised mills will reduce the burden but these are not accessible to all populations. Mills operated using animal power are an intermediate solution particularly in small communities of less than 500 persons (communities larger than this would require more sophisticated equipment). Again the time saved could be used for productive income-generating activities. For example in Senegal, women often sell secondary cereal products such as *couscous*. If produced using traditional milling methods, the process is time-consuming and not very pro-

ductive. The introduction of animal-powered mills for women could increase their production.

Oil extraction is another activity in which animal traction could have a significant impact. Oil extraction using animal traction is more common in Asian countries where the system is referred to as a *ghani*. In this case, the pestle is rotated in a mortar by the use of an animal (usually a cow) which moves around the mortar. More sophisticated, motorised versions of the *ghani* exist, but animal-powered *ghanis* are particularly useful at the village level.

It is clear that the use of traction has several advantages for women in regard to time- and labour-consuming activities. However these advantages are not always experienced by women because of various constraints.

Constraints to women using animal power

Women often do not own animals. On being married, women may have animals as part of their dowry, but the animals usually belong to the husband. Since women are seldom the principal decision makers in the family or society, decisions on the use of animals are generally taken by their husbands or menfolk.

For example, in Tanzania, women produce palm oil using traditional methods which are time- and labour-consuming and relatively unproductive. An improved oil press similar to a *ghani* was introduced, which required the use of a cow. The oil that the women produced traditionally was for home consumption as well as for sale. However the introduction of the oil press had a very negative effect. The women were not owners of cows and so they could not operate the animal-powered press. The men, who owned the cows, began operating the press and so it was they who earned the income from the oil sold. The women were left in a worse position than before. They had to continue to produce oil in the traditional way for home consumption, but

they no longer had an income from the sale of oil since the men had cornered this market.

In many societies, women are not culturally associated with the use of animals, so that improvements involving animals may not be acceptable to the women themselves.

The introduction into a community of a technology using animal traction can be a very sensitive issue and the introduction of an animal-powered mill is a case in point. If the animal-powered mill is operated by a community-owned animal the feeding and care of the animal becomes a group responsibility. This is difficult unless there exists a well-knit group prepared to work together on a mutual self-help basis. If animals are not community owned, then each user has to provide the animal to mill her individual grain. In many cases, men own the animals and they are reluctant to allow their animals to be used for milling, an activity which is traditionally considered as women's responsibility. In some societies men see no advantage in reducing the labour burden of women, believing that the women will only become idle. Where the husband is willing to lend the animal, the care and feeding of the animal then becomes the woman's responsibility since she has become the principal user of the animal.

The use of animals for crop cultivation usually allows an increase in the area of land cultivated. However this may increase the workload of the women, since they are responsible for the weeding and harvesting of the larger area. In such a case, it may only be the men's work load that is reduced.

Conclusion

It is evident that the use of animal traction is advantageous and can significantly improve working conditions for both men and women. However the overall benefits are positive only if animal traction is introduced with both men and women in mind, and if its effects on all segments of society are considered. The introduction of animal traction should be within the social, economic and cultural context of the whole community.

Résumé

La traction animale allège le travail des femmes, surtout pour les travaux pénibles et longs comme le transport de l'eau, le broyage ou l'extraction de l'huile. Elle peut aussi être une source de revenus monétaires, répondant ainsi à un besoin considéré comme l'un des plus prioritaires par les femmes.

Le fait que les femmes ne peuvent pas posséder d'animaux, et n'ont aucun pouvoir de décision sur leur utilisation, constitue le plus grave inconvénient de la traction animale. Son utilisation étant un privilège réservé aux hommes dans certaines régions, certains travaux traditionnellement féminins et sources de revenus en espèces ont été accaparés par les hommes. La culture de nombreuses sociétés implique que tout travail avec des animaux est indigne de la femme. Les surfaces cultivées augmentent grâce à la traction animale, mais les travaux de désherbage et de récolte augmentent d'autant, imposant un surcroît de travail aux femmes traditionnellement responsables de ces travaux. L'introduction de la traction animale doit se faire en tenant compte de l'environnement social, économique et culturel des communautés.