

Women

The Driving Force in African Agriculture

BY LORRAINE B. KINGDON

No one talked to the women. That simple mistake hurt many earnest international efforts to improve African agriculture.

Government agencies from the West and the United Nations have been eager to share Western farming methods and improve agricultural production in famine-ridden countries. But until about 15 years ago, the experts were almost always men. They talked to other men. After all, that's the easiest way to do things in African cultures. Village leaders are men, and so are the extension agents and school teachers.

The non-African agricultural experts assumed women didn't do the hard work of farming. They assumed the women they saw working in the fields didn't manage the farm, making decisions about what to plant and how to grow crops. And, African village women never owned land.

The experts were wrong.

Helen Henderson, the head of the Women in Development section of

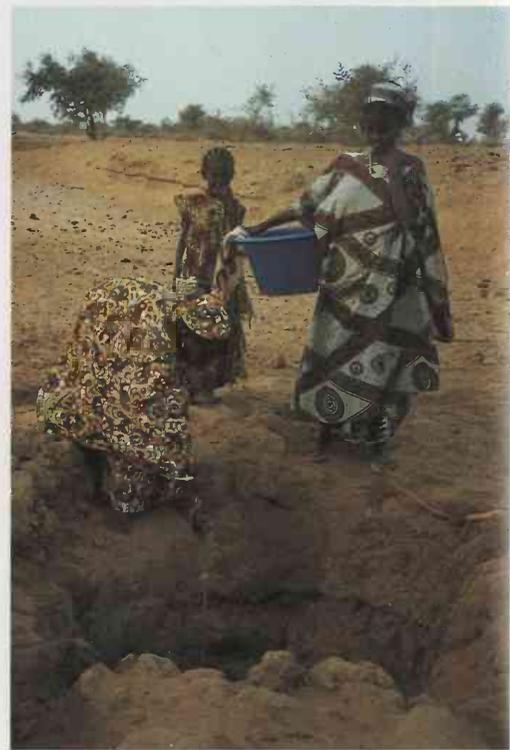
The University of Arizona Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, has statistics to prove them wrong.

From 1977 to 1983, she worked with the UA Office of Arid Lands Studies and the Office of International Programs doing field research in Niger, and Burkina Faso. Since then she has conducted field research in Egypt, Mauritania and Botswana; she is currently in Chad.

"African women farmers produce 90 percent of the food eaten by African families," Henderson says. "Women do more than 50 percent of the farm work. Nearly 50 percent of the agricultural labor force is women. But women have very little political power. The experts were right about that."

Many villagers are illiterate. Statistics also show the literacy rate is lower for women than for men, but as a country's literacy improves, the percentage of women who can read also increases.

Illiteracy can have a profound effect on the acceptance of new farming methods. In the first place,



illiterate women are apt to be less informed about agriculture in general. And, of course, written publications bypass them completely.

The first all-male teams from the West made some other assumptions that haven't proved true. Rather obviously, African families don't follow the pattern of American television's perfect Cleaver family in "Leave it to

Beaver." Men very often have three or four wives, each living in her own house.

"Kitchen table communication doesn't work. You can't assume that village men will pass along what they've heard about new ways to grow food or new crops," Henderson says.

men come in from the outside, the elders think it must be important business. All the village men want to sit in and supervise, but it would be beneath their dignity to listen to "women's business."

"We have a chance to ask who's doing what tasks on which land. We have to have time to look beyond sur-

pump worked by foot power, and they were the only ones strong enough to jump up and down on the pedals. A simple, new pump could redistribute the workload.

In another case, a new, highly touted crop demanded more fertilizer to produce well. Plots of land distributed to the women had less fertile soil so traditional crops were better adapted and more successful.

Agronomists coming in from the outside need to know that the bright, new crops they want to encourage should be adapted to small, individual farm plots.

The message from Women in Development is simple. Consider the women. Don't forget their impact on their families—on the health and nutrition of their children—and on agriculture as a whole.

The message is getting through.

In the 1970s, the U.S. Agency for International Development added a Women in Development program to find out women's contribution to African agriculture. Before then, little was known.

Host countries now frequently request funding for women to be involved in agricultural aid projects. Henderson's trip to Chad is an example. Even as early as 1985, she was asked by Egyptian authorities to take part in a project.

Education for African women is another important facet of Women in Development projects. Better educated women tend to have fewer children who, in turn, are better fed and more educated. Both male and female agricultural specialists—in the United States, as well as in developing countries—need to integrate studies about women in agriculture into the standard curriculum.

"We're building a growing pool of educated African women who have influence in their country—an alliance of women who want to stress the importance of women's role in agriculture," Henderson says with pleasure.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF HELEN HENDERSON

Valuable insights result when women talk to women, says Helen Henderson (in center of group).

She became involved in African agricultural survey teams almost by accident. In 1977, she filled a team position originally intended for a veterinarian in a UA project in Burkina Faso.

There, and in Niger, Henderson interviewed 200 village women and discovered only two had ever talked with agricultural agents who were trying to improve agriculture.

Mixed teams of both men and women are best for finding out vital information about farming practices in underdeveloped countries in Africa, and elsewhere.

"It's harder for men to reach the village women. For one thing, Moslem societies have a problem with gender interaction," Henderson says.

There's another advantage to mixed teams, she admits wryly. If

face questions to get accurate results. Men sitting in the interviews tend to answer the surveys without letting the women speak for themselves," Henderson says.

What are they raising to feed their families? And what crops do they sell to add to the family income? What do older women do? How does the village partition the land? Henderson can go directly to the fields where women are working or in their homes where they're preparing food to find answers to vital questions.

She still remembers the frustration of working with a male interpreter. One husband was so suspicious that they had to conduct the interview shouting through a thick wall.

Valuable insights result when women talk to women. Younger women in one village had to draw water from the communal well. The