

**RECOGNIZING WOMEN'S
CONTRIBUTIONS
TO SOCIETY**

**Community Economic Development Project
Final Paper**

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INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world, women have traditionally played, and still play a major role in society; despite their contributions, a women's power and status continues to be less than that of men. African women, in particular, have been more recognized for their reproductive "work" in bearing children and raising families. Their degree of access to economic resources such as land and livestock, education, training and paid wages for employment is limited.

Although the barriers faced by African women are common knowledge, public policy which continues to have an enormous impact on women's status, does not significantly address these barriers. There are two factors which have led to increasing concern among policy makers and which could positively address the status of women. They are 1) the crises in food production and 2) pressure from the International feminist movement.

In order to understand women's present position in African society, we must understand the way in which the demands of the wider economy interact with the possibilities and constraints of the local economic and political systems. The problems with recognizing women's contributions are much harder to solve because the root cause is steeped in thousands of years of male privilege.

I believe that rural development programs, agricultural research and village level investments should benefit women and children equally with men. I chose to work with the Market Women's Association of Honvie, Republic of Benin to strengthen their participation in local politics and economy.

To accomplish this goal I researched women's organizations that addressed women's social and economic issues through empowerment and women-owned cooperatives.

I believe the delicate process of removing patriarchal constraints on women without demolishing their traditional family and community supports is a process which must continue.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background

The National Organization of Peasant Farmers of Benin (ONPB) is a non-profit, non-political organization formed by concerned peasants and farmers. I am a member of ONPB's local chapter in the village of Honvie; this chapter falls under the national umbrella of ONPB.

ONPB-Honvie sector has 270 members including 94 women who comprise the Market Women's Association. Our thrust is to enhance the quality of life particularly with the community of Honvie and the rural areas in general. The farmers of Honvie are totally concerned that excellence in education is the neglected dimension in all the on-going development efforts in their community.

The members came to the conclusion that the missing ingredients in the development process are education and lack of recognition of women contributions in the community. The "post-mortem" reports of failed projects rarely mention the role of education and the vital role of women. This is a void in the community economic development market of all programs in our communities. Any definition of community economic development is incomplete if it fails to comprehend the contribution of women to development and consequences of development for lives of women.

Every development policy, plan or project has an impact on women and cannot succeed without the work of women. Development with social justice calls for measures which give women access to better education and jobs; which diminish the arduous tasks that hundreds of millions of women face in their domestic and agricultural occupations; and distributes between the sexes equal opportunity for creative work and economic advancement.

The organization asserts that the quality of development varies directly with the quality of education and not with the infusion of the state-of-the-art technology. This may sound too simple to be true but upon reflection it is a very logical conclusion. How can anyone expect the state-of-the-art technology transfer to a community that is barely 1% literate to succeed? It is like flinging hybrid seeds on a piece of land that has not been cultivated and expecting it to yield a bumper crop!

This organization, with its headquarters in the rural community of Honvie instead of the city, helps to capture the realities of rural area agricultural processes and policy options. Such a framework helps ONPB with its members to consider conditions of access to productive resources and economic opportunities, as well as how resources are allocated among alternative uses.

As a member of this organization I am a member of the Community of Ideology and Development. The local organization that I work with at the community level is ONPB-Honvie. As the ONPB representative in North America I am studying community economic development. I have researched women's organizations in the United States to gather information to be provided to the members of ONPB, and colleges and universities in the Republic of Benin, as a tool for empowering Market Women's Associations in particular and women's associations in general.

Problem Statement

Women's contributions are integral to the success of the local economy.

If the necessary resources and information are not provided;

If there is no increase in the level of education, and;

If their contributions are not recognized over the next decade, then the entire community of HONVIE will face a severe economic, social and political crisis.

Goal Statement

ONPB-Honvie is also concerned with the lack of opportunity and ability of women to participate in the community's decision making processes and believes that all these issues can be overcome through improved community awareness, education and building of self-confidence with all women's associations in the community so that their voices may be heard.

Therefore, ONPB's goal is: To promote an understanding atmosphere between the public sector, private sector and the community. This means to act as a transmitter between all the community's organizations and the authorities; we feel that there is some kind of rebellion and this attitude is a product of lack of information, communication and trust toward each party.

Inputs

The resources needed are volunteers; teachers, agricultural technicians and the support of the local leaders to assure the realization of this development program. The most important resource needed, which I could provide, was information on national and international women's issues in economic development, women owned cooperatives and education.

Outputs

The critical element needed is an adult education system that will help the population to think and behave differently. It can help them to better understand the meaning of community, learn new skills and new ways of thinking, so that they will not feel isolated from this new system of economic development that we are trying to bring into the society for the society.

Methodology

I have witnessed several times how so called educated women take advantage of their position to help only themselves and not the women as a whole in my country. For example, I can site several examples of women who have traveled to the US on Government scholarship to attend a University. In each instance they tried to stay to find a better job in the US instead of returning home, as expected by the Government, to help the plight of the uneducated women. It is my personal belief that we should take advantage of the educational systems in the US and apply what is useful to our country. With this in mind, I began to research how women's organizations in the US empower and organize their members.

My initial research was focused or targeted to Massachusetts agencies. I began by locating organizations through the telephone book and gathering information by word of mouth. This initial research lead me to the names of seven organizations all of which were located in Boston, Massachusetts. My plan was to obtain brochures from each organization and then call and request a meeting with their presidents to discuss my project and interview them on their efforts to empower and organize women.

After I received and reviewed the brochures I called to meet with the leaders of these organizations, this is where I came into difficulty. Several leaders questioned why a man would be interested in the situation concerning women's issues. I tried to convince them of my sincerity and desire to gather information to help improve the situation of women's condition in my country, and not only to complete my Master's Degree project. Because I had previously met the Director of the Women's Service Club of Boston, Ms. Valeree Crawford, it was easier to get her assistance. We have discussed building a relationship between her organization and the Market Women's Organization of Benin.

I also discovered that the one key currently missing in Africa, is access to information. There is also a lack of appropriate education, training and resources for empowerment. To begin, I focused in gathering as much information as possible on women's organizations across the United States. With this information I decided to create a database. This database is to be available to individuals and organizations nationally and internationally.

Project Product

The Market Women's Associations, elders associations, youth associations and members of ONPB will be reorganized and reoriented (educated to a new paradigm) so that women in the community can be treated and rewarded fairly. This database will be made available to a number of individuals and organizations. To begin I will send a copy to the University of Benin, the Beninese Department of Agriculture, National Office of ONPB. I am also aware of a new web site being constructed in Ghana, West Africa to be called Africaonline, this database will be

linked to that web site specifically for use by any African interested in researching women's organizations in development. Attached you will find the initial results of my project: a database of national and international women's organizations. The efforts to inform and educate ONPB continue.

PREFACE TO RESOURCES

This database and internet address list is much more than a directory. Each description provides a portrait of an organization that is working to help women in development create better lives for themselves, and a more peaceful and just world for all. For each agency in the Appendix A database, I give names of top personnel, where and how to contact them, the agency's philosophy and objectives, and the countries where they work. With the expansion of technology, I am pleased to provide the e-mail address where a list of resources is available on the internet. Appendix B contains a copy of that material which can be found at the following internet address:

<http://www.lib.ox.ac.uk/internet/news/faq/archive/feminism.resources.html>

I plan to share this document with the Market Women's Association, to the National Association of Peasant Farmers of Benin (ONPB) and to the University of Benin to increase their access to resources on women in development. I hope that you find this information of use in your efforts to assist women in development and to raise the status of women around the world.

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