

THE HISTORY OF TRAINING WOMEN IN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Adapted from an article by Golie Jansen*, formerly, Lecturer,
Vudal Agricultural College, East New Britain Province**

INTRODUCTION

Before Papua New Guinea became independent in 1975, agricultural training and extension were usually carried out by men with a background in commercial farming in Australia and other Western countries. Extension work concentrated on cash crops and, since 1964, cattle. Subsistence agriculture was studied and monitored from time to time. In his first year of work, every officer had to prepare a detailed report on subsistence gardening. However, the demands of cash cropping had priority except in times of emergency (e.g. 'taim hungre' - famine).

Very early extension efforts were directed towards village farmers. In 1967 the Development Bank of PNG was formed. After this, especially in more developed areas, most extension was directed to 'contact farmers'. These farmers were usually the 'big men' of the area.

Although some individual officers tried to develop a 'farm family' approach to rural development, village women did not receive the attention they deserved. Yet in Papua New Guinea the women are almost entirely responsible for food production once the land is cleared, while in cash crop production they provide much of the labour.

Long before independence, women recognised their rights as agricultural producers, including the right to training at the agricultural colleges. Already in 1965 a Women's Advancement Group in Port Moresby started lobbying for women to be admitted to Agricultural College. In 1972, the 'Eight Aims' for independence were drawn up. The seventh aim called for "A rapid increase in the equal and active participation of women in all forms of

economic and social activity". The Development Plan strongly emphasized a more equal distribution of economic benefits, self-reliance and improvement of living conditions in rural areas. It encouraged the new government to reduce the promotion of cash crops and livestock, and to increase attention to subsistence gardens and small scale production of animals. It also supported the inclusion of women in agricultural training.

Finally in 1975, the first 15 women were admitted to Vudal Agricultural College.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

One of the first problems to be tackled now that women were trained at Vudal was the curriculum. It was recognised that the courses needed to be expanded to include subsistence agriculture and family/village concerns. An FAO/ UNDP (Food and Agriculture Organisation, United Nations Development Programme) home economist helped to design a new curriculum to relate to both men and women. The first batch of women in fact followed the same curriculum as the men, except that they were taught 'home economics for village living' instead of 'farm mechanics, plantation crops and animal husbandry'.

* This article first appeared in 'Ideas and Action' (Freedom from Hunger Campaign/Action for Development, FAO, Rome), No. 167, 1986/2, pp. 15-19: 'Training women in agricultural extension - lessons from an experience in Papua New Guinea'.

** Present address: 4, Florida Court
Urbana, Illinois 61801, U.S.A.



Didimeri Salome Silovo working with women in Central Province. Women agriculturalists like Salome have the opportunity to encourage better food production in the village.

It was then believed that the women should be prepared to play a different role from men, concentrating on subsistence crops and home activities, rather than on livestock or cash crops.

The Rural Life Development Course: A new subject

The following year another FAO home economist revised the curriculum and courses at all 3 agricultural colleges to "prepare students for their role as change agents in rural development, focussing on family life development as an integrated part of rural development".

A new subject called 'Rural Life Development' became a part of the course for all students. Rural Life Development consisted of four units, taught over the 2-year period:

1. Community health: communicable diseases; environmental sanitation; methods of health education

2. Food science and nutrition: balanced meals; infant feeding; causes of malnutrition; methods of nutrition education
3. Family resource management: family and farm resources; goal setting; planning of time, money and energy; consumer education
4. Family life development and extension principles: the effects of 'modernization' on education, marriage, land tenure; roles of men and women; etc.

From then on, women and men trained together and women took all the same courses as men, including farm mechanics and construction, plantation crops and livestock. By now it was a strong belief that women and men could play similar roles in their jobs as extension officers.

By 1976, 85 women were enrolled in the 3 agricultural colleges. Rural Life Development was an accepted subject, and each college had an FAO lecturer, with a Papua New Guinean associate lecturer. Two of the lecturers (one FAO and one associate) were men.



Women Extension Officers work with livestock as well as food crops.

TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' REACTIONS TO THE NEW COURSES

'Rural Life Development' was traditionally seen as a women's subject, like home economics. It was not easy to introduce it into the colleges which had been for men only. Lecture time in other subjects had to be reduced to fit in the new subjects; teachers resented this. They felt that this 'women's subject' was being taken too seriously. Most staff did not try to adapt the content of their own courses to recognise the role of women in agriculture. Sometimes this led to differences in the information students received in various classes. For example, students were taught to promote more cash crops, but in the Rural Life Development classes they were taught to consider first whether cash crops were appropriate, taking into account factors such as land pressure and malnutrition.

At first the men students felt uncomfortable with Rural Life Development too. However, after a year, when they were asked to carry out a nutrition survey in their home villages, they were surprised to find nutrition and health problems in their own areas. After this most male students began to support the subject, especially the nutrition education part. It was recognized that to have male students involved in this area of training had a big advantage - that is, the men in the villages would listen to them, whereas they would not always listen to women.

The women students were very keen from the start. Some had to face opposition from their parents, and male students in being the 'first women in agriculture'. After getting used to the new subjects, and to being taught alongside men, most of the women were good students. They proved to be as skilful and knowledgeable as men in subjects usually thought of as 'men's areas', e.g. mechanics.

Initially, the Rural Life Development course staff had the difficult job of developing the courses with very few appropriate text-books for Papua New Guinea. Later on, student readers were prepared, and this made teaching much easier.

Eventually, after seeing Rural Life Development 'at work' in the colleges and the villages, other teaching staff began to support the courses. They realized that Rural Life Development was not simply traditional home economics but had value for male students and ultimately for rural development.

The women who attended the agricultural colleges all shared a determination to succeed, a concern for village women and a desire to pass on the skills and knowledge they learned at college. They were ready to play an important role in helping to upgrade living standards in rural areas. As one student said:

"Women in the villages work in food gardens and tree crops, and do more work than men. Yet they have been ignored by the didimen, who only talk to men about cash-cropping. Women agriculturalists have a good opportunity to work more with village women and to encourage better food production. I do not think didimeris should be left with women only, however, and it would not be a problem for us to work with village men as well if they can accept it".



Salome's work is not wholly with women. Here she helps a farmer measure planting lines.



First women graduates from Vudal with the then DPI Minister, the Hon. Julius Chan, C.B.E., M.P.

STRONG AND WEAK POINTS OF THE R.L.D. COURSES

The aim of the Rural Life Development course was to improve family life in the villages, through extension.

The strong point of the course was that it recognised the role of women in subsistence farming. However, it also acknowledged that men too make important decisions in home and farm affairs. Therefore it is important to train male rural development workers in subjects like health, nutrition and resources management. Village men will listen to advice from other men, more readily than from women.

The weak point of the Rural Life Development approach was that it was developed by outsiders - the FAO staff and later, other expatriates. The more permanent staff at the colleges and in the Department of Primary Industry were not as strongly committed to supporting these courses. In addition, the Papua New Guinean counterpart lecturers were often overseas for study.

All this meant that when the Rural Life Development courses were threatened by budget cuts, there were just not enough

people to support them, and stress their importance.

With changes in the staff who supported Rural Life Development courses, and with a less optimistic outlook for Papua New Guinea, the college curriculum gradually changed. These changes were aimed at producing graduates who could be employed in the private sector. Government employment was limited because of cut-backs in Government spending. One outcome from the changes was that the course in Extension was dropped completely. Rural Life Development and Farm Management became a single subject (Management Studies).

AN OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK

(Concluding note by J. Sawanga, a/Assistant Secretary, Training Branch, Konedobu).

The situation at the D.P.I. Colleges with the Extension and Rural Life Development courses has again changed since this article was written.

The Government of Papua New Guinea has recognised the important role the Extension

Services play in bringing about development in rural areas, and improving people's way of life. As a result, the Extension course was re-introduced in 1983, and is now being taught alongside Rural Life Development.

Both Extension and Rural Life Development are part of the Management Studies Department. However, moves are well underway to make Extension a department in its own right.

There is no longer any resentment by the staff or students towards the Rural Life Development course taught. Everybody accepts the subject, and both male and female students are doing the course together.

Photographs by N. Birge and Post Courier.