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in

Hamdy A. (ed.), Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), El Kady M. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.).

Training of trainers in INtegration of Gender Dimension in water management in the Mediterranean region. INGEDi project

Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 64

2004

pages 73-76

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=6002379>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Calvino M. **The water association : an instrument to help rural women**. In : Hamdy A. (ed.), Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), El Kady M. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.). *Training of trainers in INtegration of Gender Dimension in water management in the Mediterranean region. INGEDi project*. Bari : CIHEAM, 2004. p. 73-76 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 64)



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## THE WATER ASSOCIATION: AN INSTRUMENT TO HELP RURAL WOMEN

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I felt honoured when CIHEAM IAM of Bari invited me to this workshop “Training of Trainers in Integration of gender dimension in water management in the Mediterranean region”. In particular, I must warmly thank Rosanna Quagliariello, Prof. Hamdy and all our Egyptian friends for this marvellous hospitality.

On the basis of the discussion held at the first workshop in Bari in June 2004, I decided to investigate the Italian situation of women involved in the irrigation management.

Irrigation management with a gender perspective often starts by identifying the end-users, and by understanding their specific needs and interests. For this reason, I decided to analyse female farmers' role in water management and the difficulties they face in using water for crop production in different contexts, comparing the situation of Italy and some selected developing countries.

For this specific, I first studied the mechanism of water management for irrigation, from the national to the local levels, analysing the reality of Water Users Associations (WUA).

Looking at the irrigation system, the WUAs seemed the organised entity nearest to farmers' irrigation needs, and consequently to female farmers' needs.

The main aspects analysed were:

1. How does a water users' association work? What are its activities?
2. Who participate in its administrative management? How many women work for them, and in which positions?
3. What roles have member/users in the water management? How many users are women?

In Italy, the WUAs are public entities with an associative structure, based on the self-government principle and on subsidiarity (and devolution); they are widespread on the country territory. They control and preserve the irrigation system to distribute water for irrigation to their members who pay membership fees for these services. In some cases they offer technical and legal assistance on irrigation matters to their members.

The national association which assembles them is called “Associazione Nazionale Bonifiche e Irrigazioni” (ANBI), it means “national association of water improvement and irrigations”.

It is member of the “European Union of Water Management Associations”.

This union of water users associations is conceived to promote more consciousness by the institutions about the need for water improvement in the interventions directed to safeguard and valorise the territory. It monitors that national and regional legislations respect this principle and it is also aimed to coordinate the public interest with the private one. It proposes programmes and policies to realise and represent the WUAs in their relations with the Parliament, the Government, the public administration and the professional organisations. Moreover, among its several activities, ANBI implements researches and studies on the most relevant issues related to the water use sector, and organises training courses for water users' associations' officers.

I found this aspect very interesting for the training issue we are dealing with.

There is a general lack of data on the members of the associations: I could not find any national statistic on them. I only knew that half of the national irrigated territory is served by WUAs.

Concerning all the officers employed in Italian WUAs, data point out in general a lack of female representation, which diminish even more when one passes from the strictly executive roles to those requiring more responsibilities and technical competences, until the managerial status. This phenomenon can be explained by two factors: the first is related to several obstacles that women face in general to reach top level positions, in the working field as in the institutions; the second one is in the still limited number of women with technical professional qualifications for the irrigation sector, such as hydrology or engineering.

Table 1. Distribution of WUAs employees by rating and sex (updated to 31/08/04)

	Male		Female		Total
Managers	181	94.3 %	11	5.7 %	192
Cadre	374	86.6 %	58	13.4 %	432
7 Range	514	87.0 %	77	13.0 %	591
6 Range	1210	74.8 %	407	25.2 %	1617
Other employees	1216	76.1 %	381	23.9 %	1597
Workers	3168	98.6 %	45	1.4 %	3213
Without qual	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6663	87.2 %	979	12.8 %	7642

Source: ENPAIA, insurance office for agricultural sector

Although the number of women in WUAs is still low, the trend of women approaching this sector is slowly growing. In fact, in the training activities organised by ANBI, in the last five years, there has been a constant increase of women among participants.

These courses were organised in cooperation with some faculties of agricultural sciences and agro-forestry territorial management; they are addressed not only to WUAs officers, but also to simple graduates in law, economics and techniques related to land and water improvement.

Some of the courses' themes are:

1. Water improvement for territorial, environmental and food safety.
2. Irrigation problems in the framework of national and regional legislation.
3. Water improvement projects in the territorial planning.
4. Irrigation intervention: problems related to water needs, consequences on soil and water quality.
5. Environmental engineering for water improvement's planning.
6. Informatics for WUAs territorial mapping and database management. Data processing and informative territorial system for water improvement.
7. Relationships among WUAs and local entities: the subsidiarity and devolution issues.
8. Criteria for drainage networks' planning.
9. Irrigation's techniques to save water

The majority of the participants to these courses is constituted by men, but the number of women grows year by year and with high level technical professional competencies.

Table 2. Distribution of participants by course, year and sex (updated to 30/09/04)

Updating course for WUAs Officers		
Year	Participants	Women
2000	31	7 (1 engineer)
2001	38	6 (1 engineer)
2002	26	3 (1 engineer)
2003	32	11 (3 engineers)
2004	33	12 (1 engineer)

Course on informatics systems for WUAs*		
Year	Participants	Women
2000	14	4
2001	9	-
2002	17	3
2003	16	5 (3 engineers)
2004	16	-

*Source: ANBI, training office*

*\* In the informatics courses participates mainly the WUAs technical personnel, then professional qualifications are in the technical area.*

Given the general lack of data disaggregated by sex, it was difficult to assess how many women participate as users into the associations. It was, therefore, difficult to investigate women's relationship with or their membership in the WUA, but some interviews were also carried out with female farmers cultivating fruits and members of a WUA, who personally irrigate their plots.

The interviewed women have their cultivations in an area which does not suffer the drought, but they still face some difficulties in water management. They referred that in the past the water counter they used for irrigation was in common with other farmers, and that implied an inconvenience for these women, because the individual consumptions were undistinguishable. It was therefore impossible to point out the abuses many people did, causing a waste of water and money, without any profit in production. These women, once they obtained the individual counter, started saving money and were able to invest some finances in higher technology irrigation systems, which helped them to be self sufficient in irrigation. In spite of this, during the winter, women often are not autonomous in the timing of supply and irrigation, because every time they need to irrigate they have to call the WUA and ask them to open the plant.

To safeguard the quality of their products, each woman has to take care of the purity of water they use, and at times they noticed that the water they receive was not clear, and this obliged them not to feel totally confident in water quality.

Even if they have these difficulties, women were not invited to participate in decision making of the WUAs, and were not informed if there were other women among the users of the association.

If we make a comparison between the Italian situation and the reality of WUAs in the developing countries, we can notice that even if the resources and the socio-economic conditions are different, female farmers share some of the problems related to irrigation.

Some of the irrigation problems Italian women share with female farmers living in developing countries:

1. Need for a different timing of water delivery: women are not autonomous in irrigating and they would need a rotation schedule that considers female water needs.
2. Lack of women's participation in decision making processes of WUAs.
3. Lack of information on new technologies to save water and spare time.
4. Lack of economic resources to invest in these technologies.
5. Lack of quality of water they receive: women take care of this aspect for the quality of their crop production and, most of all, for the health of the family and of the consumers.
6. Gender stereotypes and prejudices.

I will not mention here the long series of problems female farmers face in the developing countries: they have been fully explained by my colleagues with their exhaustive case studies.

What I consider to be one of the possible solutions to these problems is training, and trainers should know all gender bias that women face. There is a need for gender specialists who can introduce them to gender issues.

Concerning the trainees, it is important to consider both men and women, to legitimate, from the beginning, women's participation in the irrigation management and educate men to gender needs.

It is also necessary to spread information and create networks among women, WUAs, training institutes and public institutions, to improve and multiply experiences.

The place which is nearest to female water needs and that can include both aspects – training and networking – is the WUA. There, it is possible to train men and women, listening to their questions, investigate and solve their problems with a gender oriented attitude.

I think it could be useful to create a sort of flexible WUA's pattern which could respond to the different women's needs, and can be adaptable to the diverse socio-economic contexts. In this WUA it would be possible to organise gender training courses, addressed to officers and users – including also non formal members – extension services for women, and there it would be possible to encourage new forms of association and networking.

A national WUAs could periodically collect data and realise case studies to improve knowledge on gender issues and related problems, and collaborate with training centres to the training of trainers.