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Gender based approaches - crucial in farming zones!

By Wonder Chakanyuka

Closely observing the 2010/2011 main summer cropping season activities – one notes great need to integrate and apply gender mainstreaming approaches to redress gender based violence {GBV} and disparities mostly affecting vulnerable women and children who are bulk number of farming population in Zimbabwe.

All follows that in Zimbabwe as in many other African countries, men and women have different roles and responsibilities in agriculture. As mostly noted in the conventional agricultural domain, men tend to plough whilst women plant, weed and harvest. This has seen conventional agriculture tending to increase amount of work for women, children and other vulnerable ones who mostly contribute these tasks and also help to keep animals and birds away from crop fields.

However, men – some of them living and working in towns rush to take most of the money earned from selling crops while women may not even benefit from proceeds of their additional work. During the 2009/2010 crop selling season reports have been coming from cotton growing areas like Gokwe involving incidents of men mostly pocketing all proceeds from cotton sales.

Also, this writer has occasionally witnessed some male farmers resorting to excessive beer drinking and prostitution and squandering proceeds from selling their tobacco in auction floors in Harare. These farmers ended up not having enough money to buy inputs or implements necessary to ease farm work done by their wives or children. Most often, conflicts generate between men and their wives after men have pocketed all proceeds from sale of crops. In most cases this constitutes - gender based violence {GBV} which threatens harmony in farming areas. In extreme cases GBV involve physical abuse of women and children by men during agricultural production and after sale of crops.

The scenario calls for farmers' unions and key agricultural players to adopt new and appropriate agricultural extension approaches which involve extension officers and the farmers to be practically acquainted with principles and application of GBV programming especially on physical violence in the farming areas. Hence, prevention and response should entail strategies which target root causes and contributing factors of GBV in farming areas. Response activities need to target the consequences, or outcomes of GBV. Prevention activities should involve removal of abuse of power mostly against women and children by men which happen to be the root cause of GBV in farming areas while there is need to reduce risk and severity of GBV by addressing contributing factors such as lack of resources.

At this juncture, one needs to acknowledge that survivors of GBV may suffer severe physical, psychological, emotional and social problems. According to the United Nations {UN} and the International Rescue Committee [IRC], the scenario calls for responses to GBV to be holistic in approach and help the survivor achieve a state of complete physical, mental or psychological, emotional, spiritual and social well being. This ought to be accounted for by GBV workers or agricultural extension workers in their programming while identifying and facilitating the survivors' needs. Only disturbing is that coordination remains major challenge. This comes after noting that lack of meaningful and effective coordination amongst relevant actors has undermined successful address of GBV in farming areas.

Given this background there is need to encourage fairer distribution of agricultural tasks between men and women. Extension officers should indicate how farming activities or approaches will contribute to women's empowerment and or capacity building for women who are beneficiaries of farming projects. Also men and women are urged to equally share proceeds from crop sales equally to avoid any violence. In fact gender equity should be promoted when distributing benefits among men and women, so that farming projects contribute towards gender equality.

Hence extension workers need to understand clear roles and views of men, women and children in their agricultural programming or training. This even includes holding separate meetings or trainings for women if they are not specifically targeted by your program. Hold them at convenient times of the day. Do not forget to include children too; they can play a big role. But again, make sure they are not overburdened as a result. In fact extension officers should encourage a flexible attitude towards roles among men and women. Also, involve traditional leaders to influence men to help with some of the work women traditionally do while focusing on improving food security and family welfare which are part of ultimate goals of agriculture.

The extension staffers should further provide appropriate information, education and communication materials on gender related issues particularly on resolving GBV mainstreaming issues. They should encourage children to help parents to read materials and know their roles, record their costs, yields and crop sales and have knowledge on farming trends in their communities. The extension staffers should link people including women's groups to input supplies and markets or in some cases deliberately target women with inputs including seeds and fertilizer. In the face of agricultural mechanization and agricultural technological revolution, all calls for vulnerable target groups including women, children and the disabled to access implements like tractors and agricultural terrain vehicles as well as irrigation equipment and ease their farming tasks while aiming to attain high yields. In fact women still need to be assisted and be a driving force in agriculture. Let alone women are capable to be lead farmers in their respective areas while they can also take leading roles as chairpersons of commodity groups.

Also, the gender dimension of agriculture has been highlighted by many vulnerable women including widowed women who lost their husbands to HIV/AIDs. Let alone traditional gender roles are breaking down due to the impact of AIDs and migration on households. Hence it is

important to adopt agricultural approaches which serve to mitigate these problems bedeviling most vulnerable women and children engaged in agricultural production.

Though HIV and AIDS prevalence rate has been decreasing in Zimbabwe this pandemic continues to bear devastating effects in farming communities, bearing challenges on gender mainstreaming. This comes after most men are employed in urban centers while many of the most productive members of families have died or fallen ill due to HIV/AIDs. This has since left children and the elderly taking up the farming responsibility and fending for their sick relatives. This double burden starts a cycle of food insecurity and loss of income.

After many hours are spent by women, including girl children and the elderly looking after the sick and not engaged in farming activities these household members end up cultivating smaller plots and grow a smaller range of crops. Some are not able to afford draught plough so they plant late and fail to buy inputs and weed their fields. Not surprising - their harvests are expected to be small making their diet poor and likely to go hungry. Let alone, they are beset by medical bills and funeral expenses.

Desperate families are forced to sell what they have. It is a sad story when they sell farm implements or draught animals to raise money. These may even move to urban areas where they can not cope up with the demanding urban life. These vulnerable families continue to have less interest to invest in the farms. More disturbing are reports involving relatives of the deceased seizing the family's property, leaving widows and orphans destitute or falling into disrepair. These vulnerable households also find it difficult to get credit or extension advice. Many communities have traditional ways of supporting vulnerable people but these customs have been stretched to breaking point by the large numbers of illnesses or HIV/AIDs deaths and breakdown of extended families in the agricultural sector. Instead vulnerable farming households must be assisted in identifying suitable crops to grow and provided with nutrition advice. Farmers need to work in groups so that group members help out to a member when he or she is unable to work in the fields because of illness.

As a result agricultural players including farmers' unions should provide extension support to farmers or households affected by HIV and AIDs. Therefore farmers' unions like Zimbabwe Commercial Farmers Union {ZCFU} are applauded for integrating gender and HIV/AIDs mainstreaming in their agricultural programming while their interventions should further seek to establish linkages with home based care programs and encourage participation of care-givers by deliberately targeting them regardless of their socio-economic status. But, men should take lead in the gender and HIV/AIDs mainstreaming programs in the farming areas.

Again, more health institutions and some NGOs are on mission to promote community health in farming zones through establishing clinics to cushion effects of HIV/AIDs. Their efforts are appreciated if their minimum initial service package includes provision of peer education, counseling, distribution of free condoms, assuring safe blood transfusions, support for home

based care programs and production of nutritious crops which produce food which boost immunity of those affected by HIV/AIDs. Some of these organizations have comprehensive reproductive health services which include awareness on prevention, treatment services for STIs, anti-retroviral therapy, nutritional health support and drugs provision. These still need to source and procure antibiotics and other relevant drugs as appropriate; provide care - support and treatment for people living with HIV/AIDs and collaborate in setting up comprehensive HIV/AIDs services support. What is only worrisome involves reports that some of these health or medical institutions or Non Governmental Organizations {NGOs} are reportedly charging exorbitant prices at their clinics for services they render to the affected and vulnerable people in farming zones. Many of the target groups do not have money or resources to pay medical bills which further widen gender disparities.



Hence it remains mandatory for farming actors mainly agricultural extension staffers to seriously consider gender and HIV/AIDs mainstreaming after the two continue to wreck havoc on the agricultural sector. In fact gender based approaches with sound minimum initial service packages need to be incorporated as these identify root causes exacerbating problems associated with gender imbalances and violence while HIV/AIDs mainstreaming also remain imminent in farming areas. Let alone these integrated gender based approaches contribute towards increasing agricultural production and yields which is main target of all farmers by end of the 2010/2011 summer cropping season in Zimbabwe. _

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