

THE ROLE OF FAMILY MEMBERS IN RURAL ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

The success of extension work very much depends on the roles and function of the family members. These include men, women and youth. In the rural community each member of the family unit has his/her own unique influence in the process of decision-making. This paper tries to describe and highlight some of the roles and influence each of the above family members have on the success of rural extension or adult education.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The rural family is the smallest unit in the rural community. The development of the community very much depends on the development of each family unit within it. The home is a basic unit of the community. Each family member play important roles in contributing towards the family earnings, decision making and welfare. In addition, the farm family as a unit, shares in the essential and primary task of agricultural production within the community. Hence, according to Brunner in Di Franco (1966) extension should not deal simply with men, but also women, boys, girls and older youths.

The degree of involvement of the family in the community development process, according to Maunder (1973) has a great influence in its effectiveness. This is true in cultures where great emphasis is placed on the family as an economic and social unit.

2.0 THE FAMILY AS A WORKING UNIT

In the agricultural society, the rural family is a working unit in the home and in the farm. Therefore, any rural extension work would not be complete without definite provisions for the improvement of the whole family unit. It is universally accepted that men are the head of the family unit and is associated with authority and power in decision making.

However, in the rural society, decision making is often achieved through consultation with the other family members. The opinion of households sometimes may counter the decisions made by the head of

the family. That is why, an extension programme aimed only at the head of the family unit (men) may not always bring about successful outcome. As cited by Maunder (1973), although extension work among (a family) farmers, farm women, and youth appears to be separate at first glance, there is much overlapping and intergration in the family-approach of extension. Each member of the family do play some roles (directly or indirectly) which contributes to the success of the other family members.

3.0 WOMEN'S ROLES

Women not only contribute labour in the farm work but are involved in the decision making related to the farm activities. Women do much of the marketing and purchasing for the farm and family. In other situations women do keep records and have a voice in decisions involving expenditures. According to Weideman (1987), most successful and lasting results (from extension work) were obtained from work with the women. In Malaysia, women have been known to play significant roles in supplementing the family income. It has been reported that economic projects implemented by the rural women amounted to approximately RM4.5 million in 1994 (New Straits Times, 1994).

The opinion of family members (particularly women) play an important role in decision making. Maunder (1973), cited some experiments with the farmer training centers in Kenya which failed to bring about the adoption of the improved practices taught. This happened because wives and children of the returning trainees ridiculed such new ideas. But, when women were later included in the training programme, they adopted the new practices with considerable enthusiasm.

Women are also traditionally responsible for the health and nutrition of the family as well as training of the children. This responsibility plays a vital role in producing healthy, dynamic and productive farm family. People suffering from illness, malnutrition and parasites are physically incapable of hard farm work and are not receptive to new ideas. Better living for rural people is the ultimate goal of extension education. Improved agricultural production is the only available means of achieving economic aspects of that goal. Hence, healthy, dynamic and productive farmers and farm families should be working in the farm.

Realising the important role played by the farm wives and families, the 'Smith-Lever Act' in the United States has included "practical demonstrations" in home economics as a part of the cooperative extension service,(Blauch,1969). Home demonstration agents were employed to carry out the practical demonstrations within the field of home economics. In Malaysia, the extension work on home economics is performed by agencies such as KEMAS and settler development units as in FELDA and FELCRA.

4.0 THE ROLE OF LOCAL YOUTH

Extension programmes should also involve the youths in the community since they are also a component of the rural family and community. Youths have their own specific contributing social functions in the development of the community. As mentioned by Maunder (1973), the extension advisory service through rural youth is organically a branch of agricultural extension as a whole. Young people are less conservative than their elders and hence are more likely to experiment. With education, they become successful innovators. Many improved farm practices are accepted and tested by young people through youth clubs. When proven successful they may be adopted by their elders.

Youths are much more receptive to new ideas as compared to the older group of people. Given proper training and guidance, they can be the leaders of tomorrow who can help the community to achieve their desired goals. Adult education, therefore, should be promoted along with the instruction of youth in the school. The content of both programmes should be in general, the same for many problems although details in method may differ. Schools, although formal in approach, should be used as a means of channeling new ideas and awareness related to the development of their community.

Extension and Adult education experts such as Pesson (1966) and Blackburn (1989), agree that extension programmes should use the best existing community leadership. Local leaders are valuable assets to the extension worker regarding extension plans, as well as helping decide what projects will be undertaken and how they will operate them. Hence, leadership potentiality should be developed early in the rural youths so that when they reach adulthood, they would be able to assume leadership function easily.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In the context of community development, extension programme involvement is concerned not only with the head of the family unit (men), but also the rural community as a whole. This is to fulfill the common needs of the rural population such as food and fibre supply, employment of labour and also agricultural development requires group as well as individual action, (Maunder 1973). Functions such as processing and marketing of agricultural products, supply of production inputs, education of children and other community functions, all have a direct bearing on production and require joint efforts. Records have shown that the comprehensive approach in extension and adult education programmes seem to be more effective in bringing about change in the rural societies (Claar, 1966). These are some of the reasons why extension programmes should or need to involve women, youths and the rural community.

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