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THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL ROLE OF AGRICULTURE IN ITALY AND ITS RELATION TO GENDER

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Men and women play prominent roles in agriculture all over the world. Women are responsible for half of the world food production, with a fluctuation ranging from 60% to 80% in developing countries. Despite their huge contribution to food safety, their work in agriculture is scarcely recognised and considered in overall development strategies.

Although women play an essential role in agriculture, they represent the most disadvantaged population category since wars, male migration to cities looking for a paid job, and increased mortality due to AIDS, forced them to assume also the role of family heads, thus causing the feminization of agriculture.

In many developing countries, women are the main pillars of agriculture, but at the same time they cannot enjoy the benefits of the economic growth and development processes. Gender discriminations still persist. Farmers are usually considered “males” by the public opinion and in the analyses of strategic development plans, thus hindering women's access to lands, funds, and basic agricultural services, which are all possibilities that could boost production capacity.

Although women are the main food producers of the world, their contribution to development is not considered. A series of gender-disaggregated data shows that their contribution to agriculture is scarcely emphasized and recognized. This leads to women's exclusion from any development plan.

The number of women in educational, training programmes and in the workforce is increasing. However, the level of female unemployment is still high, especially among young girls and in the Mediterranean Region and rural areas. Moreover, everyday women have to cope with a wide range of difficulties depending on their environmental context and keep on suffering discrimination, even if it is worth mentioning that some progress has been made and marginalization is no more affecting women.

However, women really want to improve their skills in order to be involved in the process of farm upgrading and better face the agricultural challenges envisaged for the next years (i.e. global market, competitiveness, quality, etc.). Notwithstanding these obstacles, agricultural entrepreneurs are assuming an increasingly decisive role in agriculture at national and international level. Women who decide to be involved in agriculture activities are fully aware of the possibility of playing an active role and above all of starting new productive enterprises able to bear comparison with those run by their male colleagues and particularly with the market.

Agricultural entrepreneurs comprise a considerable percentage of women living and working in rural areas. In addition, it is important to mention women who earn an income, often illegally, as well as those engaged, as owners or employees, in other productive sectors, such as tourism, handicraft and environment, which characterize the economic structure of these areas.

Community structural and rural development policies are also directed to rural women, and are intended to increasingly promoting a participatory approach as well as a multifunctional agriculture able to interact and boost the other productive sectors. In particular, these policies aim at increasing the presence of women in the economic, social and institutional structures of rural areas, promoting, at the same time, gender equality.

In this regard, more and more attention is being paid to agricultural multifunctionality. It derives either from the role assigned by national, international and community development policies to agriculture in promoting the socio-economic development of European and extra-European countries,

or as a response to the recent consumption behaviour of civil society increasingly concerned with environmental issues and healthy and quality environments.

Agricultural multifunctionality represents one of the strategic keys in the valorisation and development of agriculture. According to the EU, the term “multifunctionality” refers to the “fundamental link between sustainable agriculture, food safety, environmental stability, landscape and environmental conservation, as well as stable food supply.”

In Italy, the multifunctional role of agriculture has been approved through the legislative decree n. 228 of 18 May 2001, which provides a new juridical and functional shape to the farm business. A business that manages a multifunctional farm can stop being “unisectoral” and become “multisectoral”. In the light of this consideration, today the agricultural sector considers multifunctionality as an economic opportunity for farm enterprises.

Among the activities that are encountering important opportunities towards generating income and jobs there are the following: agrotourism, organization of didactic activities within the farm, essential to educate future consumers, and processing and sale of farm produce.

The female work in agriculture significantly contributes to promoting the above-mentioned activities. Actually, the process of arranging food and accommodation in the farm depends on women's capacity to combine domestic activities with agricultural ones and to apply all their skills, including the gastronomic ones, which are a result of their extensive knowledge of the local history, culture and production.

It is also worth underlining that in Italy women usually run small or medium concerns and manage a small produce destined to be directly sold. This is a key aspect of the agricultural offer since these products often derive from very generation-old traditional recipes.

Didactic and social farms have been established also thanks to women's presence. These facilities organize respectively educational courses for future consumers and therapeutic programmes aiming at social rehabilitation and integration through the valorisation of the agricultural resources.

The feminization process is affecting our country's agriculture. Actually, women's presence in agriculture is not an isolated example or exclusively connected to family relations, but it is becoming a characteristic feature of Italian agriculture. “Women-run farms make up 30% of the total farms in the country, and even if their percentage is still low as compared to men, their number is increasing. This confirms women's will to gradually assume a role as juridical-economic farm managers.”

The main objective of women-run farms in Italy is achieving a high standard of quality which consequently entails genuineness, hygiene and originality. Women are aware that only through intensive efforts towards reaching product quality they can significantly contribute to boost consumer confidence in the agro-industrial sector.

In conclusion, Italian agriculture's multifunctionality can be categorized as productive, environmental, landscape and recreational. Within the rural policy framework, the recreational use of agricultural resources is one of the main objectives towards upgrading agricultural activities.

The current society expects agriculture to guarantee safe and high quality food, environmental protection, conservation of limited resources, and rural landscape conservation, and to contribute to the socio-economic development of rural areas. Thus, it is necessary to find an effective compromise solution between agriculture's objectives, strictly productive, and social and environmental ones.