

# *Women in Agriculture*

Remarks by  
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## **Rural Women's Access to Research and Technological Innovation for Rural, Farm and Fishing Developments**

Greetings on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, its mission area of Rural Development and the Rural Utilities Service which I administrate.

I am so pleased to be part of the third World Congress of Rural Women. I know first-hand both the joys and trials of being a rural woman. I grew up in a small community of about 600 people in rural Kentucky. I have experienced the backbreaking drudgery of carrying water from a spring for the weekly clothes washing because we did not have indoor plumbing. But, I have also experienced the joy of walking bare-foot down a row of freshly turned dirt on a warm spring evening as the fire flies dance across the field.

It is hard to believe that 8 years have come and gone since a group of women from Australia saw their dream of a World Congress of Rural Women develop into a meeting of nearly 1500 women from 50 plus countries. And, during the last Congress four years ago, we were preparing to enter a new millennium wondering what challenges and firsts we would experience, and what technical phenomenon Y2K held in store for us.

I am proud to say that President Bush has given the U.S. Department of Agriculture a wonderful first and I bring you greetings from the first female Secretary of Agriculture, Ann M. Veneman. Growing up on her family's peach farm in a small rural community has helped Secretary Veneman to understand well the issues important to rural women. She has spent much of her career dedicated to food and agriculture issues and advancing sound U.S. farm and food policies.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which she heads, employees 100,000 people. If it were a private company, it would be the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the U.S.

and if it were a bank, it would be the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest. The programs of U.S.D.A are many and varied.

It leads the Federal anti-hunger effort with the Food Stamp, School Lunch, School Breakfast, and the WIC Programs. It is the country's largest conservation agency, encouraging voluntary efforts to protect soil, water, and wildlife on the 70 percent of America's lands that are in private hands. It brings housing, modern telecommunications, and safe drinking water to rural America. It is responsible for the safety of meat, poultry, and egg products. It is a research leader in everything from human nutrition to new crop technologies that allow us to grow more food and fiber using less water and pesticides. It helps ensure open markets for U.S. agricultural products and provides food aid to needy people around the world.

Today we are here to discuss *Rural Women's Access to Research and Technological Innovation for Rural Farm and Fishing Developments*. In other words, we are here to discuss the struggles that rural women face in their daily lives as they try to find the most economical, efficient, and safest way to feed their families and the world. For that is what they do. Everyone in the world must eat and it is the farmer who feeds them.

Rural women make up one-quarter of the world's population and in some countries they produce up to 80% of the food.

In Proverbs it is said of a virtuous woman, "she selects wool and flax and works with eager hands...She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family...She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. In her hand she holds the staff and grasps the spindle with her fingers... She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness."

That's a pretty accurate picture of a farm wife. She is usually the first up in the morning and the last to bed at night. She works 18-hour days. She cooks, cleans, washes and mends the clothing. Among her duties she produces, stores and preserves the food. She also markets and sells any surplus products. And, she replenishes the farm labor through the children she bears.

Her life is hard, but she seldom complains, only searches for ways to better use what she has and to be better at what she does. I count it an honor, as I know each of you in this room does, to try to help in some small way to make her life, your lives, our lives, better.

Before I tell you more about the work we do in the Rural Utilities Service let me just hit upon the basics that we can accomplish here in Madrid. We must use every moment that we can for networking. We must share names, business

cards, and contact information. We must share ideas and best practices. We must talk about the successes and the failures that we have experienced; talk about ideas for educating, marketing, and connecting. Let us never stray too far from the very simple concept of the exchange of ideas.

In preparation for my presentation, I spoke with a friend of mine, Bonnie Tanner, who is a County Extension agent from way back. The first thing that she said to me was “the only way women are going to advance is through cooperatives, by a collective power.” Later, I am going to give you 2 or 3 success stories of women who have banded together in community cooperatives to produce, market, and sell their products, but first I want to begin by telling you a bit about the work we do through the Rural Utilities Service, giving you some of its history, and noting how the cooperative movement in a big way, transformed rural America.

The Rural Utilities Service’s mission is to help rural communities develop and maintain the infrastructures of electricity, water and waste disposal, and telecommunications. Modern utilities came to rural America through some of the most successful government initiatives in American history, carried out through the Department of Agriculture working with rural cooperatives, nonprofit associations, public bodies and for-profit utilities. Today, as the first female administrator of the Rural Utilities Service, I oversee a budget of nearly \$7 billion and a loan portfolio of \$50 billion, but it all began in 1935 with the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), \$100,000 and a directive to bring electricity to rural America.

As noted in the book *Entitled to Power* by Katherine Jellison, one Kansas farm woman wrote in 1913, “The thing the farm woman needs in this day and time is electricity. Then when her house is lighted, her cream separated and churned, her washing, ironing, and sweeping, her sewing machine run by the same power, and she relieved from the drudgery of washing and filling lamps, lifting and washing jars, pans, and all these other hard old things, she can have some time for a social life and the improvement of her mind. The only way I can see is for the Government to furnish, at a reasonable price, electricity to every farm.”

Having the proper infrastructure was important to the success of America’s rural communities. It started with electricity, but the push for telephone service and clean water soon followed. I might also add that many innovations and new concepts of electrical and telephone engineering, manufacturing and construction were specifically developed for rural areas. Borrowers’ equipment had to meet acceptable standards; standards that were set high and became the “excellence” of the industry. These standards were also consistent across-the-board, so that repairs to one cooperative’s system, could be completed by another cooperative’s workers.

In 1935, 90% of urban areas had electricity, while only 10% of rural areas had electricity. REA set out to wire rural America and they went from working with

their first cooperative to by 1940, in just five short years, working with 600 cooperatives. The program would go on to work with more than one thousand cooperatives across the country. I believe that a cooperative movement today could assure that rural women have access to research and technological innovation. The movement must have a local buy-in. The local community must understand what is in it for them and they must be a stakeholder.

In 1937, the REA began a traveling farm equipment show that was known as the REA Circus that they took on the road to local communities. They set up a tent and invited the community in to watch demonstrations of electrical equipment. This included cooking, washing, and ironing demonstrations for the women. The women did a lot of the legwork in signing up members in the rural electric cooperatives. There was a realization among the women that their workload had to be lightened. According to one woman who traveled with the REA Circus, "The heavy load of doing everything by hand the hard way and bearing a lot of children, was killing women far earlier than they die today." So the cooperative movement was born out of necessity and the same can be done today.

We must first assure access to infrastructure to bring technological advances to rural women. The cooperative movement in America in the 30s and 40s got local buy-in. People agreed to join local cooperatives for \$5. Cooperatives worked on the concept of service to everyone, no matter how far they were from the central facility. They also operated on the one member, one vote concept.

The community pitched in where necessary. At times the women walked the lines when service was interrupted to see where the trouble might be, often making repairs themselves. It was not uncommon for farmers to dig and place their own poles across their property. REA field staff also offered a great deal of assistance, attending meetings, explaining the process and assisting with loan applications. Cooperatives received low interest loans, and in turn guaranteed affordable electricity, and later telephone service, to everyone. The cooperative movement is still active today.

And, those of you from developing countries who look at the technological advances of the United States and say, "I don't see how we can ever get there," please do not forget that only 67 short years ago, 90% of our rural communities did not have even the basic electric infrastructure.

So, I believe, the cooperative movement can work throughout developing countries today on a large scale to bring important infrastructure to rural communities, lightening the load for rural women. That is where we must start, with infrastructure.

For the United States that infrastructure was electricity, for another country it might mean good roads.

And, let me say a word about water quality and management here. In the next quarter century, it is believed that irrigated crop production will need to increase by more than 80% to meet future demand for food in developing countries, but water supplies likely will increase by only 12%, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). According to FAO Assistant Director General Louise Fresco, "Agriculture needs to become more productive and needs to produce more crops per drop." We must explore ways to produce more food with less water. And because of foods such as fish that come from our water, we must also work to maintain, and in some cases achieve, a clean water supply.

The other crucial thing about water is that about 1 billion people in developing countries do not have access to potable water and more than 3 million people die annually because of unsafe water. Most of those 3 million are children. So water infrastructure is very important. Research, biotechnology, and new production methods will become very important in the coming years.

Telecommunications infrastructure is also important today. Radio, television, internet, satellite, can be the conduits for important educational tools. Technology that brings information brings power.

While it is true that in many developing countries, less than 1% of the population has Internet access, that will not always be the case and we must begin to push for basic literacy education in preparation for the day when information technology can be delivered over an Internet or a satellite connection, valuable information on weather, markets, and improved technologies. It is important for women to be literate in order to be able to take full advantage of this technology.

The United Nations places access to information technology as the third most important issue facing women globally, after poverty and violence against women. One of the ways to train older women would be by using younger, schoolgirls from local communities who generally learn computer skills more rapidly, to serve as intermediaries. Basic education for girls and women must be strengthened and technologies integrated into literacy programs.

Other obstacles besides literacy include geographical locations of facilities. We must emphasize common use facilities such as telecenters, phone shops, and other forms of public access at convenient places. I served for 7 years as the executive director and CEO for a rural economic development center in Southern and Eastern Kentucky. While there, we took high-speed internet connectivity and videoconferencing facilities into 40 counties in rural Kentucky. Each county had a community facility where the technology was accessible to everyone. Many educational and telemedicine programs were and are delivered via interactive, video to these local communities. College students are able to take classes, health care providers are able to offer consultations, and each community can develop and control the types of programming that are delivered. In addition, the

videoconferencing acts as an economic development tool, allowing companies and organizations to communicate across long distances, face to face.

Applications for rural communities are limited only by what the mind can dream. Internet connectivity can bring not only educational possibilities but also the ability to do away with the aspects of isolation in communities. Imagine a rural woman in South America connecting in a chat room with a rural woman in South Africa to discover that they share many of the same challenges and concerns.

In addition to the problem of illiteracy, other educational challenges include the lack of time. Since rural women often work long days, getting them to buy in to the idea of taking valuable time for training is not easy. Add to that the fact that much training has been patriarchal in nature, aimed almost exclusively at the men. Often, busy seasons have not been taken into account and long training periods have been offered during busy times. Is it no wonder that it is extremely hard to get women educated?

We must be aware that we might first need to educate the girls, who can then teach their mothers and create an interest and confidence in the local women. We must start a dialogue with them. Ask questions and listen. Find out what sort of educational needs they see as necessary and practical. Simple, practical, and shorter classes delivered by local participants where possible may be the best.

Besides its other applications, the Internet can serve as a great tool for marketing local products. Back to the idea of cooperatives. Local groups can form cooperatives to produce and/or raise a number of products. Marketing of the local product is an important aspect of ensuring success and the Internet can be a valuable tool in this area.

As I said before, I want to mention just a few success stories of local cooperatives. In the United States there are around 130 cooperatives that are owned and run by women; everything from sweet potato growers, to quilters, to crabmeat producers, to weavers.

Smith Island, located in the Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland, has 453 people. The Island economy depends largely on the seafood industry of the Chesapeake Bay. The women of Smith Island have traditionally picked crabs and sold the meat through home operations. Unfortunately, those operations did not meet State Department of Health and Mental Hygiene requirements. The pickers formed a co-operative which owns, operates and maintains a new centralized facility open to all pickers on Smith Island. The 1600 square foot mini crab processing plant provides continued employment to this rural area. Fifteen crabmeat pickers work there and produced about 14,000 pounds of crabmeat during the first year.

In Appalachian West Virginia, extra income from quilting has kept many families alive. Cabin Creek Quilters Cooperative was organized in early 70s with about 300 members. Today they sell their quilts for about \$800 each.

The Navajo Lifeway is a community-based nonprofit organization of Navajo women founded in 1991 to provide leadership, economic development, and support for traditional lifeways of Navajo sheep producers and weavers. The organization seeks to restore status to sheep herding, wool processing, and weaving, and to promote the education that is necessary for its pursuit in the modern world. Lifeway is dedicated to conserving the traditional Navajo-Churro sheep breed as well as to educating the community and the public about the importance of Navajo Sheep Culture and spirituality. Seamstresses produce crib-safe teddy bears which are sold to Toys R US stores.

Those are just a couple of the success stories of cooperatives on a local level. These programs should be self-managed and in the hands of the community. Find out what the local community needs and can sustain. The technology should be simple and comprehensive, with the program being grassroots and community led.

In closing I would like to note a couple of things. In 1951, the Rural Electrification Administration came under criticism and one of the arguments made at that time was that rural people did not need or want such "fancy service." This is a notion that we must not buy into, that those of us from rural areas are not somehow entitled to the same quality of service to which our urban counterparts are entitled. We must not let others treat us this way, and we must not treat ourselves this way.

I would also like to note that Margaret Mead said, "Never underestimate the power of a committed woman." Be assured that rural women will find a way. And, there is a proverb that says, and I've changed the pronouns to feminine here, "When she took time to help the woman up the mountain, lo, she scaled it herself." What we do to help others, we do to help ourselves.

I look forward to sharing ideas and discussing this topic with you.