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**ISSUES PAPER**



CILSS/CLUB DU SAHEL

## **Women in the fight against desertification**

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*A background paper for the  
Regional Encounter in Segou (Mali)  
on local-level natural resource  
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## CLUB DU SAHEL

## CILSS

Comité permanent Inter-Etats  
de Lutte contre la Sécheresse  
dans le Sahel

Permanent Inter-State Committee  
for drought Control in the Sahel

The town of Segou, Mali, was the setting for a Regional Encounter in May which brought together representatives of the three principal partners of rural development in the Sahel: rural organisations, officials of governments and aid donors, on the theme of local-level natural resource management. The Encounter agreed on an eight-point programme of action contained in its final statement, *The Segou Experience*.

*Haramata* is pleased to present this document on behalf of CILSS and the Club du Sahel. A fuller report of the meeting is now in preparation and will be available in due course from the sponsoring organisations.

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## Women in the fight against desertification

The present study, undertaken at the request of the Club du Sahel, analyzes the role of women in desertification control as described in forty-three studies carried out in six different countries of the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.

The purpose of the study is to identify the factors contributing to the economic, social and political advancement of women in the Sahel, from the standpoint of development and desertification control. There are two basic postulates behind the study:

- the postulate put forward in the CILSS-Club du Sahel strategy, that rural development in the Sahel is inseparable from the fight against desertification,
- the postulate that the mass migration of men from the countryside, amplified by the ecological disaster of desertification, makes the specific advancement of women in the Sahel a burning issue.

Against this background, women's participation in desertification control is a crucial issue for the subregion.

Our study analyzes the different approaches and projects involving women in working groups, and sometimes in the decision-making and leadership groups involved in anti-desertification programs and policies. We have deliberately chosen to analyze positive desertification control experiments - positive from the technical standpoint and, as far as possible, positive from the social standpoint, although experiments of this kind are too recent to draw any definitive conclusions from them.

It was suggested beforehand that we approach the question in two ways: from the broader outlook of the whole village, and more specifically from the women's viewpoint. At the practical level, the field work was carried out jointly with R.M. Rochette (PA CILSS, Ouagadougou) whose mission is to produce a publication on current successful desertification control experiments in the Sahel, to be entitled "Le Sahel en Lutte contre la Désertification".

Three lessons can be drawn from the study:

- 1) Sahelian women can and must put forward their viewpoint; but their ideas and opinions need to be listened to specifically, as men everywhere have recognized;

- 2) The fight against desertification in the Sahel can be won, but only if women's part in the fight is recognized as being of prime importance,
- in quantitative terms because the women remain permanently on the land abandoned by the migrating men, and
  - in qualitative terms, through their stubborn insistence on staying on their home ground and holding back the disappearing earth, men and water.
- 3) Desertification has engendered or accelerated some destructive, disruptive trends, but it has also set up a dynamic which may lead to positive changes. Sahelian women have understood this.

It is for these reasons that it would be more than a mistake to exclude Sahelian women from rural development and anti-desertification schemes, ignore them or marginalize their participation; it would mean failure in any attempt to establish a new socio-ecological balance in the Sahel, in a durable manner and before it is too late.

## 1. Women in the face of desertification

1.1. Women experience desertification as a radical, irreversible disruption. They are lucid on the subject: over the past twenty years, and particularly since 1984, all hope of a return to the pre-1968 situation has vanished.

While most see desertification as "a curse, the source of our suffering", the women do not see the will of God or the hazards of the climate as the sole cause; they willingly accept the responsibility of individuals and rural communities in the process of ecological degradation.

The newest and most significant trend is their growing awareness of the negative effects of population growth on living conditions and the environment. The old women are the sharpest critics of the rising birthrate, especially in areas of high population density like the Mossi plateau.

Women perceive the desertification phenomenon in a comprehensive way, linking cause and effect as they analyze its ecological and socio-economic impact. For all three main agro-ecological zones - Saharo-Sahelian, Sahelian and Sudano-Sahelian - the women list the consequences, in order of importance, as follows:

### 1.3. Socio-economic effects

1.3.1. While they must suffer the ecological effects of desertification, Sahelian women are even more sensitive to the socio-economic disruptions these effects provoke or accentuate, the foremost of these being the departure of the men.

- Besides the traditional work-related migration, an old and well organized practice, there is now drought migration, a response to emergency situations especially in the Saharo-Sahelian zone. Their herds decimated, many herders have joined the flood of "drought victims" pouring into miserable camps on the outskirts of the towns or in the "asphalt villages" of Mauritania. While the men leave to try their luck in the towns, the women, old people and children stay on, abandoned, to wait for food aid. Asphalt and aid together encourage the men to leave, as the family's food needs seem to be assured in their absence.
- Migration for work is amplified by desertification, and the centers of immigration are further and further away, since the nearest coastal countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria) are becoming saturated; now men are travelling as far as Cameroon, Gabon, Zaire or Europe. They stay away for longer periods, no longer return for the cropping season every year, and sometimes emigrate for good. Some young women also take the migrants' road, alone or with their husbands.

For the women, the mass exodus of the men is the most painful result of desertification. It has turned hundreds of thousands of women into "widows", left without news of their menfolk for years on end. All they can do is wait, while their parents grow older and their children grow up fatherless, merely waiting to reach the age when they too can leave.

1.3.2. The mass exodus of the men has created a chain of social destabilization effects, especially in the Saharo-Sahelian zone. The destructuring - or indeed disintegration - of certain societies, nomadic pastoral societies especially, and the profound changes affecting all the traditional societies, leave populations in a state of bewilderment, incapable of finding a response to their new situation.

- The first result is a profound destabilization of marriage patterns: the normal ratio of men to women in the bush is disrupted. This has brought contradictory trends and led to later marriage in some cases, earlier marriage in others. In the Saharo-Sahelian zone one is beginning to find single

- they unanimously denounce the increase in domestic labor that goes hand in hand with deforestation, an increased birthrate and scarcity of water;
- they stress how they have woken up to the situation and organized themselves, positive consequences of their openness to questions involving the whole village community, e.g., CES/DRS initiatives and the creation of new activities;
- they complain of the worsening migration of the menfolk to the towns and the serious social upheavals this entails;
- they stress the impoverishment due to falling agricultural output and degradation of the land, which is felt more sharply than food or water shortages.

But one must beware of this apparent unanimity across the main agro-ecological zones, since a zone-by-zone analysis shows marked differences in women's perceptions of desertification, always with close reference to the ecological and human environments. In the Saharo-Sahelian zone where the environment has deteriorated most, its socio-economic effects, and first and foremost the exodus of the men, are far more predominant in the women's replies than they are in the other two zones, where the women's concern is more evenly divided between ecological and socio-economic effects.

1.2. Degradation of the environment penalizes woman especially, in all fields, but particularly in the domestic tasks that are so essential to group survival:

- fuelwood supplies have become a real problem, indeed a severe problem, in most regions of the Sahel. With deforestation and the extension of prohibitions, fuelwood has to be gathered further and further from the villages. Fuel-gathering, a job that has to be done several times a week, becomes ever more time-consuming and burdensome, to the point of becoming unbearable.
- while water shortage is no new phenomenon in the Sahel, it has reached critical proportions in many places. Asked what their biggest problems are, women in all three zones almost always list the deadly three: water, wood, grinding of grain. The women sometimes have to go at night to the well, where the wait is interminable. Water carrying is a tremendous waste of time and energy.
- the degradation and reduced availability of cultivable land penalizes the women particularly. Two contradictory trends

emerge: on the one hand the women are allocated increasingly marginal plots of land, or are refused land altogether, while on the other hand the departure of the men leaves them with new responsibilities and tasks as more and more women find themselves acting alone as head of the family farm holding, in fact if not in law. Desertification brings the land ownership issue into sharp relief for women.

- The land and the women alike are exhausted. Neither gets any rest: women's work on the farm has increased; falling yields and the adoption of cash crops force them to work harder and produce more cereals on their own plots, to the detriment of their usual crops.
  - The gathering of wild plant products accounts for a high proportion of women's incomes, and provides nutritional supplements for the entire family. But desertification, deforestation and over-use of wilderness areas have drastically reduced the amount of supplementary products gathered in the bush. As the women so eloquently put it, "the trees have turned mean", and all their natural produce such as vegetable butter or "sombala" is severely affected.
- Wild or cultivated, then, the land no longer feeds herds or humans: scarcity, and in the worst years famine, settle in. The women, children and old people are the worst affected.
- The women's craftwork activities are threatened too: cotton hardly grows any more on the Mossi plateau, and the women are being forced to reduce or abandon their spinning; doum palm and andropogon leaves are disappearing from the village lands, forcing the women to go dozens of kilometers for their raw materials or give up a source of income that is increasingly necessary to buy food for the family. Even traditional house-building, a women's job in herding communities, is under threat.

Thus the cumulative ecological impact of desertification has severely affected women's daily lives in the Sahel. Access to the essential sources of life has become uncertain and even, in the case of wood supplies, prohibited and punishable. The dry season, once a time when the pace of work slowed down, is now devoted to intense activity merely for survival, giving women no chance to rest before the hard work of the cropping season begins again. As the women modestly say, "life has become hard".

women of twenty or older; some have lost all hope of marrying. The young men cannot pay the dowry and must leave home to acquire the money. Elsewhere, families are forced by poverty into marrying off fifteen-year-old girls to merchants for a derisory sum. Long periods of separation lead to unstable marriages. Polygamy is developing in societies where it was previously rare, whilst more and more women find themselves alone with dependent children after a fleeting relationship - abandoned, repudiated or divorced. Marriage no longer necessarily brings security.

- Some young people are beginning to reject the hard conditions of village life and to rebel against the labor and destitution that is their lot. These are the "disobedient children", the boys who do not want to dig the fields, girls who refuse to grind the grain or join the interminable queue at the well. The parents have no way of forcing them to obey, for the young people threaten to leave the village and abandon them. Demands for a new sexual freedom often lead to illegitimate pregnancies, resulting either in early marriage or in the girl's departure for the city.

1.3.3. The women must also face up to growing individual and family poverty. The loss of the herd, lower yields, increasing scarcity of wild plant products and the departure of the men have led to the ruin of some population groups and destroyed the traditional channels of trade and barter. In the bush, destitution is a day-to-day reality: famine forces people from their land, but they try to stay put and resist want and hunger by developing survival strategies and waiting for better days. They sell their family belongings, often at derisory prices; they no longer have any reserves of goods or livestock.

The women too must strip themselves of their belongings: livestock, jewelry, furniture. Moreover, they are obliged to spend more and more time in the family's fields, to the detriment of their own crops and their trading or craftwork activities. Their health, that precious asset, is severely undermined by privation of food, more frequent pregnancies, and the increasing burden of work.

The process of desertification has thus hastened the breakdown of socio-economic structures in societies undergoing forced change. The socio-cultural role of the women is also weakened: their role as educators and counselors is affected by the length of time they spend on everyday tasks that have now become a struggle for survival.



they are working for their children's future, and they are aware that the fight against desertification is a long term task. They express pride at taking part in a collective job, alongside man or in place of the absent man. On the other hand, there are too many cases where women participate under indirect pressure of one kind or another, e.g., to save the family's land or benefit from mass distribution of food aid. In many cases, women are still being excluded from anti-desertification schemes, or ignored.

The most widespread form of participation is unpaid; but the women may receive food aid of one kind or another; "food for work" in the form of daily food rations or meals on-site. Waged work is far less common; it is usually men who take all the waged jobs available. Two interesting cases were found in Cape Verde, where the workers were paid, and in Burkina Faso, where a few teams of women were on waged work building bunds.

All in all, women participate in anti-desertification schemes on a massive scale, forming a majority of the workforce, working voluntarily, unpaid, and on under-skilled tasks. Various approaches are employed in such schemes, and the approach is the determining factor.

2.2. Our overall analysis of the approaches employed in the cases studied shows no significant difference between the different types of agency involved (bilateral or multilateral aid agency, NGO) or between the different types of project (large-scale or small) as far as integrating women into the project is concerned. On the other hand, the ten most successful experiments show that women are better integrated in projects with an all-round approach than they are in single-issue projects. The all-round projects generally include a women's scheme, either as an integral part of the main project or alongside it; the single-issue projects do so less often. On the other hand, few specific women's projects so far have included desertification control within their scope.

The role of the project management is decisive, and agencies and projects differ little in this respect. The most successful experiments show a high supervision ratio and frequent supervision, involving outside managers in close collaboration with the government services in all activities. Management and supervision by women is the key to any approach to women's participation, but this is far less concentrated than the male management levels, and is satisfactory in only 40% of the cases studied, as against 90% for the ten most successful

experiments. With management by women, women's self-management emerges: the training of women "relay supervisors" permanently based in the area is one satisfactory response that holds great promise for the future.

Projects carried out with women too often suffer from a care-oriented approach (health, grain mills) and are not always carried out with a view to development, socio-economic advancement and restoration of the environment. This general trend is remedied to a significant extent where there is a specific women's side to the project: in the ten most successful experiments, higher percentages are obtained for all work undertaken with women where there are women managers and suitable, specific schemes for the women.

Implementation of these schemes implies taking an interest in the issues of women's training and organization. As a part of projects undertaken at village level, there are three possible approaches: women can be excluded from part or all of the work undertaken; they can be integrated into joint activities with the men; or one can work specifically with the women as a group.

- It is still common to exclude women from pilot activities in projects and schemes, and from any allocations of land, agricultural extension services, and access to credit or training.
- However, an unsegregated approach is becoming increasingly common, especially in Burkina Faso; this may be due to the numbers and scale of anti-desertification projects under way and the energy of the women's groups in that country. In fact, most anti-desertification projects could not be carried out successfully without the women. Women are beginning to receive training alongside men. But male resistance is strong, among villagers and project managers alike. Even so, male resistance can be fought, as is shown by the work of the local Burkinabe "Vive le Paysan" Association which has made huge efforts to train women in a non-exclusive context.
- Specific training for women is still by far the most common form. It is justified in some cases by socio-cultural constraints, or where the work to be done only concerns the women.

There is unfortunately no need to demonstrate that women are lagging behind in terms of training and education. The logic behind specific support for women's groups should lead to a

- Where an area is irrigated, women do not usually receive plots.

In the long run, there is a great danger of demobilizing the women. And yet they seem to compensate by getting the community to allocate land to the women's group in the form of a common field, a garden or a plantation.

- As regards agricultural production, the most positive development is the spread of fruit growing and market gardening among women's groups. But women's access to agricultural extension services and to the factors of production is still very limited and extremely unequal: the basic problem is that few schemes and projects regard women as fully-fledged agricultural producers.
- As regards reforestation, women are enthusiastic partisans of agro-forestry and individual plantations. But their access to the new trees and tree products is even more limited than the men's. Reforestation operations that have succeeded with women are those in which their right to the trees is unambiguously guaranteed.
- Extension work on improved cookstoves is the anti-desertification activity that has most affected women. They are very open to any saving of wood, and to greater comfort and safety in their cooking area. In regions that are badly deforested, and where the scheme has been well conducted, women's commitment to the stoves is total. But all too often the schemes are hasty affairs: no work to arouse awareness, no training, and above all no follow-up. Furthermore, schemes and projects sometimes use initiation into the new cookstoves merely as a way of integrating women into the fight against desertification; worst of all, such schemes can be used as an excuse to exclude the women from the production project. Women's participation in desertification control cannot and must not be limited to use of improved cookstoves.

Where anti-desertification schemes are concerned, there are still too many constraints and deficiencies for women to be unreservedly won over to the techniques applied. Moreover, one can see that women are too often the victims of contradictions or overlap between different schemes: participating as volunteers or under pressure, they have to take part in every project launched in the village by outside agencies. This can mean a ridiculously heavy additional workload, and can have a very demoralizing effect. Forgotten by one project, submerged by another, women need a minimum of

coherence in approaches to desertification control. This disappointing assessment, however, should be viewed with a sense of proportion: this type of project is a very recent development.

2.3.3. Women urgently need to develop their minor activities of trade, craft work etc., and these call for appropriate loan facilities. It is clear that by bringing a response to these demands, the anti-desertification projects would encourage and broaden women's participation in environmental restoration activities. Pressure on the environment can be reduced, on the one hand, by increasing and diversifying women's incomes, and on the other hand by improving production techniques, product quality and marketing. Lastly, by encouraging women to produce raw materials (planting, protecting naturally regenerated growth, exploiting resources rationally), one will help both the environment and the women. The situation in the Sahel is such that without the help of appropriate loan facilities it is difficult for women to develop their trading or craft activities. And yet it is well known, and confirmed by experience, that women are reliable borrowers.

2.3.4. Experience also shows that schemes to lighten domestic labor (village water supplies, mills, etc.) and to improve living conditions in the villages (health facilities, a village shop) free women's labor power and improve their living conditions. But this does not seem to have been understood, for activities of this kind are recorded in only 42% of cases, whereas women are given a heavy additional workload on the anti-desertification sites and the hardness of life in the village encourages the young to leave.

2.4. Our assessment is, overall, negative. It has to be conceded that at the present time, desertification control policies regard women as secondary and provide no advancement for them. Although they participate on a massive scale and in many different ways, most schemes and projects do no more than use their labor power, relegating them to the most arduous and least skilled jobs.

However, some promising trends are developing: the massive scale of women's participation is a positive factor; and women's organizations have acquired renewed energy and strength to meet the needs of the fight against desertification. Training schemes are beginning to cover men and women together, and an anti-desertification project can be a powerful unifying

At Boulhazar in the Assaba region of Mauritania, some 300 women, recently become sedentary, have set up a flourishing craft cooperative. They have decided to launch into market gardening and date palm production. They have bought and equipped a plot of land for the purpose, for a total investment of FCFA 1 million. They have boldly bought 40 date palm seedlings at FCFA 5,000 each, along with henna plants etc. All these trees will provide a source of income in the long run. With some commercial wisdom the women have seen that permanent settlement in the region is inevitable, and they are preparing for the future in those terms. The way these women, once confined to their nomads' tents, have taken in hand the long-term development of the land where they have settled is a lesson in hope and energy. They believe their men will come home and that, thanks to this kind of effort, they will want to come back and live in their home village. The success of schemes like this is very important for the interior of the country, which is losing its population.

Women's tree nurseries are being launched. The women of the Fazenda Tarrafal cooperative in the north of Santiago Island, Cape Verde, decided to set up their own nursery. After training by the forestry department, they produced 10,000 seedlings which were bought by the forestry department, highly satisfied with a quality product involving less in the way of transport costs. The experiment is to be repeated next year, to the mutual satisfaction of the parties involved.

At Tessaoua in Niger the NGO Care International, involved in an agro-forestry project in the area, has launched an experiment in individual private mini-nurseries with the women. The scheme is designed to meet two needs: the project wanted seedlings produced by private enterprise, and the women wanted trees and a source of income. The principle of the initiative is simple: free enterprise and voluntary participation. Each woman chooses the number and species of seedling she wishes to raise at home, and she uses them however she likes: selling at her own price, giving them away, keeping them for her own use. Though modest in scale, this experiment can be regarded as a success, and it shows that town women can be interested in trees as well. Its success is due to three factors: the freedom of choice left to the women, the very close self-management that ensured constant monitoring of the scheme, and the decision to keep to a small scale. In the long run, only a few women will become expert and make their mini-nurseries a lasting activity.

More and more, women are showing their desire to grow the trees that will be useful to them. A women's tree nursery, or a nursery that takes account of women's demands, can be a starting point for agro-forestry projects with women. Some projects are beginning to open their nurseries to women, and these initiatives are to be encouraged.

One experiment involving women in the exploitation of forestry plantations has been conducted in Cape Verde. Some large-scale plantations have reached the exploitation stage. The forestry department recruited and trained teams of workers to prune the trees; the wages were paid out of revenue from the prunings, sold by the kilo. The women proved to be the most efficient at pruning, and all-women teams formed. This is an interesting experiment in that it shows that women can manage wood resources rationally and can be reliable partners in a forestry project. Some projects, like the PARCE in Senegal and the PUSF in Guesselbodi, Niger, have begun to involve women. But all in all these experiments are still too limited and too timid.

Rural agro-forestry schemes, individual or collective, are beginning to be undertaken with the participation of women right across the Sahel. The Gandiol area experiment is the most innovative as regards woodlots for the women of the village. After the failure of a conventional village woodlot in 1984, the Gandiol area's autonomous dune-fixing project redefined the guidelines for its forestry scheme. The village woodlot became a hedged "demonstration woodlot" of 0.2 to 1 hectare, a multi-purpose woodlot planted with a range of species and created, maintained and managed by the women's groups with the help of the rest of the population. A medicinal agro-forestry scheme was run alongside this one, involving the traditional practitioners and the general population, and the protected species will be gradually reintroduced into the women's woodlots. It is also intended to create "health gardens" near the health care centers, to supply medicinal plants for the traditional pharmacopoeia. The women are also involved in protection and natural regeneration of trees, *Acacia albida* especially.

This has proved a highly positive experiment: the approach is centered on the women's groups, but in the name of the entire community and with its support. The experiment is of far more than local significance, and all those agro-forestry projects too exclusively focused on the male population could profit from it. It shows the part women can play in rural agro-

experiment of Noogo in Yatenga is a good example of the teaching of this technique on the Mossi Plateau. 115 hectares have been treated in this way in two years, with the support of local and regional government services. Women have played a major part, making up 75% of the labor force on the site. Site work is directed by a female development agent, and the organization of work is remarkable. The work has been divided among the different age groups: the oldest women mind the children in the shade, close to their mothers, who can stop to breast feed in peace; the youngest women carry the stones, and the women of the middle age group arrange them along the contour lines or prepare the meal for the workers; everyone is entitled to a meal served on site.

Noogo demonstrates three basic facts: that women have understood the need to combat desertification; that they know what they want and will adopt a scheme that responds to their needs; and that an anti-desertification site can retain a human dimension and need not resemble a forced labor camp. Consciousness raising on the problems of environmental conservation has led to many other kinds of consciousness on the part of the women: they want to restrict the number of children they have, they no longer cook without an improved stove, they have a collective field where they apply new farming techniques; in 1988 a manure pit scheme for men and women started up; they got together enough money to obtain a grain mill; for the first time, they have sent three little girls to the school in the next village; when they have a well at long last they mean to start a market garden; and they want to start a village shop with the profits from the mill.

The example of Noogo shows that a well-run anti-desertification scheme can open the way to rural development and the socio-economic advancement of women, even if women are not the main ones to benefit from the measures taken. Yatenga provides many other positive examples. At Bassi, the women have been trained to build stone bunds and have formed autonomous women's teams to build bunds for wages in other peoples' fields. Teams of this kind have been launched in other villages: desertification control is beginning to create jobs in Yatenga!

Improvement of existing farming systems is also a part of the fight against desertification. In experiments where women have access to agricultural extension work, especially through work in their collective fields, their enthusiasm can be seen. Women are gradually being taught the use of manure or compost pits; market gardening and arboriculture are fast-growing activities

in most countries. The new vegetables are becoming a habitual part of the diet, and women consistently ask to take up market gardening, even in the Saharo-Sahelian zone.

Lastly, credit facilities to buy farm equipment, launch a trade venture, set up a mill, fatten sheep or acquire a cart or bicycle, are being successfully launched by a variety of schemes and projects. The "Vive le Paysan" Association in Sapone has given loans to women's groups for animal-powered cultivation and storage of the shea-nut harvest to enable the women to withstand pressure from the traders.

The NGO ADRK is giving women access to its credit and savings cooperatives. At a later stage in the process the multiplication of women's groups also raises the problem of managing their money and farm produce: building small stores, or mini grain banks, allows flexible, independent management of the women's harvests.

The problem of training lies at the heart of women's position as regards progress in farming. The "Vive le Paysan" Association has made great efforts in this direction; the "women farmer/foresters" of the village woodlot project at Kaya, and the ODIK project in Mali which intends to establish women "relay supervisors" at village level, are moving in the same direction. The project to support women's initiatives, under the aegis of the CMDT in the Koutiala region of Mali, means to concentrate on schemes concerning management of women's agricultural activities, and to create a network of "women farmer/seed-multipliers". Lastly, support for women's organizations is beginning to develop.

The positive integration experiments are still too recent for definitive conclusions to be drawn; sometimes they show contradictory trends between different villages, or even within the same village. But the important thing is that a process is under way, and lessons can already be drawn from established failures and promising experiments. Though there are still too few, some anti-desertification experiments involving the socio-economic advancement of women do exist, and they show the way forward. The battle is not yet won, but it is important to support such schemes where they exist and to encourage others.

#### 4. Reproductive tasks

Reproductive tasks include all the domestic tasks women carry out to ensure the reproduction of the family's labor power, and procreation, the "production of producers". In terms of



energy saving. Two new types of stove or cooking fire are currently being encouraged, both more efficient and better received by housewives than the old type: these are the improved, home-built, three-stone cooking fire and the portable metal or ceramic stove. Among the most advanced countries on this issue are Burkina Faso, Niger and the Gambia; at an intermediate stage are Senegal and Mali, while the least progress has been made in Mauritania and Chad. Cape Verde is a special case, since other energy sources are already in widespread use there. The project is reaching the end of its first phase, and is to broaden the scope of its activities to cover domestic energy sources.

The massive distribution of improved cookstoves in the countryside is a step forward, but certain reservations must be stated. Schemes to disseminate their use are too often evaluated in quantitative terms, whereas successful adoption of the stoves must be measured by other criteria: regular, correct use, maintenance and reconstruction. There are two key factors in successful use: training/awareness and, first and foremost, close monitoring of the schemes being run. Effective energy saving is hard to assess accurately. A survey of metal stoves, carried out in Niamey, shows considerable variations: 29% savings where a stove is correctly used, compared to 3% where it is not used rationally. Results from the three-stone stove can be even poorer. But the improved cookstoves should not be rejected for all that: in the first place, what has been saved has been saved, and secondly, use of the new stoves forms new attitudes to fuel saving. Properly run, backed up by donations of trees and provided with continual follow-up, a scheme to disseminate the use of these stoves wins total approval from the women.

While improved cookstoves on their own are not a solution to the fuelwood problem in the Sahel, they can help slow down the crisis and, for the moment, they are the only alternative open to women in the countryside, who have no access to other energy sources. While gas is increasingly widely used in the towns, bottles and equipment are still expensive items. Paraffin is used for lighting purposes only. Biogas and solar energy are as yet little used, though the women, tired of fetching firewood under present conditions, are far more open to the idea of new energy sources than is often thought. This impetus for change must be taken into account.

#### 4.3. Gaining control over population growth

For more than thirty years the countries of the Sahel have been experiencing an unprecedented population explosion. Agricultural output has not kept pace with it, and per capita incomes have fallen. Long periods of drought and desertification have worsened the situation. Efforts to establish social infrastructures and conserve the environment may prove worthless if population pressure keeps up. As of now, fertility control is a pressing issue for most Sahel States.

State attitudes to population policies changed significantly during the decade from 1974 to 1984. 1984 was the year of the Arusha conference, with changes in governments' positions and the launching of family planning projects combined with mother-and-child protection schemes. With the exception of Mauritania, most of the Sahel states recognize the need to control population growth, either to reduce the birthrate (in Cape Verde, Niger and Senegal) or to space births more widely, and introduce mother-and-child protection (in Burkina Faso and Mali). Legislation has been introduced, allowing and encouraging the distribution of contraceptives. But implementation of government policy is hampered by negative attitudes that generally stem from the male population and from religion, and also by a ponderous administration and the lack of health or social infrastructures, though women are demanding birth control ever more loudly. New family health projects continue to spread, but they are far short of meeting women's needs, especially in the countryside, as the towns take priority in the matter.

Contrary to what is too often thought, country women overwhelmingly stress that increasing birthrate is an unwelcome problem. Births have become more frequent as traditional practices have been neglected (prolonged abstinence after a birth), and mother-and-child protection schemes have cut down infant mortality. The great majority of women would like to space their babies more widely, or indeed bear fewer children for the benefit of everyone, mothers, children and grandmothers. The older women are often the most open to change and the most determined to confront the men on a subject that is still taboo within the couple: "I am a grandmother and I want grandsons: but these puny little things wear a grandmother out; children must be allowed to grow" (from the Mossi Plateau).

disadvantaged social strata. Intellectuals generally keep away from these associations, yet it is the task of the country's female elite to demonstrate the responsibility and competence the men are challenging them to prove. It would certainly be preferable for these monolithic organizations to open up to other structures, broaden the debate and strengthen women's representation in professional groups, cultural organizations etc. Senegal's experience in this is exemplary.

The hesitancy of male decision-makers is reflected in the way implementation of a real plan of action on the issue is delayed. All too often, schemes are introduced in piecemeal fashion, with no coherent, concerted program. It is vain to speak of promoting women's advancement unless a certain number of concrete measures are taken. The lifting of some major obstacles depends on the political will to do so, at the topmost political level. Women's legal status must be clearly spelled out through family law, land law, and labor law, through subscribing to international agreements on the elimination of all discrimination against women, and so on. The coexistence of three systems of law - civil, religious and traditional - almost always operates against women, the men taking advantage of the women's ignorance. Clear choices need to be made regarding population policy, and women must be informed of their right to control their own fertility. The Sahel must not ignore the problem of the male veto over a wife's access to contraception. Measures to lighten women's tasks are indispensable, and must be governed by a nationwide policy.

Lastly, access to education and training is notoriously unequal. What skills will the Sahel's women be able to count on between now and the year 2000? If the situation is to move forward, it is vital to break the circle of ignorance and dependence.

The fight against desertification has become a priority in most of the Sahel States. The growing role of women in the fight is recognized; now it is urgent for States to define a policy of socio-economic advancement for women, through their participation in desertification control. Because they remain permanently on the land while the men move out en masse, they hold a key position in agro-forestry, land recovery and food security. Kept properly informed, they are the State's most reliable allies in the fight for control over population growth. Desertification can only be halted with their support.

## 6. Conclusion

Two major observations seem to be of crucial importance:

- 1) The fight against desertification cannot be won unless women are recognized as the prime protagonists and their social and economic advancement is assured. The current tendency, of using only their labor power, runs a high risk of discouraging and demobilizing them in the long term, and this will lead to failure. Decision-makers and donors must reorient their policies and anti-desertification projects to foster the advancement of women.
- 2) The fight to gain control of population growth will be won in cooperation with the women, who are the most lucid and open to the question of limiting family size for the well-being of all and the protection of the environment.

done. Creeping resistance combines with the obstacles that stem from a one-way respect for cultural, religious and national authenticity. Men are afraid of a real change in women - in their women. The countryside situation is too often viewed in terms of urban women, who know and sometimes abuse their prerogatives, to the detriment of country women who are taking on an increasing share of the workload and responsibilities.

It is urgent, therefore, for the political will expressed in speeches to be translated into concrete measures, even though these will inevitably "upset current prejudices and attitudes" as Niger's most recent five-year plan puts it. But such legal or institutional measures will inevitably be unpopular with the male population on whom the government depends, and they therefore entail a degree of political risk. It has to be said that optimism is not widespread, even though some progress is being made.

The gap between discourse and action is no doubt most obvious in the national women's associations. There is often just one such organization, closely dependent on the political force in power - the UFB in Burkina Faso, the OMCV in Cape Verde, the UNFM in Mali, the SEM in Mauritania, the AFN in Niger, (Senegal is an exception). These women's organizations are often too dependent on the political powers to be able to serve women's interests fully. Mistrusted but enlisted to support the government, their hands are tied and they are pushed into the background. They are asked to give their approval and, implicitly, the approval of all the country's women, to policy decisions in which they have played very little part. Short of resources, manpower and skills, they are easy to manipulate; their representation on decision-making bodies is more symbolic than real, and the men prefer to smile at the quaint traditions their contributions reflect rather than give them any real power to intervene or decide. Their structure is such that they can reach most of the women in the country, and they could be a powerful lever for the advancement of women if certain obstacles, fears and contradictions were eliminated among the male decision-makers. But the great majority of men, top level executives included, have not yet decided in favor of genuine advancement for women and an unreserved involvement of women in the development process. The women themselves have not always become aware of how important a role they have to play nationally. Some of those at the top of the existing women's structures tend to pay more attention to their own privileges than to their "sisters in the countryside" or to women in more

There is a new feeling towards children emerging nearly everywhere: the size of a family is no longer necessarily its strength, and a child no longer gives the parents a sure guarantee for its parents in the countryside: the departure or rebellion of the young has demonstrated this. Furthermore, women want fewer children, better fed, properly cared for, properly dressed and educated. It is therefore important to them to have the means to space out their babies, and their prima demand is for information. But the women also consider it essential to involve the men in any attempt to raise awareness, as it is the men who are most reticent and who have the power to decide. Access to contraceptives must be facilitated by all means, in terms of legislation and distribution alike. Family planning must be systematically combined with mother-and-child protection, for a child that is malnourished and sickly because its mother has borne too many babies in too short a time is the most powerful encouragement for a couple to adopt contraception; what is more, only if infant mortality drops significantly will parents be encouraged to limit the number of births. Lastly, the training of health workers, including rural midwives, is imperative if family planning is to be effectively disseminated.

The idea of control-over population growth is now accepted by most of the Sahel States, but implementation of population policies is a slow and delicate process and no slowdown in population growth can be expected in the short term. Just as much as women in the towns, country women are aware of the negative effects of population growth on their living environment; they need access to the means to limit their fertility at a time when they do most of the farm work and desertification control work.

##### 5. Women and government policies

Over the past twenty years women's condition has worsened considerably in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sahelian governments were not indifferent to the Women's Decade of 1975-85, and many adopted positions in support of women. At the top of the political tree there is talk of equality, emancipation, women's liberation, the need to integrate women into the development process. But one gets an unavoidable feeling that the heads of state are isolated on the issue: as the years go by, the language barely changes, doubtless because women's situation has not significantly changed either. Worn-out words suggest a certain statism: it has all been said, but little has been

appropriate regulations and the use of carts or bicycles for transport.

Traditional house-building in the Sahel is closely dependent on the availability of natural resources from the environment. The scarcity of raw materials and the increasing prohibitions on cutting timber leave country dwellers no alternative: what other building method can they find at a time when family size is growing? Solutions may be found in rural agro-forestry, involving appropriate species and a new attitude on the part of the forestry authorities, with greater responsiveness to the population's needs.

The excessive increase in their workload threatens the women's educational role. But this role is still essential since, despite governments' efforts, school attendance rates remain low, especially for girls. Overloaded with work, burdened with babies and toddlers, the mother finds it hard to fulfill her educational role. The girls are sacrificed; they do a servant's job, their work is indispensable to the household, and schooling becomes even more inaccessible to them. The overburdened women cannot always find the time to attend their own literacy sessions or training sessions - whose timetables are in any case not worked out to fit in with the women's. In this way, the increased workload threatens the future too: the young women of the year 2000 are likely to be as illiterate as their mothers, without having had the chance to acquire their mothers' traditional knowledge. To respond to the problem of education one must also respond to the problem of giving women more responsibility: the "ignorant" are excluded from decision-making structures. The circle must be broken. Cape Verde and Burkina Faso are developing some interesting experiments in rural childcare facilities. The fight against desertification cannot be restricted to reforestation schemes and anti-erosion work. It must also involve meeting demands for improved living conditions in the villages; otherwise, the villagers will leave. And finally, it must mean putting an end to the unacceptable waste of women's energy.

#### 4.2. Responses to the energy crisis

There is a fuelwood crisis in all parts of the region. Current reforestation efforts and attempts to save fuelwood are in danger of being completely annulled by population growth. In 1979, a regional project for improved cookstoves was launched by the Ecology/Environment Unit of the CILSS in Ouagadougou. 7,000,000 Sahelian households are concerned by the problem of

desertification control, the questions raised are how to save domestic energy and how to control population growth.

#### 4.1. The ninety-hour week

100% of women's groups questioned mentioned an increase in domestic labor as a direct result of desertification. The three essential tasks that ensure the survival of the family - fetching water, fetching wood and preparing food - now take up most of the labor power of Sahelian women in the dry season. A country woman's working day is 14 hours long at the very least. As long as women have to use up the better part of their time and strength in the daily domestic grind, the way forward to development will remain closed to them.

In Sahelian conditions, women have long known how to avoid wasting water. Water is strictly managed, and small girls are taught the art from a very early age. The problems mentioned are the lack of means to raise water and transport it. Women need to be more closely involved in the well management committees, and they need to be taught the simple maintenance jobs. Schemes and projects have made great efforts to provide village water supplies; these efforts need to be continued until the water needs of all are met.

Women are unanimous in finding the daily or two-daily job of grain grinding a back-breaking task. The existence of grain mills, the increase in other household tasks (wood and water) and increasing family size mean that women currently find it harder and harder to accept this task. Furthermore, they know that a well-run mill can make a profit. Senegal, among other countries, provides convincing evidence of this. A mill must not be presented as a gift, but as a money loan granted to the women for a profitable investment that will save them time and energy, and which is certainly easier to install than a well. A grain mill is now an essential component of any improvement to village life.

The scarcity of wood and increasing prohibitions on the use of forestry resources have made the problem of wood supplies virtually insoluble in some regions. Fetching wood is becoming an unbearably arduous task. Women are reduced to burning crop residues and animal dung, thereby contravening regulations and risking heavy fines, or buying wood out of their meager budgets. There are two ways of resolving the crisis: reducing wood consumption by using improved cookstoves or other energy sources; and changing the accessibility of wood supplies by



The result has been a change in the agricultural tasks and responsibilities that fall to women. They work more in the family fields, sometimes to the detriment of their own fields, where they have for many years practiced a diversified, intensive form of cropping. More and more often as land for cultivation grows scarcer, the women are left without individual plots or are forced to grow cereals on them. Lastly, male migration has made women responsible for the family farms in fact but not in law. Although they must carry out the work while the man is away, they do not receive the benefit of agricultural extension work or access to the factors of production.

The land ownership and tenancy problem seems to be a major stumbling block. Women's access to land is inadequate in two respects, quantitative and qualitative. The length of time for which a plot is allocated is also uncertain. The allocation of land depends entirely on the men: husbands, owners, authorities. Moreover, custom has it that improving a plot or planting trees on it confers the right of ownership of the land. Owners generally oppose improvements, but they may also give permission for planting or other work and then take back the improved field. Under these conditions, it is hard to encourage women to undertake CES/DRS or agro-forestry work in their fields. The great majority of schemes and projects back up the right of men to the land when improvements contribute to the spoliation of women.

However, women want individual appropriation of land. Because of the various ways their societies have been destabilized by desertification and the exodus of the men, they want to secure their access to the factors of production. Individual access remains very difficult, but collective appropriation is accepted better by the community. Desertification, and CES/DRS activities in the fields, reveal the problem of land ownership to the women, and anti-desertification schemes involve a certain ambivalence: while individuals are excluded, land may be allocated to a collective group.

#### Positive experiments in agriculture

Despite these handicaps, women are very much involved in CES/DRS activities. They are aware of the degradation of the land and its many consequences; they have invested their labor on a massive scale to save their threatened lands. The technique women have adopted most enthusiastically is that of anti-erosion bunds or banks, built of earth or stone. The

forestry in the Sahel, especially in areas where male emigration is high.

Services and projects have also begun, here and there, to encourage individual plantations. In Burkina Faso, the "village woodlot" project in Kaya has launched an initiative to help the spread of improved cookstoves: the women are being promised five tree seedlings per stove built. The operation has been a great success: 16,000 trees have been planted by individual women, and the project has not been able to fulfill all its promises. The same project, with backup from the forestry department, has trained "women farmer/foresters" whose role is to monitor the use of the improved cookstoves and to maintain the trees in their village. This initiative, costing little in relation to the cost price per hectare of the village woodlot, also provides a basis for women's self-management.

The results of all these experiments show that women are very much in favor of rural agro-forestry schemes. But their support is hampered by two obstacles: the land tenancy problem and the right to the trees planted. If these obstacles were removed, the future of rural forestry in the Sahel would be largely in the hands of the women.

Lastly, school is a place where boys and girls can acquire a better knowledge of their environment and learn better behavior towards it. In Mali, the school at Banankoroni near Ségou is raising young people's awareness through gardening activities, a tree nursery, embellishment of the living space, and an introduction to the improved cookstoves. The old men and women of the village have come along to lead these sessions. In Mopti, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has created an environmental education and consciousness raising course for schools. It publishes a quarterly bulletin about "Walia the Stork, messenger from our Nature", which is distributed in all the schools of the 5th Region. Experiments of this kind are not expensive considering their impact; and one must remember what a tragic shortage of teaching materials there is in Sahelian schools. Schools have something to learn from the men and women of the bush.

3.3. The part women play in agricultural production has grown unceasingly over the past twenty years; this is due partly to the spread of cash crops, partly to the mass migration of the men, and partly to the modernization of agriculture, which has led to an increase in the area under cultivation.

of country people. These needs have not always been understood by forestry workers, who still tend to favor species grown for timber and fuel. Women's demands are complementary, not contradictory: needs are no longer covered in certain areas, and anxiety is growing.

It is also important to stress the educational role of women in transmitting knowledge of trees and plants. It is the mother who initiates her children in the ways of the environment, in the great classroom of the bush - often the only classroom the children know. Folk tales teach, for example, that one must respect the trees if one hopes to benefit from their generosity; it is important that this kind of knowledge be recognized and continue to be transmitted. It is also vital for the women, who will pass on good or bad ways of treating the environment, to be informed and educated.

3.2. Positive experiments in reforestation that have really involved women as partners and taken account of their demands and the constraints upon them, are still rare.

The experience of the Azel craft cooperative in Air, Northern Niger, is representative of the Saharo-Sahelian zone. Impoverished by drought, the women increased their production of plaited mats made of doum palm leaves. The result was overexploitation of the doum palms and a drop in the price of the mats. At the same time, the demand for the raw material grew and the leaves rose in price. Destruction of the trees accelerated and spread. In 1984, with the aid of the Catholic Mission and the small religious community at Azel, the women formed a cooperative to produce a different type of craft product geared towards the urban and tourist markets. Using far less of the raw material, the women made more elaborate goods that brought in significantly higher profits. At the present time the scheme is trying to involve the women in regenerating the doum palm groves. A consciousness raising drive has been launched, with the help of the Felloua valley riverside biology protection project, and a 50% revival is spoken of. The aim of the forestry agents (to plant doum palms) and the aim of the women (to have the leaves they need for their products) are convergent, not contradictory. But two battles remain to be won: to convince the forestry experts that this form of craft production is less destructive than the old one, and to convince the women that they must take part in the planting of the palms if they are to continue their craft activities. This experience is relevant for the entire Saharo-Sahelian zone.

factor in the village, improving the division of tasks and responsibilities.

For many women, combatting desertification is the way forward to improve their living conditions, keep the men at home and prepare for their children's future. But one cannot continue to exploit their labor while denying this hope. This has been understood by some projects which are running innovative experiments to integrate women into the fight against desertification.

### 3. The lessons of the most positive experiments

3.1. To be able to assess a successful environmental restoration or reforestation scheme, it is important to know and understand, first of all, the relationship between women and local plant life, and how this has changed.

Whichever agro-ecological zone we look at, gathering wild produce is a fundamental part of women's socio-economic role. Women transmit from mother to daughter the knowledge and know-how that once helped preserve a certain equilibrium with the surrounding vegetation. But this equilibrium has been broken by a number of interacting factors that can constitute a veritable spiral of destruction. Population growth has accentuated pressure on the environment and led to an increase in gathering activities, at the same time as the bush is reduced by the expansion of the cultivated areas. The drop in agricultural productivity has led to scarcity and impoverishment, and the bush has been taxed even more heavily to provide a now indispensable food supplement and source of income (sale of fruit, raw materials for craft work). The trees are over-exploited and mutilated; tree populations have aged. Under pressure of necessity and emergency, the women have had to give up the traditional practices that helped preserve the environment; they can no longer choose between species, and their knowledge is being lost. It is facile to say, as one high-level expatriate project manager did: "it's the women who cause desertification: they cut the wood, and they have the children."

Women prefer local, multi-purpose species. Trees are used for two main purposes, food and medicine, before they are used for fuel. Women's predilection for wild fruit trees attests to the nourishment these trees provide. Traditional medicine holds a very important place in villages remote from modern chemists' shops, whose medicines are in any case often beyond the reach

- Women also complain that the work is extremely arduous: for hours on end, they must carry heavy loads on their heads or handle stones and tools.
- The work can have serious effects on the health of mothers and children: pregnant or breast-feeding women spend the day at work on the site, their babies on their backs: childcare is rarely organized for the infants.
- Massive food aid, far from helping stem the migration of the men, can even encourage it. A man will leave the village all the more easily if his family's food is "guaranteed" by the work of the women and children on a project site.
- Women's participation in site work may hinder other activities such as cotton spinning or basket weaving, resulting in a loss of income.
- Lastly, although there has been progress on the issue, women suffer inequality of treatment in information and training. Where a project site involves men and women, few trained women are able to apply their new know-how on the site. Their decision-making power remains very limited: on most anti-desertification sites, their labor power alone is put to use.

### 2.3.2. The anti-desertification projects

Women benefit only to a limited extent from the desertification control projects undertaken:

- Access to water is of immediate satisfaction to all, e.g., where a dam is built: gardens can be created and household water requirements are met.
- But newly available or newly productive land raises a major problem of land ownership and control for women:
- 84% of CES/DRS operations have made it possible to recover land, but women have acquired individual property rights over land in only 6% of cases, although they were in a clear majority in the project workforces.
- Because the women do not own their fields, which are in any case small and poorly sited, these fields are affected little, or not at all, by CES/DRS projects.
- The owners of the fields allocated to the woman often oppose any anti-erosion or planting work on them, for fear of losing their rights to the land: this is a major obstacle to women taking up agro-forestry and CES/DRS techniques.

combined approach, working jointly with men and women and working specifically with women. This combined approach seems to be the most fruitful, though it must be borne in mind that the first criterion of success in a project is its capacity to take account of the particularities of the human and ecological environment it is operating in.

### 2.3. The projects: an assessment

We need to ask to what extent women's participation in the fight against desertification brings a response to their needs and helps towards their socio-economic advancement.

2.3.1. In their work on anti-desertification sites, the disadvantages women suffer are greater than the advantages they gain.

Providing unskilled manual labor in 83% of cases, unpaid in 65%, women do nonetheless draw some benefits, both material and socio-cultural, from their participation in site work:

- The material benefits depend on the form of participation: often food aid, either in the form of daily rations or as meals served on site. Wages remain a rare but much prized form of payment;
- The socio-cultural benefits are much appreciated. Because women's help was needed, their isolation has been broken; they have been kept informed about the projects to be undertaken, and this meets their demand for information. Participation in site work has instigated or strengthened women's organizations and the cohesion and sense of responsibility of women's groups. Mixed sites have led to changes in the traditional sexual division of labor. Some women have had the benefit of training in a specific technical task. Training schemes and inter-village encounters have been organized. Sometimes, too, it is women's groups that have been the main protagonists in a scheme to combat desertification. The impact of such schemes is considerable, for the village community as much as for the women.

These benefits do not make the women forget that they also suffer considerable disadvantages:

- In the first place they condemn the excessive increase in their workload. The day's work on the site is in addition to an exhausting day of domestic labor.

reactions on their part: not only do they participate on a massive scale in anti-desertification schemes, they also want to be informed, to organize, to start new economic activities; it is they who are the most frank and open on the population issue. They speak of the fight against desertification in terms of survival, their own and their children's, and of bringing back to the village the disappearing earth, water and men.

## 2. Women and the fight against desertification

Throughout the Sahel, women are playing a major part in desertification control; but what precisely this part is must be clearly understood, and the basic question to ask is whether present anti-desertification policies help advance the socio-economic position of women through the projects undertaken, or whether they merely make use of their labor.

2.1. Our descriptive analysis of women's participation in anti-desertification schemes shows that they are physically involved to a huge extent. More often than not they make up more than 50% of the workforce on a project, and this proportion may reach 95% in reforestation projects like the PDRI project in Keita, Niger. Women's massive participation in the workforce on anti-desertification schemes is only partly due to the departure of the men; the women also have their own motivation.

Their participation is also very varied:

- reforestation and tree nursery work.
- CES/DRS site work
- construction of improved cookstoves
- out-of-season cropping
- various activities e.g., fattening livestock, manure pits, improved farming methods, etc.

They carry out a wide range of tasks: fetching water and meals for site workers, general labor (mainly fetching stones, earth or water). As a rule they are given the least skilled, most arduous jobs. Some, however, are beginning to get the benefit of specific training in the use of water levels for tracing contour lines, in tree nursery techniques, construction and maintenance of improved cookstoves, market gardening or arboriculture. Very few are given jobs with responsibility.

In most cases the women volunteer for the work, driven by their strong desire to restore the land, to have the right to land and water and to hold back the exodus of the men. They feel

1.4. Despite this appalling list of negative effects from desertification, the vast majority of Sahelian women (91%) have stressed two positive effects on their situation: a new awareness and organization, and the creation of new activities.

In most Sahelian societies, it is clear that the exercise of responsibility, the power of decision and access to the means of production are in the hands of the men. But the desertification crisis has forced the men to leave, and the women now find they have decisions to take, new responsibilities to carry out and new tasks to accomplish.

- This "awakening" is first reflected in the demand for information. The fight against deterioration of the land has become everybody's business: "the women have got to their feet and are trying to halt this destruction". The need for men and women to work together sometimes takes precedence over the old sexual division of labor. The demographic weight of women in the villages means that the men are obliged to take them into account, and the fact that they stay permanently in the villages makes it easier for them to obtain education and training.

- The women have understood that, to make themselves heard, they must come together in modern organizations - women's groups or cooperatives - larger, more powerful and more respected by government services or projects than their traditional forms of organization. These new groups, which sometimes embrace all the women in the village, have asserted themselves to the point of becoming fully-fledged representational bodies in the decision-making structures of the village, whatever their actual nature and socio-political character may be. The woman who chairs the women's group is an authority. Organized and united, the women's group is an official interlocutor capable of putting forward its demands.

Organized and recognized, the women in a women's group wish to undertake new activities: collective or individual farming, market gardening, craft work, small-scale trade, drought control schemes, etc. The activities of the women's groups are still specific, once-off initiatives, often with very low profit levels, but they are seen as helping to improve the present situation and as representing a hope for the future.

The price the women pay for desertification is all the higher for the fact that they are always there, on the land, and have no means of escape. Their increasing consciousness of their situation is beginning to arouse positive, constructive