

Gulf Aid for Africa

In this report, Karl Lavrencic and Susannah Tarbush report on AGFUNDS project in Binga.

A project financed by the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (Agfund) is having a dramatic impact on the life of rural women in Binga, one of Zimbabwe's most disadvantaged districts. According to J T Matarise, the government's district administrator, the project means that "life in Binga may never be the same again".

The Rural Development Demonstration Project for Women, which is administered by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), is in its second year, teaching groups of women improved farming methods. One aim is to increase food production: more than half the children in Binga — an isolated area on the eastern shore of Lake Kariba — are under-nourished and hence vulnerable to disease.

Working under the guidance of agricultural extension agents, women plant seeds of the region's staple crops — groundnuts, millet and sorghum. Fourteen shallow wells have been sunk to irrigate small family gardens, and women are learning how to improve crop storage facilities in order to avoid post-harvest losses which have accounted for wastage of up to 20 per cent. A training centre for women farmers is also about to open.

"We have chosen Binga as a guinea-pig," says a senior official in the Zimbabwe ministry of community development and women's affairs. "If life can be improved in Binga by the methods we are using, progress will be easier elsewhere in similarly-under-privileged regions." Two-thirds of Zimbabwe's eight million people eke out a precarious living in such regions.

Binga district is inhabited by 100,000 people of the Tonga group who were resettled there from a fertile valley in what is now the Kariba Lake, flooded when the Kariba Dam was built just over 30 years ago.

In their efforts to cope with an arid and inhospitable new environment, the Tongas have relied heavily on outside assistance. Since independence in 1980, much has been done to improve health services and schools, but 90 per cent of the population are still illiterate.

Although women carry out 90 per cent of all farm work, little had been done to draw them into community development. The Agfund FAO project aims to make them active participants.

Agfund gave \$500,000 for the project, with the Zimbabwe government providing the equivalent of \$625,000 — under Agfund rules, other sources must provide more than half the cost of projects.

The Middle East, February 1986.

WOMEN AND THE ARAB SOCIETY

Old Boundaries, New Frontiers

The Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS), Georgetown University, held its eleventh annual symposium April 10-11, 1986 to explore the question of women and Arab Society.

What role has the Arab woman played in her society? How has she been viewed and treated by the relatives, religious authorities, and state officials who hold power over her? How has she participated in the making of Arab history? What sorts of contributions will she be able to make to economic development and social political progress in the future?

The stereotype of the veiled and secluded Arab woman is belied by the enormous complexity of the situation of women in the past and present Arab world. Women have been the victims of discrimination and severe constraints, but their lives have also encompassed meaningful social relationships, violent political struggles, and broad economic activities. This symposium will explore the impact of the modern state on women as well as the ways in which women have been politically active on their own behalf. It will analyze the different interpretations of Islamic views of women and discuss women's own contributions to the cultural life of the region. The central problem of relations between the genders, and the ways in which these relations affect all aspects of social, economic, and political development, will serve as a major theme for the discussion of women's, and men's, past, present, and future in the Arab world.

The Center for Contemporary Arab Studies eleventh annual symposium brought together members of the academic, diplomatic, business, and governmental communities with a select group of distinguished specialists, including many from Arab countries and Europe, who explored the question of women and Arab society. Panelists included Evelyne Accad, Leila Ahmed, Abdel-Khaleq Abd-Alhay, Margot Badran, Halim Barakat, Elizabeth Fernea, Sondra Hale, Mervat Hatem, Suad Joseph, Lubna al-Kazi, Afaf Mahfouz, Margaret L. Meriwether, Fatima Mernissi, Safia Mohsen, Julie Peteet, Amal Rassam, Rosemary Sayigh, Susan Schaefer Davis, Munira Sharrad, Barbara Stowasser, Judith Tucker, Caroline Williams, and Malak Zaalouk.

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YEARLY CONTRIBUTION

Lebanon: L.L. 100 per year
Other Countries: \$ 15 per year
plus \$3 to cover postage