



Organic Cotton empowering women

By Jutta Hammer, in cooperation with Alexandra Baier

Cotton is a male domain? Not in organic cultivation.

At first glance, the connection between strengthening the role of women and organic cotton growing may not be recognised, but in fact there is a strong relationship between the two.

Cotton cultivation in Africa has been male-dominated for many years. Conventional farms are almost exclusively run by men. The high proportion of the work that is done by women in independent cultivation, as well as women's work on large farms, does not appear in any statistics; women are only a source of cheap labour.

Since the introduction of organic cotton growing, the number of areas cultivated by women has increased and continues to do so. Women greet the opportunity of being able to work independently and without risk to their health. In Benin, in the period from 1996 to 2003, the number of women active in organic cotton cultivation rose from 0 to 32 percent. In Senegal, in the 1999/2000 season, as much as 38 percent of organic cotton cultivation was carried out by women, an enormous increase compared to 5 percent in 1995. Similar developments can be observed in other African countries.

Of the 40 farmers who showed interest in taking part in an organic cotton project in Zimbabwe, 90% were women.

Organic cotton cultivation promotes health

During several organic cotton growing campaigns in Benin, no cases of poisoning occurred, whereas in conventional cultivation there are often cases of dizziness, vomiting and even death due to incorrect use of pesticides. In most cases, it seems that women are more aware of the health risks involved in the use of pesticides. They prefer biological methods as this allows them to work in the fields during pregnancy without risk to their unborn children. In addition, in organic cultivation traditional knowledge is put to use. However, in conventional cultivation it is the women who use the empty pesticide containers for collecting water or storing chickenfeed, thereby exposing their families to pesticides.

Pesticides and Women

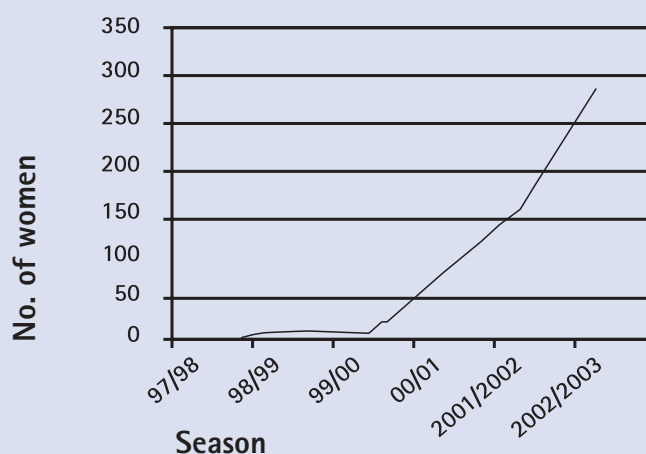
„As it is known that some pesticides can damage the health of pregnant women, they are advised not to work with pesticides during the first weeks of their pregnancy. According to a study, almost half of female pesticides users had sprayed pesticides during their pregnancy, many often before they knew they were pregnant.“

Professor Andrew Watterson,
De Montford University, UK

Division of labour

In African countries usually a clear separation is made between men and women regarding work in the home and on the land. The men take care of the so-called "cash crops", the crops with which money is earned, including cotton. Women, on the other hand, are usually responsible for the so-called "food

Participation of women in biological cotton cultivation in Benin between 1997 and 2003





crops", crops which are grown to provide food for the family.

Women usually care for the fields where the food crops are grown, as well as doing all household tasks and, in addition, working on the fields of the men. Women and men work together mainly hoeing and harvesting. The harder tasks such as felling trees, ploughing or spraying are usually done by men. The money earned from the family land goes to the men, although each member of the family is allowed to have their own piece of land which they can cultivate for themselves and earn their own income. On their piece of land, the women often cultivate peanuts or sesame for their own needs, the rest of the produce is sold on the local market.

Women in conventional cultivation

On the large farms which use conventional cultivation methods, women are often hired as cheap labour. Their swift hands are appreciated and often they are hired in preference to men as they usually do not steal and are more careful with the plants.

The most obvious difference between men and women in conventional cultivation is that the women do not have the same access as the men to resources and to the associations of small-scale farmers via which manure and pesticides are distributed.

Women often have no access due to socio-cultural reasons and their presence is not tolerated. They are therefore at a great disadvantage if they wish to cultivate independently.

Male dominance

In African countries division of labour, not only in cotton cultivation but also in other areas, is normal. Women are, in the main, in a worse position as they do not have land rights.

In Zambia, for example, women may have access to a piece of land via their husbands but they do not automatically have control over it. This means that they cannot decide what is grown on it, how much time they want to spend on the land or how the income from the land is used. Women who do apply to finance their own land receive hardly any support from the banks, as they have no security in the way of income or savings to offer. Apart from that, they often also do not have access to markets. Problems which apply to small-scale farmers apply to a much greater extent to women, as they have to fight against social discrimination anyway.

Advantages of biological cotton

Many women, disappointed with conventional methods of cultivation, turn to organic cultivation. They are directly involved in cotton campaigns and workshops; they receive their own piece of land and can make their own decisions about how to work it. The seeds for pest control and manure required for organic cultivation methods are locally available and cost less than synthetic products.

Resources are not ordered from large companies, therefore the women are not dependent on the male dominated producer groups to purchase the inputs such as seeds and manure. Above all,

organic cotton cultivation guarantees stable sales prices through the organic premium and also a secure purchase of the harvest, which guarantees a steady income, which is a main criteria for the decision for organic cultivation.

„I work with my husband on our cotton field. When I became pregnant two years ago, I was afraid that the spraying would affect my and my baby's health. The whole time I thought I would become ill. Now we grow organic cotton and we can work together in the field without fear for our health."

*Female cotton grower,
Mangassa, Benin*

Support is necessary

In many African countries the position of women as individuals is very weak. Therefore, it makes sense to support women farmers by contacting or establishing groups of women who can work together. Some women, particularly widows, are especially in need of help from outside so that they can earn their own upkeep. If the women are better educated and a women's group exists locally the number of women participating increases, whereby age plays no role. Educated women take on a position of responsibility and act as a role model for the others. They maintain the contact to development organisations. Meetings of the local groups can also be supported and also as special workshops for women in which basic knowledge of



Table 1: Number of cotton growers from five cultivation regions in Benin according to sex and cultivation category

	Organic cotton grower	Conventional cotton grower	Growers of other crops	Total
Women	32	2	1	35
Men	38	34	13	85
Total	70	36	14	120

Source: Tokannou R., Moumouni I. M. (2002): socio-economic study in OBEPAB (2002) Cotonou workshop, CD-Rom

cultivation is taught. Programmes are created to meet the needs of the women, in this way organic cotton cultivation can help to solve problems which occur in a socio-cultural context. Such problems can be caused by the women having an independent income or access to knowledge and seeds.

When women have their own income and the possibility of deciding how the money will be spent, women become more independent. They also take more care of the plants when they work for themselves.

Zambia – an example

In Zambia, women's participation in agriculture was increased by a change in the law. They were, above all, granted the right to own land. Previously this was only possible if the woman's husband had provided her with land. Most women did not dare to fight for this right for fear of endangering their marriages.

These women were supported by a cotton campaign and it was possible to reduce social inequality. With external help, interested small-scale farmers can start small farms which, due to sustainable cultivation, do not exhaust the

fertility of the soil and ensure the workers a steady income. The prospect of slightly more independence and the possibility of working in the cotton fields without a health hazard, is convincing, not only to expectant mothers.





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