

FEMINIZATION OF AGRICULTURE

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Women are a vital part of Indian economy. Over the years, there is a gradual realization of the key role of women in agricultural development and their vital contribution in the field of agriculture, food security, horticulture, processing, nutrition, sericulture, fisheries, and other allied sectors. Women form the backbone of agriculture, in India, comprising the majority of agricultural laborers, women have been putting in labour not only in terms of physical output but also in terms of quality and efficiency. Women are critical to the well-being of farm households. Aside from raising children, women are expected to prepare all meals, maintain the homestead, and assist in crop and animal production, all the while tending to the general health of their families. Perhaps, ironically, it is because women have so many responsibilities that they have been over-looked by agriculturalists and policy makers – it has been more convenient to label men as farmers and women as child raisers and cooks. In truth, women are involved in all aspects of agriculture, from crop selection to land preparation, to seed selection, planting, weeding, pest control, harvesting, crop storage, handling, marketing, and processing. Whatever the reason for this neglect, the importance of developing farming technologies relevant to women has only recently been recognized.

Rural Women form the most important productive work force in the economy of majority of the developing nations including India. Agriculture, the single largest production endeavour in India, contributing about 18% of

GDP, is increasingly becoming a Female Activity. Agriculture sector employs 4/5th of all economically active women in the country. 48 per cent of India's self-employed farmers are women. There are 75 million women engaged in dairying as against 15 million men and 20 million in animal husbandry as compared to 1.5 million men.

Beyond the conventional market-oriented narrower definition of 'productive workers', almost all women in rural India today can be considered as 'farmers' in some sense, working as agricultural labour, unpaid workers in the family farm enterprise, or combination of the two. Moreover, several farm activities traditionally carried out by men are also being undertaken by women as men are pulled away into higher paying employment. Thus, Rural India is witnessing a process which could be described as Feminization of Agriculture.

Gender division of labour in agriculture:

The particular tasks done on farms by men and women have certain common patterns. In general, men undertake the heavy physical labour of land preparation and jobs which are specific to distant locations, such as livestock herding, while women carry out the repetitious, time-consuming tasks like weeding and those which are located close to home, such as care of the kitchen garden. In most cultures the application of pesticides is considered a male task, as women are aware of the danger to their unborn children of exposure to chemicals. Women do a major part of the planting and weeding of crops. Care of livestock is shared, with men looking after the larger



animals and women the smaller ones. Marketing is often seen as a female task, although men are most likely to negotiate the sale of crops. Some jobs are gender neutral. The introduction of a new tool may cause a particular job to be reassigned to the opposite sex and men tend to assume tasks that become mechanised. The impact on women of the modernisation of agriculture is both complex and contradictory. Women have often been excluded from agrarian reform and training programmes in new agricultural methods. Where both men and women have equal access to modern methods and inputs there is no evidence that either sex is more efficient than the other. Technological changes in post-harvest processing may even deprive women of a traditional income-earning task.

Women and food security issues:

Not only do women produce and process agricultural products but they are also responsible for much of the trade in these and other goods in many parts of the third world. In many parts of the world, women continue to play an important role as rural information sources and providers of food to urban areas. This may involve food from the sea as well as from the land. Although women rarely work as fisherpeople they are often involved in net-making and the preparation and sale of the catch. Women's roles and status all over the world are generally determined by social institutions and norms, religious ideologies, eco-systems and by class positions.

The Indian social systems exhibit such grave disparities. Indian women are not a homogeneous group. Their traditional roles are not identical in all strata of society. Norms and taboos governing their roles and behaviours within and outside the family, the structure of family organisations and social practices and the positions accorded to women in a community differ considerably across regions, cultures and levels of socio-economic development. It is needless to emphasise on the significant contribution of women to agricultural production and household food security. In the process of production, handling and preparation of food, women play a multiple role throughout the sequence. They are said to be "feeding the world". Do women really feed the world? Let us consider the evidence. On a global scale, women produce more than half of all the food that is grown. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, they produce up to 80% of basic foodstuffs.

In Asia, they provide from 50 to 90% of the labour for rice cultivation. And in Southeast Asia and the Pacific

as well as Latin America, women's home gardens represent some of the most complex agricultural systems known. In countries in transition, the percentage of rural women working in agriculture ranges from about a third in Bosnia and Herzegovina to more than half in Poland. Across much of the developing world, rural women provide most of the labour for farming, from soil preparation to harvest. After the harvest, they are almost entirely responsible for operations such as storage, handling, stocking, marketing and processing. Women in rural areas generally bear primary responsibility for the nutrition of their children, from gestation through weaning and throughout the critical period of growth. In addition, they are the principal food producers and preparers for the rest of the family.

Despite their contributions to food security, women tend to be invisible actors in development. All too often, their work is not recorded in statistics or mentioned in reports. As a result, their contribution is poorly understood and often underestimated. There are many reasons for this. Work in the household is often considered to be part of a woman's duties as wife and mother, rather than an occupation to be accounted for in both the household and the national economy. Outside the household, a great deal of rural women



labour - whether regular or seasonal - goes unpaid and is, therefore, rarely taken into account in official statistics. In most countries, women do not own the land they cultivate. Discriminatory laws and practices for inheritance of and access and ownership to land are still widespread. Land that women do own tends to consist of smaller, less valuable plots that are also frequently overlooked in statistics. Furthermore, women are usually responsible for the food crops destined for immediate consumption by the household, that is, for subsistence crops rather than cash crops. Also, when data is collected for national statistics, gender is often ignored or the data is biased in the sense that it is collected only from males, who are assumed to be the heads of households.

Rural women in agricultural cooperatives:

Women are represented in various forms and in various types of cooperatives in the Region. In most of the South-Asian countries women membership in mixed membership cooperatives is generally lower as compared with those from other countries in the Region. In societies where culture restricts women's membership in cooperatives, women-only cooperatives proliferate. It is in women-only cooperatives that women feel freer and

less restricted in their participation in cooperatives. In countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, women comprise just 7.5% as compared with men (92.5%) of the total membership. In Malaysia it is around 30.6 per cent.

The relationship between women and their cooperatives in the context of gender integration can be summarised as under:

- A cooperative being a social development agency should play an active role in advocating for gender equality;
- Since women have been active in development work, they should play central role in development;
- The cooperative can be a venue to improve women's social status and economic conditions; and
- thus, cooperatives should promote women's empowerment by integrating gender concerns and formulating a strategy that would address gender issues.

Constraints faced by rural farm women:

Based on the experiences of farm extension workers, field advisors and rural farm women in the Asia-Pacific Region, the following are the general constraints faced by them:

- High illiteracy rates and poor living conditions among rural women; Lack of leadership and inadequate participation in the organisational and economic affairs of their agricultural cooperatives;
- Absence of property inheritance rights, restriction on acquiring membership of agricultural cooperatives consequently being deprived of farm credit etc.;
- Inadequate health care services in rural areas;
- Inadequate water supply for household and farm operations;
- Lack of appropriate agricultural technology aimed at reducing the physical burden of farm women;
- Inadequate access to credit and agricultural inputs and other services;
- Lack of female farm extension workers;
- Lack of marketing facilities and opportunities;
- Traditional, religious, social and cultural obstacles;
- Less participation in decision-making – even within the household;
- Male migration/urban drift which increases pressure on women;

- Lack of opportunities to improve socio-economic status of farm women;
- Lack of skills and attitudes in leadership and management development; and
- Lack of secretariat supporting functions for women's organisations and allocation of funds for them in cooperative organisations.

Conclusion: Women have been the focus of attention of all international and national development programmes. Efforts have been directed at empowering them in all fields of activity. Special programmes have been instituted to improve their social and economic status through provision of education, employment, health-care and involvement in social and economic institutions, including cooperatives. Cooperative institutions and especially the agricultural cooperatives are the agencies which hold enormous potential for the development of women, and more particularly the rural women. Rural women are actively involved in the process of food production, processing and marketing. They often lack the legal status which prohibits them to have access to credit, education and technology. Cooperative institutions can help accelerate the process of development and participation of women in their organisational and business activities. It is generally agreed that education is central to women's development the participation of girls in the national educational system continues to lag well behind that of boys at every level. Among the factors that are believed to contribute to this gap are women's self-perpetuating negative social status, economic constraints and male-oriented biases in the design and delivery of primary and secondary education. These limitations have meant that millions of women have not received formal education and that millions more are deprived of the opportunity for more than token participation. Women, however, retain a strong orientation to self-help and group cooperation. They look to their own resources and to other women when faced with a problem of opportunity. This perhaps is the key factor on which women's development programme could be developed. This is their greatest asset. They have kept folk art, family bonds, religious traditions, cultural heritage alive, thriving and vibrant. They have played significant role in food security efforts and rural and small industrial sectors.

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