

**RESEARCH NOTE:**

## The plight of Indian women in agriculture

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**SUMMARY :** The status of women in a society is assessed by the recognition given to their participation and contribution in various fields. When we assess the number of women in farming activities, we realize the impact of the crisis prevailing in the agriculture sector. The seminal role played by our women in the enterprise of agriculture and its related activities has never been documented. Most certainly, our agriculture would not have sustained thus far without the role played by our women in its domain. Women with lower literacy levels and financial income as compared to their male counterparts may be unable to read leaflets or purchase protective equipment, putting their health at risk.

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India has a predominantly agrarian economy. Almost 70 per cent of the population is rural, of those households, 66 per cent engage in agriculture as their main source of income (Rao, 2006). In agriculture sector, researchers have distinguished certain activities as men's and women's tasks. Men's tasks require greater physical effort such as clearing the land for planting and ploughing. Women's tasks such as weeding and harvesting are more easily arranged around household chores and require less physical effort. Similarly, a distinction has been drawn between crops planted by men and women state wise. Historical perspectives suggest that men tended to plant cash crops such as maize and other cereals, women on the other hand, tended to plant subsistence crops, such as vegetables, which contributed toward family food security and local sale. However, with agricultural intensification, accompanied by

migration of men toward the industrial sectors and growing female empowerment, clear distinctions between men's and women's work and crops are no longer easily made in agriculture. While women continue with domestic responsibilities, their agricultural activities and responsibilities have increased.

In India, about 74 per cent of the entire female workforce is engaged in agricultural operations, but the nature and extent of women's involvement in agricultural operations varies greatly from region to region (Satyavathi *et al.*, 2010). Further, male farm workers are relatively free during off-season; however, farm women work during these periods too. The challenge to the sustainability of a production system lies in integrating technology, work, and resources (financial and social) effectively with gender so that both women and men can play an active role in improving the productivity, profitability, stability

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and sustainability of major farming systems (Brahmanand *et al.*, 2010). At the same time, as women care for their children, manage family nutrition and seek alternate sources of income, in most parts of the developing world they carry a major responsibility for the production of food for their families. For household subsistence as well as for the market, they produce, gather and process a wide variety of food.

Rural women play a very important role in agriculture. They are mostly employed in India as labourers, as farmers and co-farmers in crop production or are involved in smallholder livestock farming, backyard poultry and collection of non-timber forest produce. Nearly 63 per cent of males are engaged in agriculture as compared to 87 per cent of females. Almost 50 per cent of rural female workers are classified as agricultural labourers and 37 per cent as cultivators. About 70 per cent of farm work was performed by women (Rao, 2006). Though they participate in all activities related to agriculture, they often lack capital, information, access to markets and technologies, knowledge and skills to transform or transcend subsistence level activities to earn enough to overcome poverty. They are usually the first to be marginalized, as agriculture gets mechanized and modernized. They have little or no advantage in rural areas as regards social and economic issues. Rural women's voices are usually not heard and they are less educated and empowered. Therefore, they cannot articulate their need, requirements and aspirations for better livelihoods.

There is a close association between women labour in agriculture and their health. Agriculture sector produces food, fibre and materials. In many countries it is also an important source of livelihood among the poor. At the same time, inadequate intake of nutritious food can be linked with poor health, including malnutrition, malaria, and food borne illnesses. In agricultural communities, poor health reduces work performance, reducing income and productivity and perpetuating a downward spiral into ill-health.

Women even participate in agricultural activities such as pesticide mixing and application. Women with lower literacy levels and financial income as compared to their male counterparts may be unable to read pesticide information leaflets or purchase protective equipment, putting them at risk for pesticide exposure and the resultant adverse health effects. Furthermore, women

working in agriculture in developing countries tend to participate in repetitive activities, work long hours and have low incomes, all of which increase their risk for adverse occupational health hazards. Some of the hazards encountered by farm workers in agriculture have been listed in Table 1.

In Himalayan region, the extent of health hazards faced by farm women in farm activities include 50 per cent in transplanting and 26.5 per cent in harvesting under farm activities, 50 per cent in threshing, 33 per cent in drying and 67 per cent in parboiling under post-harvest activities, 47 per cent in shed cleaning, 23 per cent in fodder collection and 27.5 per cent in milking under livestock management (Satyavathi *et al.*, 2010).

#### **Preventive measures from hazards :**

The person should remain alert to prevent oneself from hazards. He should wear proper clothing not only to protect his body from cold and heat but proper boots to protect his feet from infection, gloves to protect his hands from chemicals and other agents that may produce dermatitis and insulated hats to protect oneself from heat stroke.

Workers with immunity through vaccinations or earlier exposures are not generally at risk from diseases, but pregnant workers without prior immunity should be careful about various problems. Harmful substances can enter a woman's body through inhalation, contact with the skin or swallowing (ingestion). Workers should also use good hygienic practices such as frequent hand washing to prevent the spread of infectious diseases among each other.

The health problems related to drudgery can be reduced by providing gender-friendly farm tools and equipment which increase the productivity of worker with safety and comfort to her. Time scheduling is also needed for achieving such task. This includes the gender-perspective such as anthropometry, muscular strength, aerobic capacity etc. So, one way of drudgery reduction can be through quantification of the particular field operation. For example, if work is being performed by farm women with traditional tools in bending/ squatting posture can be reduced by providing women friendly farm equipment (equipment assessed/developed considering gender perspective).

Workers should also take the following steps to ensure their own safety:

**Table 1 : Hazards encountered by farm workers in agriculture**

Exposure	Health effect	Specificity to agriculture
Weather, climate	Dehydration, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, skin cancer	Most agricultural operations are performed outdoors
Snakes, insects	Fatal or injurious bites and stings	Close proximity results in high incidence
Sharp tools, farm equipment	Injuries ranging from cuts to fatalities, hearing impairment from loud machinery	Most farm situations require a wide variety of skill levels for which workers have little formal training, and there are hazard controls on tools and equipment
Physical labour, carrying loads	Numerous types of musculoskeletal disorders, particularly soft tissue disorders, eg back pain	Agricultural work involves awkward and uncomfortable conditions and sustained carrying of excessive loads
Pesticides	Acute poisoning, chronic effects such as neurotoxicity, reproductive effects, and cancer	More hazardous products are used in developing countries with minimal personal protective equipment
Dusts, fumes, gases, particulates	Irritation of the eyes and respiratory tract, allergic reactions, respiratory diseases such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and hypersensitivity pneumonitis	Agricultural workers are exposed to a wide range of dusts and gases from decomposition of organic materials in environments with few exposure controls and limited use of PPE use in hot climates
Chemicals, pesticides, dust and husk particles	Skin irritation and allergy	Seed treatment, working in soil treated fields, and threshing, winnowing and cleaning of grains
Ignorance about pesticides and storage	Poisoning	Consuming food from utensils, used for mixing chemicals during seed treatment and storage
Khurpi, hoe, thresher leave blades, Leeches	Cuts, wounds and injuries	Weeding, harvesting, threshing, cutting fodder for cattle, transplanting and handling animals
Long hours in watered fields	Swollen and sore hands and feet	Transplantation and household work
Long hours in field under sun	Sun stroke	Transplantation, harvesting and weeding
Drudgery (Bending for hours, sitting postures, working of arms in repetitive motion for long hours carrying load)	Body-ache	Transplantation, weeding, harvesting, sowing, processing of grains, household work such as washing, cooking, cleaning, collecting fodder for animals and firewood collection
Eat last what is left	Malnutrition and anemia	Caring for the family

- Avoid direct skin contact with dust particles, chemicals etc.
- Use appropriate personal protective equipment (gloves, respirators and personal protective clothing) to reduce exposures to workplace hazards.
- Prevent home contamination with the following steps:
  - Change out of contaminated clothing and wash with soap and water before going home.
  - Clothes worn from home should be kept in a separate area of the workplace to prevent contamination.
  - Wash work clothing separately from other laundry (at work if possible).
  - Avoid bringing contaminated clothing or other objects home. If work clothes must be brought home, transport them in a sealed plastic bag.
- Do not allow the pregnant and lactating women to handle or apply the pesticides.
- Do not use leaky or defective equipment.
- Open the chemical packages in the well ventilated places.
- Do not smell the pesticides.

- Do not eat and drink while handling pesticides.

Realizing the importance of rural women in agriculture is an important aspect. In many countries, the role of women in agriculture is considered just to be a “help” and not an important economic contribution to agricultural production. Despite the important roles they play in agricultural economies, rural women suffer from the highest illiteracy rates and are the most visible face of poverty. Women guarantee livelihoods, especially in rural areas. As a result of their great efforts in agricultural production, women’s production helps to guarantee their self-sustenance.

### Conclusion :

Women constitute about 66 per cent of the agricultural work force. Around 48 per cent self-employed farmers are women and 64 per cent of the informal sector work force depending on agriculture is women. Rural women have, since many centuries, been putting in unfathomable, unbearable and inadequately paid joyless drudgery to earn for their families’ livelihood and provide food security to country’s millions of people.

The plight of most rural women has been pathetic since they have to collect firewood, fetch drinking water, search fodder to feed cattle, work on their meager land to raise crops and as labourers on other farms, take care of children etc.

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