

A REVIEW

Role of farm women in Indian agriculture

■ N.H. Sunitha, Chandra Naik and D. Hanumanthappa

SUMMARY

In order to awaken the people, it is the woman who has to be awakened. Once she is on move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves Pandit Jawaharalal Nehru. India is a developing and predominately agrarian economy. 70 per cent of its population is rural, of those households, 60 per cent engage in agriculture as their main source of income. Agriculture is an engine of growth and poverty reduction in developing countries where it is the main occupation of poor. Many women, in developing countries, are major producers of food. Nearly 63 per cent of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78 per cent of women. It is observed that women play a significant role in agricultural development and allied activities including main crop production, live-stock production, horticulture, post-harvesting operations etc. About 70 per cent of farm work is performed by women. Women farmers do not have equal access to productive resources and this significantly limits their potential in enhancing productivity. The present paper shows that the contribution of women in agriculture is extremely significant. It also throws light on the obstacles faced by them in terms of less access to productive resources which do not recognized her work as active productive member.

Key Words : Women, Agriculture, Production, Employment

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Some historians believe that it was woman who first domesticated crop plants and thereby initiated the art and science of farming. While men went out hunting in search of food, women started gathering seeds from the native flora and began cultivating those of

interest from the point of view of food, feed, fodder, fibre and fuel. During the struggle for independence Mahatma Gandhi ji - the father of nation who had thought that the development of India could be made possible only when the villages would develop as India is a country of villages. Even after 60 years of Indian independence, 70 per cent of people are living in rural areas and 60.4 per cent people are depending on the agricultural sector for their livelihood. According to the Indian Fiscal commission, "Agriculture is not merely an occupation; it is a way of life which for centuries has shaped the thought and outlook of many millions of people." Agriculture is the

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first culture that man learnt to practice as a means of living and a way of life. It is the primary sector of any economy either it is developed or developing. Agriculture is considered as the backbone of the Indian rural economy and is a family enterprise. It is an important engine of growth and poverty reduction. India's economic security is heavily dependent on agriculture. In terms of employment, it is the most important source of income, especially for rural women. According to 2011 World Bank Data only, 17.5 per cent of India's gross domestic product (GDP) is accounted for by agricultural production. Based on 2012 data, India is home to the fourth largest Participation of Women in Agricultural Production sector in the world. It has an estimated 180 million hectares of farmland with 140 million of which are planted and continuously cultivated.

Singh and Vinay (2013) briefed in their working paper about the significance of female labour in agriculture and allied activities. They further stated that the role of women in agriculture as female labour is not highlighted in India. Despite of their presence in activities sowing, transplanting and post harvest operations they are considered as an invisible workers. Damisa and Yohana (2007) highlighted in their study that despite of various social, economic and various other constraints women have high level participation in agriculture and they are very committed in their agricultural activity. Overall the level of involvement of women in farm decision making was found very medium. The extent of involvement and decision making in activities like intercultural operations is 48 per cent in harvesting of crops 45.33 per cent, storage of farm produce is 42.67 per cent, 42.00 per cent in sale of farm produce and in subsidiary occupation like animal husbandry and dairy business is 38.67 per cent and financial management is 36 per cent only (Unnati *et al.*, 2012). Bala (2010) cited in his working paper regarding engagement and participation of women workers in almost all activities of agriculture but there is discrimination in wages even if they do same type of work as male labour. Further despite of their extensive and active involvement in agriculture of India, they are not considered for decision making in farm activities. Women participation in agriculture will be acknowledged when women farmer will actively participate to build and improve their knowledge and gain access to new and necessary information to make use of most of them in their farming activities. By linking the knowledge and information flow

amongst women socio-economic progress can be achieved (Dhaka *et al.*, 2012). Farid *et al.* (2009) discussed the major role of women in farming and non-farming activities especially in post harvest operations, homestead gardening, livestock and poultry rearing, selling labour etc. The primary need of women working or seeking employment in various agricultural and non – agricultural activities is to meet the family needs and to enhance the family income.

Status of women in India:

Globally women constitute half of the world's population and produce half of the agricultural products according to a UN report. This indicates the contribution of women in the economic prosperity of the nations, whose lifeblood is agriculture, through their participation in agriculture as cultivators, agricultural labourers and casual helpers. In spite of this, women suffer from womb to tomb in the male dominated society. Their labour plays a key role in the survival of millions of families. The problem of poverty cannot be tackled without providing opportunities of productive employment to rural women. Women are important economic agents in India, particularly in the context of poverty. Women's income in the poverty groups is critical for household survival. Three quarter of women all over to world live in rural areas and work in agricultural sector and a wide range of related activities. In addition, a large number of women in rural areas, like their men folk depend on daily wages earned in agricultural operations. Though they work hard for long hours, they get very less money leading to indebtedness. Yet they continue to depend on the land owners for employment and loans. They are frequently tortured by the landlords for their personal interest and enrichment. They are treated as sub-servant or personal property. Thus, their dependence on agriculture makes the land lords utilize freely the services of all the members of the families. In the process of economic exploitation the female agricultural labourers even become the targets of sexual harassment. Farmers, particularly women, face a high degree of economic, legal, and institutional uncertainties when investing in their land and other resources. Employment in agriculture is thus available for fewer days per year. It is therefore becoming essential for men to migrate in cities in order to search of better-paid work. Women are filling this vacuum because in addition to working in fields, they face additional work burden that men do not. In most rural societies, women

are responsible for most of the household and child-rearing activities although norms differ by culture and over time. This additional work burden is unpaid and limits women’s capacity to engage in income-earning activities, which often require a minimum fixed time before being profitable. Furthermore, the nature of tasks, such as caring for children and elderly household members requires women to stay near the home, thus, limiting options to work for a wage. They are forced to work in agriculture in their own village under very bad conditions because they cannot migrate in cities as easily as men. Gender differences become clearer when looking at women’s workloads. It is estimated that women provide 85 to 90 per cent of the time spent on household food processing and preparation. They also have to look after the emotional needs of their families the children, elders and husbands. The nurturing, caring and reproductive responsibilities are the dimension that have never been computed economically but are essential and significant aspects of women’s work load. Women’s role as food producers is related also to their role as mothers and nurtures and in sustaining their families and communities. Their work is integral to the quality of life of people. Most of the rural women labourers are landless, homeless and belong to the socially and economically depressed classes of the society. Rural agricultural women in our society are exploited and denied their basic rights. Their inherent dignity and equal inalienable rights are not recognized in the society. Though, their socio-economic status, the nature and mode of work and the way of people’s life have been changed along with the new development in the society. But the society particularly, rural society is not still ready to accept any change in women’s role, work position and status because of the orthodox and conservative beliefs in villages. Participation of women in the workforce is only 13.9 per cent in the urban sector. Women’s wage rates are, on an average only 75 per cent of men’s wage rates constitute only 25 per cent of the family income In no Indian State women and men earn equal wages

Table 1: Literacy rates in India

Years	Male	Female	All
1981	56.50	29.85	43.67
1991	63.31	38.79	51.54
2001	75.85	54.16	65.38
2011	82.14	65.46	74.04

(Source: ESCAP, 2001 Literacy rates of male and female in 2011)

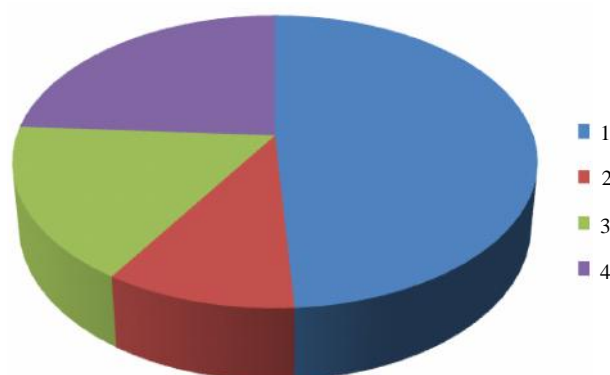
Table 2 : Distribution of women workers in India

Years	Total female population million	Cultivators (%)	Agricultural labourers (%)	Industry and service (%)
1951	173,543	45.3	31.3	23.3
1961	212,467	55.7	23.9	20.4
1971	263,900	29.6	50.6	19.90
1981	321,357	33.2	46.2	20.6
1991	402,813	34.5	43.6	21.9
2001	494 million	36.5	43.5	20.00

Source: Registrar General of India, New Delhi, 2001

Table 3: Women supervising the agricultural operations performed by the labourers

1.	Wage laborers (49%)
2.	Works in own farm and also wage labourers (10%)
3.	Works in own farm (17%)
4.	Supervise farm work (24%)



(Source: Percentage of the respondents’ relationship to the farm work as per the research.) (www.worldmapper.org)

in agriculture. Women occupy only 9 per cent of parliamentary seats less than 4 per cent seats in High Courts and Supreme Court less than 3 per cent administrators and managers are women.

Women-contribution and status:

Women contribute to two thirds of the world’s work hours, produce 50 per cent of the worlds food supplies.

Table 4 : Share of farm women in agricultural operations

Activity	Involvement (%)
Land preparation	32
Sowing and cleaning	80
Intercultural activities	86
Harvesting-reaping, winnowing, drying, cleaning and storage	84

Table 5 : Time and energy distribution by rural women

Activities	Duration hrs/day	Energy	Percentage
Domestic activities	7.55	903	40.5
Agriculture allied activities	7.00	283	39.69
Sleep	6.50	283	12.76
Rest and recreation	2.15	155	6.97
Total	23.20	2255	100.00

Women work in fields, take care of families and manage household. Despite the services rendered by women in the family and work place, they make up for nearly 70 per cent of the world's poor and more than 65 per cent of the illiterates.

Why women in agriculture?

In order to eradicating poverty to ensure food security to increase their stake in agriculture to increase economic contribution Ownership in land, livestock, etc.

Importance of women in agriculture:

Woman is the moulder and builder of any nation's destiny. They play a significant role in any economy. They

are regarded as the backbone of the rural scene. Most of the women perform various types of work for their livelihood and agriculture is considered as the biggest unorganized sector where large number of rural women takes part actively.

Multi-dimensional role of women:

Agriculture:

Sowing, transplanting, weeding, irrigation fertilizer application, plant protection, harvesting, winnowing, storing etc.

Domestic:

Cooking, child rearing, water collection, fuel wood gathering, household maintenance.

Allied activities:

Cattle management, fodder collection milking etc.

Horticulture:

Vegetable production, flower production, fruit production.



Sericulture:

Silk worm rearing, cocoon production, 19.

Tasks of women in agriculture:

Women's participation in the labour force
 Women's roles in farming systems
 Women in biological diversity
 Women in the cash crop sector
 Women in the post-harvest sector
 Employment and enterprises of women
 Heading households and household production
 23 Tasks of women in Agriculture.

Problems in women participation are:

- Some of the farm women may inhibited to participate.
- Most of the women were willing to take up jobs, though they remained unemployed.
- New jobs require a different kind of skills.
- As wage-earning agriculture labourers, women suffer other kind of disadvantages also.
- While men attended farmer's camps to learn about the use of new implements, fertilizers, pesticide and crop rotation, etc.
- Constraints on time and mobility by women's dual domestic and agricultural roles.
- Inefficient transfer of agricultural knowledge from husband to wife.
- Lack of incentives to increase productivity.

Women contribution to agriculture responsible for household food and nutrition security. 90 per cent of the hoeing and weeding in food production. 80 per cent of the work on food storage and transport. More than 90 per cent of post harvest management including food processing, providing water and energy. More than 60 per cent of harvesting and marketing.

Suggestions to overcome the above problems:

The women in rural area should be educated. To promote rural development programmes. A good and democratic leadership should be created at the grass roots level. Women's clubs and other organizations should be set up in the village. Several meetings and training of village women should be conducted. The training should be able to create awareness, generate interest, motivate learning, impart knowledge, change attitude and generate skills.

Conclusion and recommendation:

Rural women are the major contributors for

agriculture and its allied fields. Her work ranges from crop production, livestock production to cottage industry. From household and family maintenance activities, to transporting water, fuel and fodder. Despite such a huge involvement, her role and dignity has yet not been recognized. Women's status is low by all social, economic, and political indicators. Women's wage work is considered a threat to the male ego and women's engagement in multiple home-based economic activities leads to under remuneration for their work. Women spend long hours fetching water, doing laundry, preparing food, and carrying out agricultural duties. The nature and sphere of women's productivity in the labour market is largely determined by socio-cultural and economic factors. Women do not enter the labour market on equal terms when compared to men. Their occupational choices are also limited due to social and cultural constraints and lack of supportive facilities such as transport and accommodation in the formal sector of the labour market. Women's labour power is considered inferior because of employers' predetermined notion of women's primary role as homemakers. As a result of discrimination against female labour, women are concentrated in the secondary sector of labour market. Their work is low paid, low status, casual and lacks potential upward mobility. The majority of women in the urban sector work in low paying jobs.

Finally it is concluded that agriculture is central to economic growth where women can learn the best way to grow and cultivate their own nutritious food and sell at markets. So closing the gender gap in agriculture is imperative if we want to grow productivity and ensures food security. Agricultural education be made gender sensitive and research, development, extension and services be engendered to give due recognition to the multiple role played by women agriculturists.

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