

Understanding Women and Agriculture

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Abstract

The argument of the article revolves around the issues of women which always have been an undervalued subject to the society. To make the argument secondary data have been used which are both qualitative and quantitative in nature that deals with their role, contribution and limitations.

Keywords: Women; Agriculture; Development; Empowerment.

Introduction

International Development Agency has stated that agriculture development is one of the most powerful tools to end extreme poverty in the agrarian countries like India. Agriculture is the engine to boost up the growth and development of economy of a country. Role of women in agriculture is indispensable. M.S Swaminathan describes that it was the women who first domesticated crop plants and initiated the art of farming. There is a saying in academics that 'women gatherer is better than men hunter'. When men went out for hunting, women started gathering seeds from the native places and began showing them for the purpose of food, feed, fiber, fodder and fuel.

Women's Role

It is well said "if you teach a man to farm, his family will eat but if you teach a woman to farm, the community will eat". The role of women in agriculture can be seen since time immemorial.

Women of various classes, caste and communities played the fearless, dynamic and pivotal role in the history of peasant movements in India. They were the heroines of the peasant movements uprising in 20th century. Women are better care taker and steward of environment than men. Women have played an important role in the conservation of basic natural resources like land, water, flora and fauna. By using organic farming system they have improved the soil health as well as environment and ensured food security of the nation. Females frequently provide their families with diversified cultivation via kitchen gardening of fruits, vegetables, tuber crops etc. and also by rearing of small livestock. The role of women in Poultry farming is continuously increasing day by day. The poultry farming have a key role in the rural economy. Although the women are not equipped with the modern technologies of poultry like vaccination and improved feed to their chicken, hen, duck etc. but they show an excellent example in poultry enterprise. These women on the basis of their traditional knowledge do the poultry raising and sell their eggs and poultry meats to generate additional income. The extra or additional

income of these female farmers help and support them in running their household giving educational facilities to their children, get nutritional food and take care of their health and of their families. According to FAO Data women are involved in the production of 60 to 80% of world's food and 90% of dairy production. If women have an opportunity to self organize the farming sector and take part in the decision making whole community will be benefited. Respecting the basic rights of women and providing them a better access to the resources are the most effective means of fighting hunger and poverty and achieving the goals of Sustainable agriculture in India. Promoting the women empowerment will help the female farmers to gain confidence and to know their importance. In the region or the societies where the woman dominate agriculture production and in the dual gender system there is a greater chance and opportunity to promote their inclusion in agriculture system. Those areas that are already under the women's sphere like home gardens, poultry, and livestock cultivation help them to improve their productivity and benefits. Enhancing positive collaboration between men and women will give a better outcome for everyone. One of the number of reasons of under performance of agriculture in many developing countries is the gender gap in agriculture and lack of resources or opportunities to the women they need to fully utilize their potential in increasing the production. FAO Data estimates that 43% of Agricultural labour forces in developing countries are women. So if they had equal access to the production resources, yield can be increased up to 20%-30%. Closing this agriculture yield gap due to gender gap can help us in decreasing the number of undernourished people by 15% and net of hungry person by 12 to 17%. [FAO 2010]. Farm is a place where crop production takes place. It is a place that is labeled or seen as public place unlike private place like house and family for household chores. That's why it is considered as a place where men should dominate as per this patriarchal society. When the word farmer comes to our mind it somewhat describes the masculine identity. We need to change the way we think about. Farming is not just about procurement of inputs and producing the output. Domestic labour is not limited to the domain of females only but it is the characteristic of all household members. The work predominantly done by women like household works and provision of the meal to the agricultural workers is not considered as a part of farm works. Women must be considered as a productive resource rather considering them to be made for only household

works. Official statistics do not capture the data of unpaid work be it in the garden, field or in the household works. So it insufficiently represents the women's actual share in agricultural works. Mostly women farmers have less representation in the farmers' organizations and protests. So their contribution is not recognized in the society and work of women is not considered as economically active employment in the national economy. Role of women in agriculture and rural areas vary widely depending upon the society, age, culture, region and ethnicity etc. The proportion of women in agriculture production and post harvest activity is 20%-70% and it is increasing day by day with the increase in the development of export oriented integrated farming system as it is associated with increasing demand for female laborers. Working as agricultural labours also affect their home environment as they could not take care of their children and family. But this issue is completely ignored by us. Women play a multifarious role in the agriculture and allied sectors. They perform agricultural activities like sowing, transplanting, weeding, irrigation, fertilizer application, plant protection, winnowing, storage etc and allied activities like cattle management, fodder collection, milking etc. They work as farmers, as paid laborers in agriculture enterprise and as unpaid workers on their family farm to support their farmer husband to increase the productivity and benefits. Despite their extensive and diversified participation in this sector they face a lot of problems like health issues, perilous working conditions, limited access to resources, low wages and income, insecure employment, limited support by government. According to FAO survey, female farmers receive 5% of all agricultural extension services and only 10% of total aid provided for agriculture, forestry and fishing goes to woman. Women lack power over assets, technologies and resources but their role are more complex than what is presented before us. Biggest roadblock in front of the female as a farmer or as an agricultural labour is their less access to the various resources like land, water, finance, labour, skill, credit etc, which are discussed below:

Land Ownership

In most of the cases ownership is in the name of male counterparts of the family. A/c to FAO data, due to legal and cultural constraints in land inheritance, less than 20% of land holders are women. To close this gender gap in land ownership, reform laws should be made and guarantee equal rights to women. A/c to Census 2011, only 14% of women

have ownership of land in which they cultivate. Women should be empowered to ensure that they are aware of their rights and have the ability to claim it.

Low Wages

A/c to FAO data, earnings of women labor is 24% less than that of men labour in the labour market. Due to low wages they feel insecure and marginalized.

Credit Facilities

Credit and insurance services are required by the farmers for the procurement of inputs like fertilizers, seeds, pesticides etc. Lack of ownership of land hinders in the loan granting procedure by the banks and financial companies as lands are used as collateral guarantee for sanctioning of loans. Lack of fund excludes the women farmers in buying and use of hybrids or high yielding varieties (HYV) seeds and using modern technologies in their field. To overcome these problems micro finances are being provided by NABARD as collateral free loans to women farmer. NABARD is also taking initiatives to provide technological advancement and skill development programs for these women.

Education

Generally female farmers have less than half of the year of education of their male counter parts. It decreases their efficiency in farming and related activities. Self Help Groups (SHGs), Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVKs), or women groups can be a stepping stone in increasing the awareness, developing skill and building confidence of these women farmers. Women groups also help in pulling the risk of cultivation, reducing the input cost and transaction cost to increase the profit. KVKs are extremely helpful in educating and training these women as these KVKs provide a grassroots approach to them about the innovative technologies developed in the agricultural field.

Land Holdings

The more number of people buy and own land so the size of landholding comes down. As a result, majority of farmers come under the category of marginal and small farmers. Due to small land holdings its economic efficiency decreases as the use of mechanical tools like combine harvester or tractor cannot be done, so it lowers the net return. Policy of consolidation of land holdings should be implemented by the concerned government to increase the productivity in the agriculture field.

Technology and Mechanization

There is lesser mechanization of agriculture in India and if it is mechanized it is more male-centric. Most of the machines and tools and implements are male-centric and not female friendly. So the female farmers find it difficult to operate them. Due to this they are forced to engage them self in labour intensive works. So manufacturers should be given incentives to make female friendly tools and machineries. Also these female farmers should be given subsidiary to motivate them to use these tools.

Due to lack of proper access to credit, women are less likely to use or purchase improved seeds or fertilizers and pesticides. It reduces their efficiency,. And if they get loans it cannot be used for productive purposes but most of these funds are used to fulfill the needs and demands of their family, son and husband. In the patriarchal society, man farmer consider themselves superior than their female counterparts that relegate woman to secondary or support role. To keep their cultural privilege men don't prefer joint ownership of land. Men labourers are not ready to work under female farmers. Women are restricted to bring their produce to market or even leaving their village without permission of their husband or any male member of the family. If she is not empowered to make decisions about the land she works it's impossible for her to enter contract farming agreement that provide her higher earnings and reliable source of income. Women are considered physically weak and assume that they cannot perform heavy farm works like irrigation as it is considered as mens' job. Without removing gender biasness in these sectors we cannot target on the role of women in agriculture. When migration of men occurred in search of employment in the cities, a good woman ideology has seen as a revival, emphasizing that decent women stay at home, are caretaker of their family. They were not allowed to take over male tasks such as ploughing, preparing land, spraying pesticides or marketing crops.

Conclusion

Rather than de-motivating the female farmers we must focus on encouraging them by offering qualification opportunities, agricultural training, and extension services. Capacity of NGOs and nonprofit organizations should be strengthened to improve knowledge of women's role and involvement in farming. Support should be provided in women's income generating activities. Strengthening the women's ability to benefit from market based opportunities, traditional and modern

masculine social boundaries need to be addressed or challenged. International Women's Day is observed by United Nations on 15th of October every year and in India National Women Farmer's Day is observed on the same day to encourage the female farmers. Truth about women in agriculture is often obscured by myths which ultimately hinders their effective development. A number of reforms should be done to strengthen women's contribution to Agricultural production and sustainability. These reforms include support for public services and investment in rural areas to improve women's living and working condition. Recognizing their needs, skill and knowledge in the production of food and conservation of biodiversity. Addressing the negative effect of pesticides and chemicals on women's health and immediately taking the needful measures to reduce their use and exposure. We cannot think of any progress in the agriculture and allied sectors without proper participation of women in this field. So we must give proper

education, training and decision making power to the women for the progress in the agriculture field and finally to the all-round development of the country.

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