
Role of Women in Agriculture

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ABSTRACT

Women are the backbone of the development of rural and national economies. They comprise 43% of the world's agricultural labor force, which rises to 70% in some countries. In Africa, 80% of the agricultural production comes from small farmers, who are mostly rural women. The international development community has recognized that agriculture is an engine of growth and poverty reduction in countries where it is the main occupation of the poor. Women make essential contributions to the agricultural and rural economies in all developing countries. Their roles vary considerably between and within regions and are changing rapidly in many parts of the world, where economic and social forces are transforming the agricultural sector. Rural women often manage complex households and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. This paper contributes to the gender debate in agriculture by assessing the empirical evidence in three areas that has received much attention in the literature: But the agricultural sector in many developing countries is underperforming, in part because women, who represent a crucial resource in agriculture and the rural economy through their roles as farmers, laborers and entrepreneurs, almost everywhere face more severe constraints than men in access to productive resources. Efforts by national governments and the international community to achieve their goals for agricultural development, economic growth and food security will be strengthened and accelerated if they build on the contributions that women make and take steps.

INTRODUCTION

India has a national tradition bound to agriculture fertility. In the North, the Indus valley and Brahmaputra region are critical agricultural areas graced by the Ganges and monsoon season. Based on 2011, World Bank data, only 17.5% of India's gross domestic product (GDP) is accounted for by agricultural production. Yet for a majority of the country, an estimated 72% of the 1.1 billion people who live in rural India, it is a way of life.

Agriculture in India defines familial tradition, social relations and gender roles. Female in the agricultural sector, whether through traditional means or industrial, for subsistence or as an agricultural laborer, represents a momentous demographic group. Agriculture is directly tied to issues such as economic independence, decision-making abilities, agency and access to education and health services and this manner has created externalities such as poverty and marginalization, and compounded issues of gender inequality.

Rural Women form the most important productive work force in the economy of majority of the developing nations including India. Rural women often manage complex households and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. Their activities typically include producing agricultural

crops, tending animals, processing and preparing food, working for wages in agricultural or other rural enterprises, collecting fuel and water, engaging in trade and marketing, caring for family members and maintaining their homes. Many of these activities are not defined as “economically active employment” in national accounts but they are essential to the wellbeing of rural households. Statistical data are available regarding their participation in the agricultural sector and allied activities but their impact on the home environment has been completely ignored. As seen above, women play a significant role in the agricultural labor force and in agricultural activities, although to a varying degree.

It has often been claimed that women produce 60-80 percent of food. However, assigning contributions to agricultural outputs by gender is problematic because in most agricultural households both men and women are involved in crop production. It can be attempted to allocate output by gender by assuming that specific crops are grown by women and others by men and then aggregating the value of women’s and men’s crops to determine the share grown by women. Rural Women form the most important productive work force in the economy of majority of the developing nations including India.

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WOMEN FARMERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The loss of biodiversity in India and specifically food crops is a serious concern of food security and sustainability of the agricultural sector in India. The connection between women farmers and environmental health is not simply for subsistence and survival. It also stems from a long existing cultural valuation of India's agricultural fertility in ritual and practice. Women's connection to land is reflected in their almanac-like knowledge of plant varieties. Rituals and ceremonies in various parts of the country show this close relationship. There is Lohri, the harvest festival of Punjab or *navadhanya puja*, which translate to the worship of nine cereals, celebrations that take place in southern India.

Both ceremonies celebrate the role of women in agriculture and fertility and importance of environment. Furthermore, traditional agricultural methods heavily utilized by women subsistence farmers boast environmentally friendly features, such as seed preservation, natural fertilizers and crop rotation techniques that do not exhaust delicate soil. In the wake of Green Revolution’s reforms, it is clear that many of the high yield recommendations had severe environmental impacts. The negative environmental impacts of the Green Revolution are barely beginning to show their full affect. The widespread chemical pollution in communities that utilize pesticides and herbicides is creating a public health problem, which has disproportionately impacted women.

In the state of Punjab, which was touted as a success of Green Revolution, cancer rates have skyrocketed. A 2008 study by Punjabi University a high rate of genetic damage among

farmers, which was attributed to pesticide use. Ignorance on the appropriate use of pesticides, resulting in the heavy use, improper disposal, the use of pesticides as kitchen containers, and contamination of drinking water with heavy metals are contributing factors. In reaction to the health and monetary costs of inorganic farming many women are turning to organic farming practices. On a micro level women are organizing into collectives to exchange knowledge, organize organic seed sharing, to pursue organic and sustainable agricultural practices.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION:

Despite women's extensive and varied participation in agriculture, they continue to have less access than do men to modern agricultural inputs. As a result, their farm work is labor intensive and yields meager economic returns.

Multi-Dimensional Role of Women:

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

Domestic Activities: Cooking, child rearing, water collection, fuel wood gathering, household maintenance etc.

Allied Activities: Cattle management, fodder collection, milking, etc.

Women in India are major producers of food in terms of value, volume and number of hours worked. Nearly 63 percent of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78 per cent of women. Almost 50 percent of rural female workers are classified as agricultural labourers and 37% as cultivators. About 70 percent of farm work was performed by women. Women play a significant and crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields including, main crop production, live-stock production, horticulture, post-harvesting operations, agro/social forestry, fishing etc.

In the past, household units - men, women and children together - were responsible for the foodstuffs needed to maintain their families. A division of labour existed, but everybody worked for the direct survival of the family. With the introduction of cash crops, women's responsibility to provide the required food crops increased, while men's main responsibility shifted to the production of cash crops, often with considerable labour contributions from women. The adoption of commercial crop production was partly induced by the growing need to obtain cash, which is necessary for survival in increasingly monetarized societies.

In large parts of the developing world, increases in agricultural production have not been able to keep up with the rapidly increasing population, and population pressure in itself has contributed to expansion into less fertile zones and, at times, to a reduction of the productivity per area unit. At present, no single member of small landholder and landless households has a sufficient economic base to provide the required food supply for the entire family. Recent years have shown a new trend, most prominent in Africa, whereby male family members leave the rural household to try to find waged labour in the urban centres and increase the family income. All this has further increased women's responsibilities to provide for family food requirements.

Poultry farming is one of the major sources of rural economy. The rate of women in poultry farming at household level is the central in poultry industry. Even though rural women are not using modern management techniques, such as vaccination and improved feed, but their poultry enterprise is impressive. Every year, income from poultry farming has been rising. In order to generate more and more income, rural women often sell all eggs and poultry meat and left nothing for personal use. Due to poverty and lack of required level of proteins most of women have got a very poor health. Most of women suffer from malnutrition.

Swaminathan, the famous agricultural scientist describes 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. Women have played and continue to play a key role in the conservation of basic life support systems such as land, water, flora and fauna. They have protected the health of the soil through organic recycling and promoted crop security through the maintenance of varietal diversity and genetic resistance.

In rural India, the percentage of women who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is as high as 84%. Women make up about 33% of cultivators and about 47% percent of agricultural laborers. These statistics do not account for work in livestock, fisheries and various other ancillary forms of food production in the country. In 2009, 94% of the female agricultural labor force in crop cultivation were in cereal production, while 1.4% worked in vegetable production, and 3.72% were engaged in fruits, nuts, beverages, and spice crops.

Women's participation rate in the agricultural sectors is about 47% in tea plantations, 46.84% in cotton cultivation, 45.43% growing oil seeds and 39.13% in vegetable production. While these crops require labor- intensive work, the work is considered quite unskilled. Women also heavily participate in ancillary agricultural activities. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Indian women represented a share of 21% and 24% of all fishers and fish farmers, respectively. Despite their dominance of the labor force women in India still face extreme disadvantage in terms of pay, land rights, and representations in local farmers organizations. Furthermore, their lack of empowerment often results in negative externalities such as lower educational attainment for their children and poor familial health.

CONCLUSION

The international development community has recognized that agriculture is an engine of growth and poverty reduction in countries where it is the main occupation of the poor. Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy. Women play a vital role in building this 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. Variations in women's participation in agricultural work depend on supply and demand factors linked to economic growth and agricultural modernization.

Farm women felt the impact on their children's education to a large extent, as they were able to provide them with better educational facilities as well as chances to get an education outside the village. Non-farm women only felt this impact to a medium extent; they were able to provide better educational facilities by buying books and stationery but there were far

fewer chances to get their children educated outside the village. The impact of liberalization and globalization on women is important not only because they represent almost half of the total population, but also because they face constraints, which make them less beneficial from the liberalization. Once different impacts are ascertained well designed policy responses may aid women in taking advantage of greater openness to agriculture. The bulk of the development projects for rural women over the 1976-85 period provided training in traditional female skills (e.g. sewing, cooking, and crafts), credit programs for microenterprises, and income-generation schemes to bring rural women into the market economy.

Agricultural extension efforts should help women improve food production while allowing them to shift more of their labor to export production. Similarly, changes in legal, financial, and educational systems must be undertaken in order to enhance women's social and economic contributions to rural development in the long term.

There is a need to examine carefully the implications of land tenure laws and regulations for women. And educational policies and funding must be changed to reflect the very high social and economic returns to women's primary education and literacy. As women are the backbone of agricultural workforce and 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 contribution in the field of agriculture, food security, horticulture, dairy, 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. With various targeted efforts, her enlightenment will change the face of rural India.

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