

Participation of Women in Agricultural Production

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ABSTRACT

India is a developing and predominately agrarian economy. 70% of its population is rural, of those households, 60% 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% of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78% 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% 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.

Keywords: women; agriculture; production; employment.

1. INTRODUCTION

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% of people are living in rural areas and 60.4% 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 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% of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is accounted for by agricultural production. Based on 2012 data, India is home to the fourth largest

agricultural sector in the world. It has an estimated 180 million hectares of farmland with 140 million of which are planted and continuously cultivated.

Women in India are the backbone of the society and important resource in agriculture and rural economy. They make essential contributions to the agricultural development and allied and household activities and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. These activities include producing agricultural crop, cleaning animals, preparing food, working in rural enterprises, engaging in trade and marketing, caring family members and maintaining their homes. About 63% of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78% of women. Traditionally, women have always played an important role in agriculture- as farmers, co-farmers, wage labours and managers of farms. They have conventionally been producers of food from seed to kitchen. They carry the heavier work burden in food production and because of gender discrimination, get lower returns for their work. The multiple role of women leads to a significant contribution in real terms to the productive system. But it is unfortunate that her role is not adequately recognized and properly her contribution not qualified in the male- dominated society. They have been under-represented in the development process.

Despite their dominance of the labor force, women in India still face extreme disadvantage in terms of pay, land rights and representation in local farmers organizations. Apart from this, women faces many challenges due to limited access to productive resources in agricultural production which prevent them in enhancing their productivity.

2. WOMEN' CONTRIBUTION IN AGRICULTURE AND ALLIED ACTIVITIES:

Swaminathan, the famous agricultural scientist, describes that it was women who first domesticated crop plant 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 begun cultivating those of interest from the point of view of food, feed, fodder, fiber 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.

Women in India are major producers of food in terms of value, volume and number of hours worked. In rural India, the percentage of women who depend on agriculture is as high as 70%. In 2009, 94% of the female labor worked in cereal production, while 1.4% worked in vegetable production and 3.72% were engaged in fruits and spice crops. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Indian women represented a share of 21% and 24% of all fishers and fish farmers respectively. Rural women play a vital and crucial role not only in agricultural production

i.e crop production but also allied activities such as horticulture, livestock poor-harvest operation, tending animals, agro-forestry, fisheries etc.

Most of the work that women do, such as collecting fuel, fodder and water, growing vegetables and keeping poultry for domestic consumption go unrecorded in the census country. Many women who work on family land are not recorded as workers. Rural women engaged in agriculture form 78 per cent of all women in regular work. They are a third of all workers on the land. The traditional gender division of labour ensures that these women get on average 30 per cent lower wages than men. A recent study conducted by Women and Population Division of FAO revealed that in developing countries women provide 70 percent of agricultural labour, 60-80 percent labour for household food production, 100 percent labour for processing the basic food stuffs, 80 per cent for food storage and 90 per cent for water and fuel wood collection for households. Women produce between 60 to 80 percent of the food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production, therefore, women's role in food production ensures the survival of millions of people in all regions. Women's livelihood strategies, and their support and means of ensuring food security are diverged and complex, from cultivating field crops to livestock rearing, home gardening, gathering etc. They make above contributions despite unequal access to land, inputs and information.

Rural women farmers perform numerous labor intensive jobs such as weeding, grass cutting, picking, cotton stick collections, separation of seeds from fiber. Women are also expected to collect wood from fields. This wood is being used as a major fuel source for cooking. Because of the increasing population pressure, over grazing and desertification, women face difficulties in searching of fire wood. Clean drinking water is another major problem in rural areas. Like collection of wood, fetching water from remote areas is also the duty of women because a rural woman is responsible for farm activities, keeping of livestock and its other associated activities like milking and preparation of ghee are also carried out by the women.

Within pastoralist and mixed farming systems, livestock play an important role in supporting women and in improving their financial situation and women are heavily engaged in this sector. An estimated two-thirds of poor livestock keepers are women. They share responsibility with men for the care of animals, and particular species and types of activity are more associated with women than men. For example, women often have a prominent role in managing poultry and dairy animals and in caring for other animals that are housed and fed within the home. When tasks are divided, men are more likely to be involved in constructing housing and herding of grazing animals, and in marketing of products if women's mobility is constrained. The influence of women is strong in the use of eggs, milk and poultry meat for home consumption and the income from these products. In some countries small-scale pig production is also dominated by women. Female-headed

households are as successful as male-headed households in generating income from their animals, although they tend to own smaller numbers of animals, probably because of labour constraints. Ownership of livestock is particularly attractive to women in societies where access to land is restricted to men

The pattern of livestock strength is mainly influenced by various factors such as farm size, cropping pattern, availability of range-lands including fodder and pasture. Rural women earn extra income from the sale of milk and animals. Mostly women are engaged in cleaning of animals, sheds, watering and milking the animals. She has very hectic life. She rises before dawn and ends at dusk and walks miles to collect water, if there is to be found. They are also responsible for collection, preparing dunk cakes, an activity that also brings additional income to their families. She works all day in a field, sometimes with a baby on her back. If she is lucky, droughts, blight or pests don't destroy her crops and she raises enough to feed her family and may be has left over to sell. But in some rural areas, there is no road to the nearest market. In spite of this, her work is considered as 'unproductive'. Moreover, her work is not counted in many economies "as economically active employment." Even though rural women supply half of the Pakistan's food production, yet her own food security is always at risk.

During the harvesting season, utilization of women labour is maximum, carrying bundle of harvested crop to the spot where threshing would be done is a heavy task which is performed mostly by women. Each bundle is carried as a head load by women, mostly bare footed, walking over the sharp shrubs of the harvested fields. Men rarely participated in this task.

It was observed that majority of women is self-employed and work in dangerous environments. The crop farmer plants, tills, fertilize, sprays, harvests, packs and stores the product. They are involved in activities like winnowing, weeding, grading, threshing and cleaning of field farm operations. The physical strain of female farmers in agricultural activities seems to be high because of heavy work tasks. Various activities done by women in agriculture and allied field such as manually handling loads/material, threshing, transplanting, land preparation, cleaning of animals sheds, feeding the animals and disposal of cow dung. These activities have ill effects on women health. Due to poverty and lack of required level of proteins most of women have got a very poor health.

3. MAIN CHALLENGES FACED BY FEMALE FARMERS IN AGRICULTURE SECTOR:

1. Women have unequal land rights. They hardly enjoy land ownership rights directly in their names. Limited rights or access to arable land further limits livelihood options and exacerbates financial strain on women, especially in women-headed households.

2. Women have limited access to use of productive resources.
3. Women perform all un-mechanized agricultural tasks and perform multiple tasks which add more burden to them due to lack of equipment and appropriate technology.
4. Women have little control over decision making process, either inside home or outside home. Without access to capital or household decision making abilities women lack the resources that are for their labor stability and stability of their household.
5. Few women holding of agricultural productive resources such as land, animals and machinery.
6. Poor women farmers are less able to purchase technology to adapt to climate change due to lack of access to credit and agricultural services. They often have low productivity due to an inability to invest in things such as improved seeds and soil replenishment.
7. Women farmers in agricultural sector suffer from high illiteracy rate among them. They do not know their legal rights.
8. Women earn less wages, especially in joint, informal and private sector.
9. Miss applying some laws and regulations in favour of women such heritage legislation.
10. Lack of market intelligence and inadequate information put women farmers under unfavourable situation with weak bargaining power with the buyers.

4. STATUS OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

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 percent 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.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Rural women are the major contributors in 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 labor market is largely determined by socio-cultural and economic factors. Women do not enter the labor 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 labor market.

Women's labor power is considered inferior because of employers' predetermined notion of women's primary role as homemakers. As a result of discrimination against female labor, women are concentrated in the secondary sector of labor 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.

These are the following suggestions for the recognition of women contribution in agriculture:

1. Recognition of labor work of working women in the rural economy may be accounted in monetary terms.
2. More facilities should be provided to poor rural women for land, agricultural and livestock extension services.
3. Priority must be given to women in accessing credit on soft terms from banks and other financial institutions for setting up their business, for buying properties, and for house building.
4. Measures should be taken to enhance women's literacy rates. A separate education policy for women may serve the purpose.
5. Women must be involved in decision-making bodies that have the potential to introduce structural changes. This action will bring some changes in the gender relations in the society.
6. Minimum and equal wages should be fixed by state government for women agricultural labours and the rates should be reviewed periodically.
7. Women must be aware regarding their existing rights, access to judicial relief and redress, removing discrimination through legal reforms, and providing legal aid, assistance and counseling.

8. Conscious efforts are needed for training of female agricultural workers in the rural areas in alternative skills.
10. There is a need to make available cheap credit to needy agricultural women to start self-employment and as a result of that our rural women may get additional opportunity for gainful employment.
11. Addition to above, some alternatives employment programmes and opportunities should be provided to agricultural women labour in rural areas.

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.

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