

Women in Indian Agriculture- Feminization of Agriculture

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SUMMARY

In Indian society, women have a multidimensional role. The largest number of women in India is engaged in farming operations either as cultivators or as supervisors or as agriculture laborers. With women playing major role at all levels-production, pre-harvest, post-harvest processing, packaging, marketing – of the agricultural value chain, to increase productivity in agriculture, it is vital to adopt gender specific interventions. An ‘inclusive transformative agricultural policy’ ought to aim at gender-specific intervention to raise productivity of small farm holdings, amalgamate women as dynamic agents in rural transformation, and engage men and women in extension services with gender expertise. In order to accomplish the full economic benefit from employment, rural women should be provided a better choice over their occupations so that they are not enforced to do the work left behind by men. It is thus important to have overall women empowerment through education, awareness and doing away with gender biases.

INTRODUCTION

Women were the first to domesticate crop plants and commence the art and science of farming as said by famous agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan. Women play a central role in agriculture and associated fields which include crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post harvest operations, agro/ social forestry, fisheries, etc. Economic Survey 2017-18, delineated that with mounting rural to urban migration by men, there is ‘feminization’ of agriculture sector, where women take up multiple roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs, and labourers. Though data discloses decrease of participation of both men and women in agriculture but the rate of downturn of men has been faster than women. The Agriculture Census (2015-16) discloses that, there is ascendancy in percentage of female operational holdings in the country from 13% percent during 2010-11 to 14% during 2015-16. Agriculture, contributing around 16% of the GDP, is increasingly becoming a female activity.



Multi-Dimensional Roles of Women



Agriculture sector employs 80% of all economically active women; they comprise 33% of the agricultural labour force and 48% of self employed farmers (www.agricoop.nic.in). About 18% of the farm families in India, according to NSSO Reports are headed by women. In view of identification of women in agriculture Indian government started to celebrate October 15 as Rashtriya Mahila Kisan Diwas. A bird's eye look into the role of women in agriculture disclosed that 78% of India's employed women work in agriculture, 70% of farm work is led by women, 50% of rural women are agriculture labourers and 60 percent of the world food volume is grown by women. The data itself reveals that there is an increased role in female participation in agriculture which is clearly depicting the feminization in agriculture.

Multi-Faceted Role of Women in Agriculture and its Allied Fields

Women play a pluridimensional role in agricultural and allied fields. As reported by Baig (2010) women enthusiastically and expansively participate in the production of major crops and other farming operations. Women add on to family income through both farm and nonfarm activities. The nature and degree of women's participation in agriculture varies greatly from block level to overall country level. Despite of these variations, women participation and involvement in various agricultural activities is high. Rural women perform numerous labour intensive jobs such as weeding, hoeing, grass cutting, picking, cotton stick collection, separation of seeds from fibre, keeping of livestock and its other associated activities like milking, milk processing, preparation of ghee, etc.

Agriculture: Cultivators, Paid Labourers, doing labour on their own land and act as managers of certain operations of agricultural production by way of labour supervision and the participation in post harvest operations, sowing, nursery management, transplanting, weeding, irrigation, Plant protection, fertilizer application, Harvesting, storing, winnowing, etc.

Livestock:

Livestock is the primary sources of livelihoods which assists in fulfilling the household food needs as well as add on to farm incomes. There exists one common practice in the rural areas to give an animal as part of a women's dowry. Generally women are busy in cattle management activities such as cleaning of animal and sheds, watering of cattle, milking the animals, fodder collection, preparing dung cakes, and collection farm yard manure.

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

Feminization of Agriculture?

The term 'Feminization of agriculture' connotes the escalating participation of women in agricultural activities. It can be elucidated in different ways such as an increase in the percentage of women who are economically active in agricultural sector either as self-employed or as agriculture wage workers or unremunerated family workers. In other way it is an increase in the percentage of women in agricultural labour force relative to men, either because of more women are working or because of fewer men are working in agriculture

Causes of Feminization of Indian Agriculture:

Poverty is a major factor due to which women are forced to work as agricultural labourers to supplement the family's income. An agrarian distress is another one which led to migration of males from agriculture towards casual work by which women have got absorbed in agricultural and allied activities. According to a 2013 report a total of 7.7 million farmers left agriculture. With increased mechanization of agriculture, men have moved to other non-farm activities while women have been confined to traditional roles such as winnowing, harvesting, sowing seeds and rearing livestock. As per Census, about 33.7% of rural males migrate for reasons of employment and better economic opportunities. However, in the case of females, it is as

low as 3.6% for rural females. The upward mobility of women for employment is restricted and is further constrained by gender wage differentials.

Challenges in Front

- a) Land ownership** - The major challenge which women are facing is the powerlessness of women in terms of claiming ownership of the land they have been cultivating. Census 2015 disclosed that almost 86% of women farmers are devoid of this property right in land.
- b) Access to credit:** women have less access to credit because land is taken as collateral where women lack ownership of land which in turn does not allow women farmers to approach banks for institutional loans
- c) Access to agricultural inputs:** When compared to men, women in general have less access to resources and modern inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides) to make farming more productive.
- d) Access to technology:** Mechanization of agriculture has resulted in confinement of women in low paying traditional works. Further, most farm machinery is difficult for women to operate.
- e) Access to education, training and extension services:** Access to education, agricultural guidance and extension services for women has been predominantly low as compared to men.
- f) Managing different roles:** In addition to intensive work on the farm all day, women are also expected to fulfill domestic obligations like cooking, child rearing, water collection, fuel wood gathering, household maintenance etc.
- g) Wage:** Despite more work for longer hours when compared to male farmers, women farmers
- h) Marketing:** Small and marginal farmers in India lack adequate access to marketing facilities due to lack of basic infrastructure like market yards, roads and transportation, and storage including freezers and presence of middlemen. Additional constraints for women include seclusion, lack of literacy, knowledge and information. Further, women have no representation in agricultural marketing committees and other similar bodies.
- i) Health and Occupational Hazards:** Women face health hazards in the cultivation of many crops and plantations due to lack of training, lack of protective gears and long working hours. Lack of nutritional security further perpetuates health issues.

Suggestions to Overcome Challenges

- a) Gender policies:** A gender analysis is important for development policies and programs directed at agriculture. The Economic Survey (2017-18) recommended that there is an urgent need for 'inclusive transformative agricultural policy' aimed at gender-specific interventions.
- b) Ensure property rights:** The government should ensure access to secure land and property rights. A formal access to land will help increase productivity by facilitating investments and would ensure household food security and nutrition
- c) Credit without collateral:** Provision of credit without collateral under the micro-finance initiative of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development should be encouraged
- d) Equal access to resources:** Equalizing access to productive resources could increase agricultural output in developing countries by as much as 2.5% to 4%. Women farmers should be listed as primary earners and owners of land assets to elevating their place as real and visible farmers.
- e) Training:** The training of rural women to help them adopt modern agricultural techniques that are tailored to local conditions and that use natural resources in a sustainable manner. Krishi Vigyan Kendras in every district can be assigned an additional task to educate and train women farmers about innovative technology along with extension services.
- f) Gender friendly tools:** It is thus important to have gender-friendly tools and machinery for various farm operations. Manufacturers should be incentivized to come up with better solutions. Farm machinery banks and custom hiring centres promoted by many State governments can be roped in to provide subsidized rental services to women farmers.

g) Equal pay for work: Legal measures should be taken to ensure equal pay for work of equal value. Women should be made aware to help them negotiate equal wages and women organizations and unions can play an important role in this. The ILO has developed a program named Women's Education for Integrating Women Members in Rural Workers' Organizations with the objective of increasing empowerment of rural women in Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh.

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