

ROLE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND ALLIED SECTORS- CALLING FOR A CHANGE IN THE TEMPLATE OF THE DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

India is a developing country. Seventy percent of Indian population depends on agriculture to earn their livelihood. But the sector is underperforming due to various intrinsic issues connected to it. One key reason being women who critically contribute in agriculture are not being adequately addressed. Present trend shows that males are leaving the sector and the women have to shoulder the responsibility of various roles connected to it. So it is of utmost importance to mainstream their needs and requirements in a tailor made manner. In this era of modernisation we all are moving towards mechanisation. In the field of agriculture too, different efficient tools are being developed to reduce the time taken for completion of work. But less interest is being taken to develop women friendly tools. Women besides household works, do major agricultural activities as compared to her male counterpart. The activities rendered by women in different sectors of agriculture largely remains invisible. Also the actual participation of women in agriculture varies from region to region and within a region. We must not be blind to this fact. It is high time to document empirically the role that rural women play and the contribution that they make in agricultural production. Correct depiction and analyses will result in inclusive agriculture policies and programmes that will address their needs properly. Apart from this, urgent action is necessary to give priority to women's access to education, information, science

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and technology, and extension services which will also improve enable women's access, ownership and control of economic and natural resources.

INTRODUCTION

According to DR. M.S. Swaminathan, the famous agricultural scientist, "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".

In India agriculture is the most important engine of growth and poverty reduction. 70% of her population is rural; of those households, 60% engage in agriculture as their main source of income. In this important agricultural sector woman plays a vital role. The women are the backbone of agricultural workforce and are a vital part of Indian economy. It is estimated that about 60% of all agricultural operations are handled exclusively by women. In India women are major producers of food in terms of value, volume and number of hours worked. Due to lack of access to mechanization and technology transfer in agriculture, the sector is turning out to be less lucrative as compared to other sectors such as manufacturing and services. Add to this the land-use trends owing to geometrical increase in population or because of land being allotted for manufacturing or other related pursuits and we see that less and less land too is available to the section of the farming community who are at the receiving end. The resultant is slowly but surely a sort of feminization of agriculture. 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. Despite that female hourly wage rates in agriculture vary from 50 to 75% of male rates, and constitute only 25% of family income which is too low in order to overcome absolute poverty.

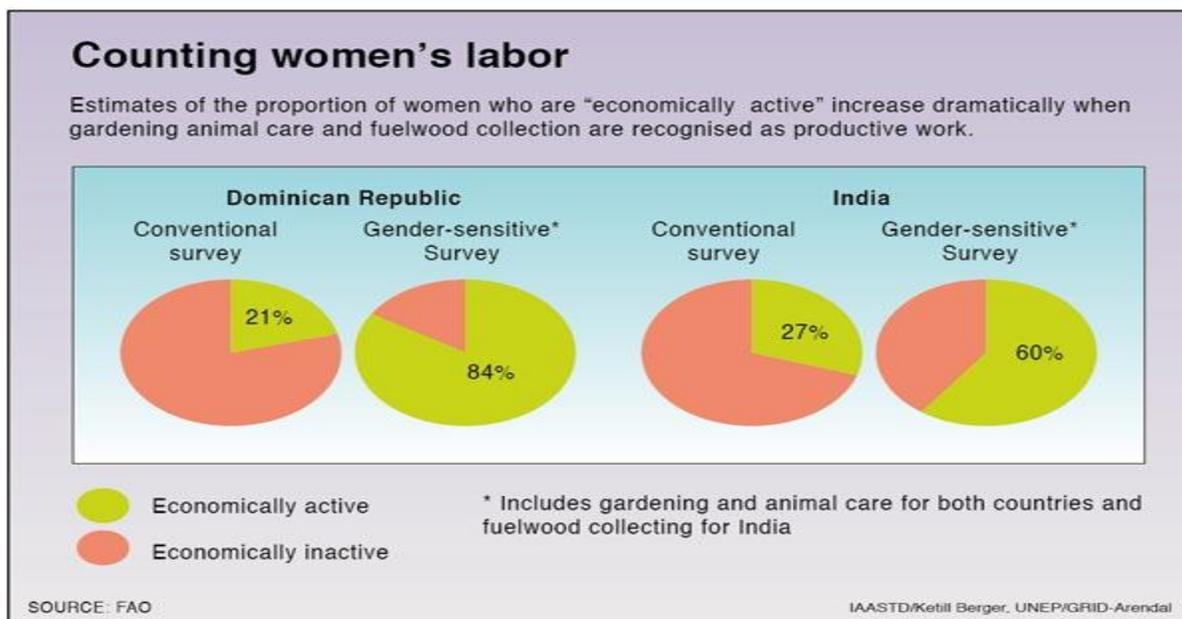
According to FAO, women play a significant role in agriculture, the world over. About 70% of the agricultural workers, 80% of food producers, and 10% of those who process basic foodstuffs are women and they also undertake 60 to 90% of the rural marketing; thus making up more than two-third of the workforce in agricultural production.

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, poultry, piggery, vermicomposting, mushroom production etc.

Women in agricultural labour force

Women comprise an average 43 percent of the agricultural labour force of developing countries. Agriculture sector employs 4/5th i.e. 48% of all economically active women in the country. Their roles vary considerably between and within regions and are changing rapidly in many parts of the world.



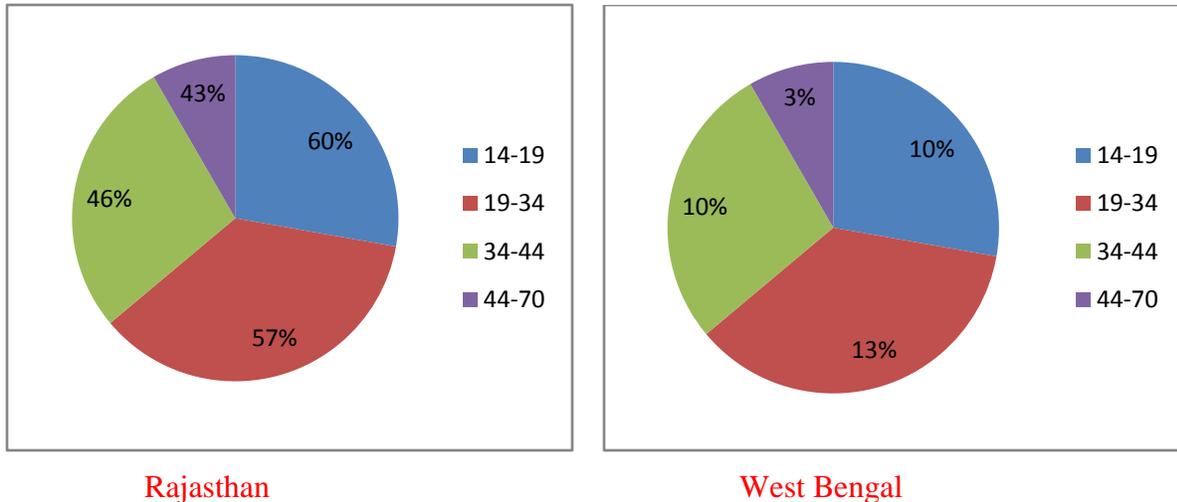
Women are the invisible farmers contributing immensely to the agriculture sector. There is a tendency to gloss over rather than critically understand their contribution. At best it is considered ad hoc since it is over represented in the unorganised, unpaid or part time worker. At worst it is considered an extension of the household chores which are also considered unimportant and not even identified labour (that is accounted for). Post harvesting processing activities which are mostly done informally within the confines of a household such as food processing and preparation of food (especially pickles, chutneys, vadi/papads) and also tending animals -

feeding them, cleaning their sheds, or managing animals diseases and they are not considered as measures/indices in any official survey done on a regional level or a national level. Time use surveys give a very comprehensive description of gender division of labour and the gendered access especially in countries such as India which document the time spent by men and women in different activities. But typically it is difficult and unconceivable to do so on a large scale i.e. regional and national level.

Variations across the board

The tendency is to look at the share of women in economically active pursuits as well as time-use surveys is to consider and over generalise rather than taking into account the variations in terms of age, social class and ethnic groups. Also the variations extend in terms of agro-climatic zones, crop production and production cycle. One constituency among the women farmers are the women who are either separated, widowed or divorced. Time use studies of such households would go a long way to throw light on the fact that women are not just workers but in many cases they take up the roles of supervisor, manager etc just like their male counterparts.

In a country like India, we must take caution in quoting gender statistics pertaining to agriculture. We cannot make blanket generalizations. If we have to quote we must show regional or even state wise data rather than national data and conceiving agriculture policies and programmes based on this. For example, we understand that as per the national average of women's share of total time use in agriculture is 32 percent. If we take two states, West Bengal is one in which the share of women in agriculture is as low is 10 % and Rajasthan which is a state where the share of women in agriculture is higher than 40%. Having said this, in both the regions, younger women contribute a considerably higher share of their total time to agriculture rather than their older counterparts. In Rajasthan, for example, girls between 14 to 19 years contribute upto 60% of the total time spent in agriculture by their age group.



Women in crop production activities

In crop production role of women is very high and women carry out different operations including field preparation, transplanting, and weeding, harvesting and post-harvest handling etc. In this section women empowerment is needed in the area of new technologies such as; drudgery reducing tools and equipments and increased productivity for household food and nutrition security and income generation.

Not just that. In different contexts, women are seen to practice crop diversification on the lands that they have access to either temporarily or permanently. Women practise crop diversity by default because they are not just thinking of production for income generation but also the varied needs in their households- the nutrition balance to be maintained, the fuel requirements, the field residues that can be used as cattle or poultry feeds. And since economy is largely seen as a feminine ‘gender trait’ that is largely appreciated in the community, women practice it with élan till it becomes like ‘second nature’. It is this very role socialization that creates an aptitude for ‘multi-tasking’ and for seeing ‘from multiple vantage points’ as far as their homestead is concerned. In the wake of climate change, this crop diversity enhances the adaptation capability of the farm household, the soil and the water resources. The fact that they are responsible for family health, makes them more responsive to information on pesticides and IPM Techniques. So it is but a ‘smart strategy’ to make use of this ‘default’ aptitude already entrenched in a gendered manner. This gendered pattern is empowering indeed for women rather than being contrary. But one major issue that has been there decelerating their progress is linked with their ‘real’ i.e. legal ownership over assets such as ‘farm land’ whether on lease or any other manner.

In a system which recognizes the land owning farmers primarily as beneficiaries of national or state agriculture programmes, women have a great disadvantage. It is this factor which opens for men (land owners) the pathway to access inputs, technology transfer, training, agri-credits. Intensifying the yield is something on which women need to be tuned up. What with their already existing 'stock of knowledge' if they are given support on state-of-the-art agricultural technologies and also if their marketing and entrepreneurial skills are honed, they will be enabled to participate on level-playing ground as men regarding large-scale and market oriented production.



Women in dairy production activities:

Rural women are involved in almost all livestock related activities. This is one sector of agriculture where the influence of women is strong as in the aspects of home consumption or even marketing and income generation, especially in case of poultry and small scale dairy activities. It goes without saying that largely women are the ones who are responsible for feeding, disease management etc of the livestock at the homestead level. Mostly women are engaged in cleaning of animal, sheds, watering and milking the animals. Rural women are also responsible for collection, preparing dung cakes an activity that also brings additional income to poor families. Except grazing, all other livestock management activities are predominantly performed by females. Majority of women are involved in shed cleaning and collection of farm yard manure. It is evident that the women are playing a dominant role in the livestock production and management activities.

This is the reason why small-scale dairy or poultry projects are popular investment for development programs. In contrast to the crop production mainstream farming, women are found to successfully manage these ventures well. One of the key aspects is that mostly women are not dependent on land asset ownership and control and these are much smaller and easier to avail. Many a times especially in case of poultry these have been distributed and women have been singularly empowered for small dairy or poultry management. While the role of women in small scale livestock management has been well recognized, the new age intensive production and market chains associated with large commercial enterprises are yet to be explored on a large scale. However, one success story which echoes through the echelons of Indian dairy farming is AMUL i.e. Anand Milk Union Limited which has evolved out of a cooperative movement that has now become a force to reckon with not just in the country but all over the globe. Hence, instead of a merely conventional gendered role positioning, the template has to change with regard to extension, training, handholding and quality control of the produce. To enhance the entrepreneurial skills of women we need to largely of them not just as employees/workers but also as managers, supervisors and entrepreneurs.



Women in fish production activities:

At global level 60% - 70% of labour force in fisheries is provide by women. In India, women represented a share of 24 percent of all fishers and fish farmers. Women are more commonly occupied in subsistence and commercial fishing from small boats and canoes in coastal or inland waters. Women also contribute as entrepreneurs and provide labour before, during and after the catch in both artisanal and commercial fisheries. Including women in fish farming is not only

proven to increase yields and available protein, but also leads to greater income distribution throughout the family, resulting in educational and health benefits.

Here too, women engage in multifarious activities. However, the fisheries data available does not really capture this aspect of their contribution. And so quite obviously there are few policies that are conceived with the consciousness of this reality. But it is their very presence, especially in representative bodies such as fish workers' organizations, that has broadened the agenda of these bodies. It is women again who have facilitated the inclusion of community perspective in fisheries issue. Though they are, one can say indispensable by way of their contribution in terms of 'standing in the gap' in the sector, yet it is by virtue of their multidimensional role which in fact continues to accord low social status to them because they do not occupy the position of a 'specialist' or a skilled worker. They are rather 'generalist' pitching in '*where and whenever it is needed*' rather than sticking to one particular role in the value chain or in the production system. Fisheries scenario has also been affected by the advent and domination of big commercial production houses as also the aspect of climate change. Women must be empowered and given access to information like the male counterparts. It is not that there is a conscious attempt to not be gender inclusive in extension and information and training but it has been the status quo, because primarily it is men who have more time to spare and accessibility because of better mobility support and thus it is men rather than women who mainly participate in associations and organizations. To change this, focussed and conscious attempt at women inclusive 'reach out' strategies have to be thought of and implemented.



Women in poultry production activities:

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. All family members provided labour to a rural poultry production enterprise. Men and children mainly did construction of poultry sheds as women did cleaning, feeding and treatment of rural poultry.

Whereas this can be said when the poultry production unit comprises of less birds such as 5 -20 birds on an average, as the scale of production and size of the production unit increases in volume, the picture becomes different. The sector involves women in different aspects of the rural poultry production. Women are involved in decision making whether plural or singular, in rural poultry. This is namely in three ways either selling the produce- eggs and chicken; using the produce for one's own household consumption or giving away produce as gift to others. The division of labour also shows a clear cut tilt towards women's participation. Except for issues such as construction of shed, cleaning, feeding, treatment of diseases is done by women. In all of these it is the women who dominate the activity profile in poultry. Studies show that mainly subsistence poultry farming or non-market poultry farming is where women as significant role. Subsistence poultry farming where women's role is akin to her productive and reproductive roles in the household and where the household food residues and kitchen waste serves as 'scavenged poultry feed' has given a picture in general that poultry is mainly a 'woman's affair'. As far as women and also children in the household are involved in poultry farming, practically most of the labour required is provided by them. Men's involvement primarily was on 'once-and-for-all' activities such as construction of sheds or occasional activities such as 'cash requiring' activities e.g. purchase of inputs such as feed etc. Ironically because of their maximum involvement, women are not able to participate in meetings or go to market or attend even trainings



Women in mushroom production activities:

Mushroom cultivation is a women friendly profession. Mushroom growing is one agricultural activity in which women can play a vital role without sacrificing their household responsibilities. Activities involved in mushroom growing range from construction of mushroom houses to collection of substrate, fermentation/composting, pasteurization, caring for the growing bags and harvesting, post-harvest handling and marketing. There are different degrees of involvement of men and women in these activities, with the woman's role being significant.

Whereas traditionally women are given accolades on being the custodians of traditional knowledge regarding identification and plucking of mushrooms as well as mushroom oriented food preparation. They need to acquire new knowledge with regard to biotechnological aspects regarding mushrooms too. They need to be equipped with the new age knowledge of recognizing mushroom strains appropriate to their own natural environment as well as the species (either edible or with medicinal use) which can be most beneficially produced and with more income generation. They also need to be skilled in recreating appropriate 'lab conditions' that need to be set up for the species that they choose in isolation to the natural habitats of mushrooms. The latest applications of mushrooms in nutraceutical and pharmaceutical industries, as nutritional supplements, as cosmetics also need to be well understood and learnt by women farmers.

**CONCLUSION**

Women make essential contributions to the agricultural and rural economies in all developing countries. Despite the activities rendered by women, many of these activities are not defined as “economically active employment” in national accounts but they are essential to the wellbeing of rural households. It is extremely important to document the role that rural women play and the

contribution that they make in agricultural production. Urgent action is necessary to give priority to women's access to education, information, science and technology, and extension services which will improve enable women's access, ownership and control of economic and natural resources.

In a scheme of things which largely is dependent on women to perform with the best extension and other support what with their male counterparts departing from growing crops, to increasing stress on ecosystem due to the land use skewed in favour of urbanisation and further industrialisation, women need to be supported through 'consistent hand holding' and inclusive extension practices. This is especially so because work participation is permanently changing its template in agriculture. Besides, statistics which are so important for etching out the policy directives to be followed in state or nationally, need to be generated relating to women's yields, technology adoption rates and use of inputs.

Agricultural research needs to draw on women's production strategies and experience in crop selection especially for adaptation to the onslaughts of climate change already in the 'here and now'.

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