

Women Farmers and Farm Labour – Special Needs and Opportunities:

The problems and needs of women in agriculture and steps to be taken

- Agriculture in India accounts for 37% of India's GNP and according to the National Sample Survey organisation data, employs 70% of the working population and about 84% of all economically active women (NSS, GoI, 1991). However, some argue that 84% is an underestimate. In reality there are few women in rural areas who are not 'farmers' in some way, be it working on the family farm, working as wage labour, or working as share croppers.
- In most of South Asia, the majority of poor women depend on agriculture for their livelihood --- even more than men, who have broader opportunities. In rural India in 1993-94, 86% of women workers were in agriculture, compared with 74% of men [UNDP HDR97].
- A disproportionate number of those still dependent on land are women in India. 58 percent of all male workers but 78 percent of all female workers, and 86 percent of all *rural*/female workers, are in agriculture. The irony however is that they do not have control over agriculture.
- De-facto female headed households range from 20 to 35% of the rural households (widows, deserted women as well as women who manage farming when their men migrate)
- 66% of all women agricultural labourers are dalits earning Rs 8 to Rs 25/- per day ["Battle against fear and discrimination", Amnesty International, 2001].

The problems of women in agriculture resemble the same 'progressive set of problems' that other marginalised communities face in the general population but in a more acute and distressing manner. However, when addressed in a women-centric manner, the potential for increased productivity, restoration of ecological balance, for high positive social impacts like increased status, self-confidence and food security for communities are all increased much more tangibly than working in a gender-neutral manner. The problems relate to land ownership, security of tenure, land quality issues in cases where land ownership is assured, and finally, land management issues in terms of agriculture and the support systems it requires.

Any changes in land ownership and agricultural patterns affect women far more than men (positive or negative), given the existing gender roles that women are expected to fulfil, mainly related to management of the household in their reproductive roles - fuelwood collection, fodder collection, livestock tending in general, food security needs and so on. Their dependence on agriculture, on common lands, on forests and water is that much more high and acute.

As both theory and empirical evidence inform us, there is a particular continuum related to women and social justice - land ownership by women - viable and sustainable land use patterns - increased productivity - environmental sustainability - sustained food security etc. Such a continuum should be recognised and given a central importance in policy formulations. In the case of women agricultural labourers, it should be recognised that employment potential should be an organic and integral part of agriculture itself. The technologies used, the cropping patterns adopted etc., should all contribute to more and more employment generation than less and less. Associated with this should be the wage rates payable. There could be a healthy symbiotic relationship created here between the agriculturists and the labourers.

For the women labourers in particular, and women in general, formal land rights can go a long way (atleast in terms of joint ownership of land to begin with) in improving their lives and livelihoods.

Land ownership: Access to and control over land resources is the first issue related to women in agriculture. Connected with this are various other issues like availability of credit - formal or informal, power to make decisions regarding cropping, markets, access to formal extension support systems etc. Further connected with this is the fact that women are often not considered as farmers who also need training support, capacity building with regard to information and technology, extension advice and so on. Women's land rights are closely connected to right to livelihood, right to food, their reproductive rights and so on as empirical studies have shown.

It is well known that land-based activities usually generate more income and carry less risk than non-land based activities that women are often encouraged to take up even in rural areas by many 'development schemes'. Even for off-farm activities to succeed, a little land was found to be beneficial. "In all states of India, rural households with land were able to earn substantially more from off-farm activities than the landless households" [Agarwal, B., *Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, 1994].

However, given a patrilineal system of land inheritance, women are often left out. Where they are not left out completely, it is an unequal right grudgingly granted. Leave alone legal inheritance rights in an equal manner, even government transfers are not sensitive to the issue of land ownership for women. There is also the issue of the lack of ability to use a legal right effectively given the socio-cultural gender biases that exist. However, there are many case studies of overcoming such problems by a cooperatised approach to the issue.

Therefore, effective land rights for women - not just in law, but in practice seems to be the crux of the matter. As Bina Aggarwal argues, this is not just for the welfare, equality and empowerment of women but also for efficiency in land use. There is empirical evidence to suggest that women can give increased outputs with secure land rights. It is reported that output could be increased by as much as 10-20% if inputs were re-allocated from plots controlled by men to those controlled by women. They also put land to more sustainable use. The arguments of land fragmentation do not hold much ground given the outweighing-advantages of land ownership vesting with women.

Security of tenure: Prevention of land alienation and the ability to hold on to land depends on a variety of issues including legal frameworks protecting such tenures as well as institutional, technological and policy frameworks that support such security [by ensuring productivity of land in a sustained manner]. Even in watershed development programmes which seek to increase the productivity of lands amongst other things, women have been marginalised stemming from the earlier deficiency in land ownership itself [Women's participation in watershed development in India: Madhu Sarin, Janet Seeley and Meenakshi Batra, IIED Gatekeeper Series, 2000].

Agricultural transformation directly affects security of tenure of land. It has been found that shifts from food crops to cash crops tend to marginalise women further. In the Green Revolution paradigm and in the intensive commercial agriculture models, high market dependency for both inputs and outputs leads to further marginalisation of women. In the case of the Nair community in Kerala, the commercialization of agriculture and the subsequent demand for land is supposed to have eroded women's traditional land rights. It is also known that where women own land, they own more marginal land and therefore, may need separate kind of investments.

Farm Labour women:

The Green Revolution paradigm has many negative implications for farm labour women. Monocultures leave their own impacts too, especially with their high space for mechanisation. This in turn leads to lesser employment potential for women. Agricultural technologies like herbicides and herbicide-tolerant GE crops also affect the employment potential for women. This is in turn the result of monocultures. Food security of the families is affected directly and indirectly.

Another issue is of technologies like pesticides and the health impacts that it causes for women. Women are known to be more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of pesticides than men. However, little or no attention is paid to the issue while pesticide use goes on unabated in the country.

The closure of common lands makes access for fodder and fuel wood and in some cases water more difficult for women, especially the landless poor women.

The 2001 Census data shows that main employment growth (that is, involvement in economic activity for more than half the year) collapsed in rural areas over the decade of the 1990s. Most of the women employed in India are engaged in agriculture, whether as workers in household farms owned or tenanted by their families, or as wage workers. Yet it is precisely livelihood in agriculture that has tended to become more volatile and insecure in recent years. In terms of wage workers, for most categories of employment in both rural and urban areas, the male-female wage differential has tended to increase over the 1990s. The exception is only for wage labour in rural public workers, where in any case women account

for less than 12 per cent of the days employed on average. ["Women in India: A status report": C. P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, September 3, 2002]

Given that the situation for women - whether as farmers in a formal land-owning sense or farmers working on their husbands' lands or farm labourers dependent on agriculture - the conditions right now are adverse and further deteriorating, a set of policies, legislations, opportunities and programmes need to be put into place. Such an outlook should be gender-sensitive recognizing the differential impact on women at all times.

Widows of farmers who have committed suicides:

Given the current spate of suicides by farmers in Andhra Pradesh particularly and across the country in general, it is important to have special redressal programmes for the widows of these farmers. Also to be addressed is the situation of women who have lost their husband due to pesticide exposure during spraying. Case by case economic rehabilitation programmes have to be evolved for all such cases, and support systems put into place.

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