

Role of Women in Agriculture and Allied Activities

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ABSTRACT

Today, women play a vital role in agricultural management and production activities in addition to their responsibilities at home. They are the backbone of the agricultural workforce. They do the most tedious and backbreaking tasks in agriculture, animal husbandry and homes. Women are involved in all aspects of agriculture and allied enterprise from land preparation to processing and marketing. Many households in rural areas are headed by a single parent, usually a mother because men migrate with their limited literacy skills to urban areas for secondary jobs leaving the illiterate women behind with the land and children leading to 'feminization' of agriculture. These women despite the fact that they are performing several farm activities, their roles have been over looked by agriculturists and policy makers. This neglect of women's 'invisible labour' contributes to the marginalization of women in the economy. In view of this the broad objective of this paper is to study the status of the rural women in the allied activities of the agricultural sector. The present paper is based on the secondary data which is obtained from the various Government Reports like Census and the Economic survey and also other published articles.

In this context removing barriers that prevent rural women from having the same access as men to education, economic opportunities and productive inputs can generate broad productivity gains which not only supports the family but also provide the much needed impetus for the overall development of the society.

Key words: Allied activities, Agriculture sector, Rural women.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Indian women in rural areas are extensively involved in agricultural activities. However the nature and extent of their involvement differs with the variations in agro production systems. The mode of female participation in

agricultural production varies with the landowning status of farm households. Their roles range from managers to landless labourers. In over all farm production, women's average contribution is estimated at 55% to 66% of the total labour with percentages, much higher in certain regions. In the Indian Himalayas a pair of bullocks works 1064 hours, a man 1212 hours and a woman 3485 hours in a year on a once hectare farm, a figures that illustrates women's significant contribution to agricultural production. Women carry the heavier work burden in food production, and because of gender discrimination get lower returns for their work. (National Commission for Women 2005)

According to Swaminathan, the famous agricultural scientist, "...some historians believe that it was women 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. Therefore, without the total intellectual and physical participation of women, it will not be possible to popularize alternative systems of land management to shifting cultivation, arrest gene and soil erosion, and promote the care of the soil and the health of economic plants and farm animals. That women play a significant and crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields including in the main crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post harvest operations, agro/social forestry, fisheries, etc. is a fact long taken for granted but also long ignored. The nature and extent of women's involvement in agriculture, no doubt, varies greatly from region to

region. Even within a region, their involvement varies widely among different ecological sub-zones, farming systems, castes, classes and stages in the family cycle. But regardless of these variations, there is hardly any activity in agricultural production, except ploughing in which women are not actively involved. In some of the farm activities like processing and storage, women predominate so strongly that men workers are numerically insignificant. Studies on women in agriculture conducted in India and other developing and under developed countries all point to the conclusion that women contribute far more to agricultural production than has generally been acknowledged. Recognition of their crucial role in agriculture should not obscure the fact that farm women continue to be concerned with their primary functions as wives, mothers and homemakers (National Commission for Women 2005).

Mainly rural women are engaged in agricultural activities which are multi-dimensional in nature. There are three types of agricultural activities depending on the socio-economic status of their family and regional factors. They are:

- a) Agriculture: Sowing, transplanting, weeding, irrigation, fertilizer application, plant protection, harvesting, winnowing, storing etc.
- b) Domestic: Cooking, child rearing, water collection, fuel wood gathering, household maintenance etc.
- c) Allied Activities: Cattle management, fodder collection, milking etc.

The broad objective of this paper is to study the status of the rural women in the allied activities of the agricultural sector. The present paper is based on the secondary data which is obtained from the various Government reports like Census and the Economic survey and also other public articles.

II. RURAL WOMEN IN ALLIED ACTIVITIES

Rural women perform numerous labour intensive jobs in agricultural field. They are directly attached with summer, rainy and winter season agriculture system. Generally Rain fed agriculture system is the dominant agricultural practices in India. Apart from agriculture, women are engaged in various allied activities in the rural areas. Women are also expected to collect wood from fields. This wood is being used as a major fuel source for cooking. Clean drinking water is another major problem in rural areas. Like collection of wood, collecting water from remote areas is also the duty of women. Because a rural

women is responsible for farm activities keeping of livestock and its other associated activities like milking, milk processing and preparation of ghee are also carried out by the women. Livestock is the primary subsistent activity used to meet household food needs as well as supplement farm incomes. The majority of farms own some livestock. 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. Therefore 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. Rural women are also responsible for collection, preparing dung cakes and activity that also brings additional income for poor families. In most of the cases rural women are involved in almost all livestock related activities. 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. Poultry farming is one of the major sources of rural economy. The role 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. As a result most of the women suffer from malnutrition and severe diseases. It may also be noted that majority of the rural women are uneducated, unskilled and tradition bounded, therefore their productive capacity are also low and counted as unskilled labour. Rural women have very hectic life. Her work starts from dawn and ends at night. The daily routine works begins from house cleaning, collection of drinking water, dish washing, laundry, preparing food for farming, care of children. She manages these activities very smartly.

From Table 1 it is clearly evident that percentage increase of female main workers has nearly doubled from 13.99 percent in 1981 to 25.5 percent in 2011. Particularly the women engaged in the household industry has registered nearly nine times increase during the same period which is maximum as compared to the percentage increase in female cultivators and agricultural labourers.

Table 1

Percentage of Female Main Workers to Total Female Population Under Broad Categories - 1981 to 2011

Census Year	Percentage to Total Female Population				
	Female Main Workers	Cultivators	Agricultural Labourers	Household Industry	Other Workers
1	2	3	4	5	6
1981	13.99	4.65	6.46	0.64	2.24
1991	15.93	5.51	7.05	0.55	2.82
2001	14.68	5.11	4.51	0.95	4.11
2011	25.5	24.0	41.1	5.7	29.2

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India

As an evidence to the significant contribution of women in the allied activities, the brief description of women's contribution to plantation and dairy industry is explained below.

III. WOMEN: THE BACKBONE OF PLANTATION.

In India, plantation sector occupies a unique position due to its agro industrial features and large number of women in employment. Women are more preferred by the plantation authority because they can be employed on low wages and are more committed. Also they can be easily convinced for the unauthorized deduction from wages, as well as delayed wages because of their subservient nature and low level of education and awareness.

The special feature of plantation is that it not only employs the men members, but also women and children above the age of 12 years and women have an important role to play. The reasons for this are:

- (a) Plantation work is only a special kind of agriculture off work, familiar to Indian women, the vast majority of them live in rural areas.
- (b) Facilities have been given to make workers to settle down on or in the vicinity of the plantation and to take their families and wives with them.
- (c) Under the old system, labour contract was based on the principle of utilizing every able bodied persons of the family and fixing the rates accordingly.
- (d) Many women had to seek employment in order to balance the family budget, although the

contract system has been abolished the wage system.

- (e) As the entire labour force is residential, the women can take up employment without causing serious disruptions to the family.

IV. WOMEN: THE FOUNDATION OF THE DAIRY INDUSTRY

Animal Husbandry is predominantly a male affair in case of high, economic status as majority of them employ, permanent male labour to look after the animals, whereas it is predominantly a female affair in case of farmers of medium and low socio-economic status. On an average, a woman devotes 3.5 hours per day for animal husbandry activities against only 1.6 hours per day devoted by men in this category. Women accounted for 93% of total employment in dairy production. Depending upon the economic status, women perform the tasks of collecting fodder, collecting and processing dung. Women undertake dung composting and carrying to the fields. Women also prepare cooking fuel by mixing dung with twigs and crop residues. Though women play a significant role in livestock management and production, women's control over livestock and its products is negligible. Men, leaving only 14% to women, assume the vast majority of the dairy cooperative membership.

In India, Animal Husbandry is a vocation for millions of small farmers and land less people, a large percentage of them raises animals on crop residues and common property resources. When in some developed countries, less than 3% of the adult population is engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, 70 percent of Indian population is dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry, of

which 30 percent are landless. Women provide 60 percent of the livestock farming labour and more than 90 percent of work related to the care of animals is rendered by women folk of the family.

V. MORE WORK LESS PAY

Generally man can easily shift from one place to another place for better job opportunities and better income facilities. They can move as a migrant labourer from their birth place to anywhere. But women cannot shift from their living place. It is therefore becoming essential for men to migrate in search of better – paid work. Women are filling this vacuum. Women are forced to accept work in agriculture in their own village under very bad conditions, because they cannot migrate as easily as men. The dependence of women’s labour on family farms, especially during the peak periods of sowing and harvesting has become very common. Farmers on the other hand also seek to prefer women as agricultural workers.

The farmer is forced to employ female labourers with the increasing costs of production required for modern agriculture. He finds that he can squeeze his labour costs by using lower – paid women workers. Similarly the work of women within family based agriculture is preferred because it is cheaper than hiring labour. Women agricultural workers although they present a big proportion of all women workers continue to receive lower wages than men. The ministry of labour puts the differences at 60 % of men wages, while the Indian labour journal showed that women received 75 % of men earnings.

Table 2 presents the time and energy devoted by the rural women for various activities. It may be noted that almost same hours are devoted for both the domestic and agricultural activities, from this; it is very clearly evident that rural women consider both the agricultural and domestic activities as equally important in their life.

Table - 2
Times and Energy Distribution by Rural Women

Activities	Duration Hours/Min	Energy Percentage Hours/Min K. Cal.	Percentage
Domestic activities	7.55	903	40.53
Agriculture and allied activities	7.00	283	39.69
Sleep	6.50	284	12.76
Rest and Recreation	2.15	155	6.97
Total	23.20	2255	100.00

Source: National Commission for Women 2005

VI. WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING IN AGRICULTURE AND ALLIED ACTIVITIES

Women’s role in agricultural operations, animal husbandry and other economically productive activities is very significant. They contribute about 60-70 percent of the labour required for these activities thus playing a pivotal role in sustaining economy. The decision making process is an important segment of every household because it makes implementation of a plan or programme quite easy.

In rural areas of the country, both husband and wife are jointly responsible for making decisions on matters like family obligations, specific housing charges and purchase of household articles. However, women’s suggestions are not given due consideration in the decisions pertaining to agricultural sector and important family matters. It is because the majorities of women are illiterate, have little time to know about the latest techniques of framing and restricted mobility due to several cultural taboos. Decisions in matters of food and clothing more or less have an equal participation rate between males and

females. But decision regarding savings and investments and purchase of household assets is taken by males i.e. 83.5 per cent and 81.3 per cent respectively. As the male members control the finance, this creates an adverse impact on women's access to household assets and other household activities (National Commission for Women 2005).

On an average, a woman spends 14 hours a day working in and outside the home. During harvesting season she spends about 16 hours a day. Moreover, women's exclusion from public life keeps them out of the decision making process related to various rural developmental activities such as the utilization of loans and subsidies under the various Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) schemes. Women also fail to get loans sanctioned for agricultural development or various schemes under Rural Employment programme (REP) women have no representation in the Agricultural Marketing Committees and other similar bodies. The governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGO) also prefer men for these purposes. Thus, the ideology of segregation and seclusion of women helps in keeping them out of the various decision making process concerning the various facts of rural development. It is for this reason that to find that women's labour is utilized for both productive as well as non-productive work, the various source of power lies in the hands of men only.

VII. WOMEN: ACCESSIBILITY TO INFORMATION

The obstacles that hindered the growth of women in agriculture sector are only few women are holding agricultural productive resources such as land, animals and machinery. Women did not participate in decision making process, either inside or outside the home. Women performed all un-mechanized agricultural tasks and performed multiple tasks, which added more burdens to them. Women workers in agriculture are either illiterate or dropouts. Women earn lesser wages, especially in joint, informal and private sector. Women are not aware of their legal rights. Women farmers are frequently ignored in the development strategies and policies. In most of the developing countries, both men and women farmers do not have access to adequate resources but women are even more constrained because of cultural, traditional and sociological factors.

Rural women do not benefit as they should from training and extension for the improvement of their skills, working conditions and productivity. Compared to urban women, rural

women suffer from relatively high illiteracy rate and workload of domestic and agricultural tasks that limit their participation in training sessions and extension. Extension staff is still predominantly male, which generally limits communication, for cultural reasons: the number of females graduated in agriculture degree is still small and few of them hold decision making positions. Female extension agents generally work in offices and often deal with traditional home economics matter. Rural women's access to credit for investment in agriculture and allied activities is still limited. Schemes adapted to the local context including agricultural banks, co-operatives and social funds for development are still being experimented. There is no specific extension programme on agriculture targeting women. The new technologies are mainly used by men in medium and large units, while women use traditional practices. The new technologies focus on the large scale units while it was demonstrated that women who work in small scale units, participate for more than 50 per cent to the food production in the world. The existing environmental associations, the number of NGOs dealing with gender in agriculture in particular is weak.

It may not be out of place to mention here that considering their dual responsibilities within and outside the home, it would be in the fitness of things that more and more in the village training is organized for rural farm women to suit their convenience with due realization that institutional training is important in its own place.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Women's unpaid work on family farms is not reflected in national accounts. As a consequence, this non-economic or unpaid work goes unnoticed and is not reflected in the design of agricultural policies. This neglect of women's 'invisible labour' contributes to the marginalization of women in the economy. However, women's work is often integral to the functioning of smallholder farms by carrying out sustenance activities and participating in post-harvesting. Furthermore, in many countries women are also the main providers of food for their household. A major reason for the failure of developmental planning lies in treating women as "end products" rather than "agents of changes". A substantial part of this mystification has occurred because rural women are treated as "farmers' wives" and not as "farm women"

Most of the world's farm and plantation workers are women. They have been the most

affected by the restructuring of agriculture and agricultural trade as well as the intensive use of toxic chemicals. They suffer from chemical induced illnesses and greater deprivation within families. Women agricultural workers face greater health problems due to the increased use of chemicals to boost farm production and the greater intensity of work on the farm and at home to bolster dwindling incomes. The occupational health and safety of farmwomen is the most neglected area in agriculture and animal husbandry. The technological empowerment of farmwomen with occupational safety and better work output is the need of the day. In this context removing barriers that prevent rural women from having the same access as men to education, economic opportunities and productive inputs can generate broad productivity gains which not only supports the family but also provide the much needed impetus for the overall development of the society.

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