

Empowering Women in Agriculture

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Major attributes that contribute to women empowerment are education, social equity and status, improved health, economic or financial stability and political participation

INDIA WAS fortunate to host the *Global Conference on Women in Agriculture* in New Delhi between March 13 and 15, 2012. The conference with the goal of “*Empowering Women for Inclusive Growth in Agriculture*” was sponsored by Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and New-Delhi based Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Science (TAAS) jointly with the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), and the Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APPAARI), among others. Her Excellency Smt. Pratibha Patil, President of India in her valedictory address emphasized the need to empower women with new knowledge and skills to bring women into the mainstream of agricultural development and reduce gender disparity. Today,

much of the scientific knowledge and technologies does not reach rural women for various reasons. This needs rectification. Research system must also seek the inputs of women as they have historically been the source of much traditional knowledge and innovations. While appreciating the efforts of the National Agricultural Research System for bringing women in the fore front of agricultural research and development, she suggested forming Mahila Kisan Mandals in every village to educate women on different aspects of agriculture and related activities. This paper briefly reviews the concern for women in agriculture at global level and in India, initiatives taken by the Government of India to enhance the understanding and working of women in agriculture and suggests the need to empower women in agriculture in real sense of the broad-based definition of empowerment.

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According to Food and Agriculture Organization (2011), women farmers account for more than quarter of the world's population. Women comprise, on an average 43 percent of the agricultural work force in developing countries, ranging from 20 percent in Latin America to 50 percent in Eastern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet women have less access than men to agricultural related assets, inputs and services. If they have easy, timely and reliable access to productive resources as men, women can increase yield by 20 percent to 30 percent, raising the overall agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 percent to 4 percent. This gain in production can reduce the number of hungry people in the world by about 12 percent to 17 percent, besides increasing women's income.

There is now growing realization and commitment of the global community to achieve more sustainable and broad-based agricultural growth by addressing gender related issues in agriculture through national, regional and global initiatives and partnerships. There is also greater degree of coordination, consultation and convergence of initiatives undertaken by international institutions, viz. FAO, Global Forum on Agricultural Research, Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, regional forums and many National Agricultural Research Systems.

Improving the role of women in agriculture has been at the forefront of a Washington based International Food Policy Research Institute's research for the past 15 years.

IFPRI has committed to working on gender issues and its recent gender work includes the book 'Engineering Agricultural Research, Development and Extension' and the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). WEAI, a new tool developed by IFPRI, the US Government's Feed the Future Initiative, the USAID and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative measures the empowerment, agency and inclusion of women in the agricultural sector. The WEAI is a composite measurement tool that allows researchers to identify women who are disempowered and understand how to increase autonomy and decision-making in key domains.

Indian scenario

As farmers, agricultural workers and entrepreneurs, women constitute the backbone of India's agricultural and rural economy. Yet, together with children they remain one of the most vulnerable groups. Women shoulder the entire burden of looking after livestock, bringing up children and doing other household chores. The extent of health hazards faced by farm women in farm activities include (i) 50 percent in transplanting and 26.5 percent in harvesting under farm activities (ii) 50 percent threshing, 33 percent drying and 67 percent parboiling under post-harvest activities and (iii) 47 percent shed cleaning, 23 percent fodder collection and 27.5 percent milking under livestock management.

Their hard work has not only been unpaid but also remained mostly unrecognized. They perform on a daily basis the most tedious and

back-breaking tasks in agriculture, animal husbandry and homes. They are invariably paid lower wages than men for the same agricultural work. Land ownership titles are most often in a man's name. Men often either take or dictate the decisions concerning farming and women have to compulsorily carry out. Farm produce is marketed commonly by men and that gives them complete control over household finance. More and more women are taking to farming as men are migrating to urban areas for work. But they are not getting access to credit as they do not have pattas. Only 11 percent women have access to land holdings, that too, mostly as small and marginal farmers.

With grossly inadequate access to education and technology, a host of other socio-economic factors have an adverse impact on the lives of women farmers in recent years. Despite their eagerness they have often not been able to take advantage of opportunities from new technologies, innovations and markets. The constraints and opportunities that women face in agriculture vary across the agro-ecological and geographical regions of the country depending upon, among others, the socio-economic-cultural context. Despite many policy reforms and interventions at the macro level gender issues have not received the priority attention they deserve.

India's Initiatives

Recognizing that enlightenment of women will change the face of rural India India's initiatives to empower women include the following.

It has reserved one-third of the seats in village panchayats for women.

Acknowledging the role of women in agriculture India has been the first country in the world to set up a National Research Centre for Women in Agriculture (NRCWA) in Bhubaneswar way back in 1996.

The NRCWA, Bhubneswar has been engaged in developing methodologies for identification of gender implications in farming systems approach and developing women specific technologies under different production systems. Most important research projects in the area of gender study on agriculture and house economy, among others, include (i) development of extension methods for farm women in Easter India, (ii) standardization of women specific field practices (iii) occupational hazards of farm women (iv) improvement of storage practices of seeds and grains (v) reducing drudgery of women in agricultural operations through use of improved tools and techniques (vi) management of coastal agro-eco system affected by super cyclone (vii) involving women in aquaculture to ensure nutritional and economic security (viii) mobilizing Self-Help-Groups to pursue income generating activities in agriculture and animal husbandry and access to marketing outlets, enhance knowledge on various aspects of family life with emphasis on increasing decision-making capabilities, improving skills.

Strategies used for empowerment of women include development of technology kits and media mix for dissemination of knowledge; development of

software; organizing stimulation programmes; conducting outreach programmes through media of mass communication; adoption of one village by each AICRP centre and using Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques for sustainable, self-reliant and people centred development that is socially just, economically viable, efficient and ecologically sound for empowering rural women.

Empowerment process is strengthened through educational interventions, transfer of technologies, feasibility trials and knowledge sharing.

The NRCWA, other ICAR institutes and KVKs have concentrated their researches, *inter alia*, to relieve women of the drudgery by providing time and labor saving tools. Besides, vocational trainings are being conducted to impart skills necessary to undertake different avocations.

KVKs have trained more than 200,000 farm women, girls and women extension workers.

The strategies used by AICRP on Home Science have encouraged women to play key role in micro level planning, designing community infrastructure for information dissemination and mobilization of community resources (human and material) to gain benefits from the projects.

Empirical evidence suggests that women have moved from beneficiaries to active partners in shaping empowerment.

Recognizing the role of women in agriculture Dr Swaminathan has proposed to move the *Women Farmers' Entitlement Bill, 2011* in

the Rajya Sabha that seeks, *inter alia*, access to water, credit and inputs, pattas for women farmers as a policy reform to create enabling environment.

India seized an opportunity to host Global Conference on Women in Agriculture which has called for a radical reorientation of the agricultural research agenda to overcome the existing gaps and to face the emerging challenges of sustainable development and livelihood of resource poor small holder farmers, especially the women farmers. The conference aimed at developing a Framework for Action to integrate and empower women for inclusive growth and development through an enduring global partnership programme on gender in agriculture.

Measures

In order to effectively empower women in agriculture following enabling measures need to be initiated.

Assertive interventions by various departments and Governments are required to ensure that more and more women get access to land holdings. A '*Gender in Agriculture Platform for Gender in Agriculture Partnership (GAP4GAP)*' as recommended by the conference is required to be set up with hubs in different countries and regions of the country to work in this direction. ICAR has a key role to address gender concerns through such platform.

To implement Action Points for full empowerment of women in agriculture that emerged out of conference deliberations, viz. enhanced visibility for role of

women, generation of knowledge and evidence for support and contextualization of global issues to suit local needs. More policy support and institutional mechanisms are required to achieve desired results. Collective action for empowerment of women is required so that they come together on a single platform to march further.

About 36 percent girl students are studying in various courses of State Agricultural Universities. They need to be appropriately trained, their capacity built up and motivated to act as facilitator to empower women in agriculture.

Focused attention should be given to five-point programme as recommended by Dr. Swaminathan, that can make farming intellectually stimulating and economically remunerative for women as well as rural youths, includes (i) land, water and gene care (ii) technology and inputs (iii) credit and insurance (iv) post-harvest management and (v) remunerative marketing opportunities. All these can make farming intellectually stimulating and economically remunerative.

The concepts, innovations and technologies being generated at NRCWA and other ICAR institutes need to be forthwith disseminated widely for the benefit of rural women. Regrettably this is moving at a slow pace.

New programmes should be planned with adequate resources for mobilizing women, forming groups, improving capacity and capability in technical, organizational and commercial (business micro-enterprises) sector and support

systems (credit, inputs, markets). These should be prepared jointly in consultation with women, other organizations (public, private and voluntary) that can potentially complement and supplement the efforts of the State Department of Agriculture.

Banks in India have as on March 31, 2010 have assisted exclusively 38,97,797 women SHGs under their SHG-Bank Linkage programme and 25,13,152 women SHGs under the Government sponsored programme, viz. Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana. Most women of these SHGs have been agricultural workers, small and marginal farmers, with substantial working experience in agriculture and animal husbandry. Efforts should be focussed on training them and empowering them as women in agriculture.

Women Empowerment

While it is heartening to note that NRCWA, KVKS and ICAR Institutes have undertaken several researches and facilitated women in agriculture, there is simultaneous need to *empower them in real sense of women empowerment* as is being briefly discussed here.

Empowerment in the literature refers to the act of bestowing power and authority on some one. Thus, women empowerment refers to the conferring of leverage to women who are otherwise deprived. This includes granting to women effectual decision-making power/authority and the power to influence others decisions along with economic, social and civil freedom. Empowerment, by its very definition, implies an increase in the ability to exercise power. In India,

as in most developing countries, women are believed to be and treated as inferior to men. Moreover, as the lives of women and men are embedded in a matrix of unequal gender relations, a decrease in the gender inequality is necessary for an outcome of 'empowerment' for women. In other words, changes such as increased income, skills and self-confidence, may be better understood as enablers that promote women's empowerment. However, the women, in order to be significantly empowered to achieve their perceived goal, firstly need authority at home, which in most cases they do not have. The process should, therefore, be carried out concurrently at home and outside. Within the family they must have equal say as men and so should be the case at work. The most extensive element of women empowerment is providing them with social rank, status and justice. Major attributes that contribute to women empowerment are education, social equity and status, improved health, economic or financial stability and political participation. In India, a whopping 56 percent of the women are illiterate as against a considerably 24 percent in case of men, evincing the striking inequality. This has to be significantly enhanced in a five year time-frame. Educating the girl child is now an integral part of the Right to Education Act in force which should, therefore, significantly enhance the women literacy level at par with men in a five year time-frame. This apart adult literacy programmes should be initiated in villages to contribute to the education in female literacy. □