



Role of Women in Agriculture Sector of India

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Abstract

India is a developing and predominately agrarian economy. 70% of its population is rural, of those households, 60% engage in agriculture as their main source of income. Agriculture is an engine of growth and poverty reduction in developing countries where it is the main occupation of poor. Many women, in developing countries, are major producers of food. Nearly 63% of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78% of women. It is observed that women play a significant role in agricultural development and allied activities including main crop production, live-stock production, horticulture, post-harvesting operations etc. About 70% of farm work is performed by women. Women farmers do not have equal access to productive resources and this significantly limits their potential in enhancing productivity. The present paper shows that the role of women in agriculture is extremely significant.

Keywords: women; agriculture; employment.

Introduction

The advent of settled life happened with the beginning of agriculture when people started cultivating food for their livelihood.

Agriculture is the vertical backbone of the country. Major part of the country's population earns its livelihood from agriculture. Our country has a wide and very old setting of agriculture of about 10 thousand years. At present in terms of agriculture production the country holds second position across the world. The agricultural production in India encompasses field crops, fruit crop, plantation crop, livestock, forestry, fishery etc. So overall it is a huge industry which recruits or engages 52 % of overall manpower of India. The rural population of our country is mostly dependent on agricultural activity. Despite of the fact that there has been steady slump in the contribution of agriculture in country's GDP, Indian agriculture continues to remain the leading industry in the country contributing vastly in the socioeconomic growth of India. States like Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar and West Bengal are the leading states in terms of agricultural contribution of the country followed by the rest. Thus agriculture in India is the key industry and in recent times with implementation and initiatives of various government policies, NGO's and private agencies immense growth is recorded in this industry. The scenario of agriculture has completely changed with change in time but from centuries one thing that didn't change is the visualization of women as key labour in this industry. Agriculture sector as a whole has developed and emerged immensely with the infusion of science and technology. But this latest emergence is not capable of plummeting the ignorance of women labour as an integral part of this industry. In developing countries like India, agriculture continues to absorb and employ 2/3rd of the female work force but fails to give them recognition of employed labour. The female labour force in developing nations still faces the oppressive status of being majorly responsible for family and household maintenance. In addition to that their contribution of being an agriculture labour is suppressed under the status of family labour who work in farm in addition to her regular household chores. These problems of the rural women are further accentuated by the tribulations of illiteracy, underdevelopment, unemployment and poverty. Despite of the major productive women labour force in agriculture their needs and problems are somewhat ignored by the rural development initiatives. The multitasking potentiality of female labour bought significant propositions for agricultural productivity, rural production, economic vitality, household food security, family health, family economic security and welfare. Many of the systematic studies identify the trends of working female labour in agriculture. Empirical studies were conducted and explained on gender roles and gender analysis.

This piece of research will further highlight the trend of female participation in agriculture across various Indian states. Efforts were put to collate and categorize the states of identical behaviour in Indian agriculture by hierarchical clustering of economically active female in agriculture.

Literature Review

Singh and Vinay (2012) briefed in their working paper about the significance of female labour in agriculture and allied activities. They further stated that the role of women in agriculture as female labour is not highlighted in India. Despite of their presence in activities sowing, transplanting and post-harvest operations they are considered as an invisible workers.

Damisa et.al (2007) highlighted in their study that despite of various social, economic and various other constraints women have high level participation in agriculture and they are very committed in their agricultural activity. Overall the level of involvement of women in farm decision making was found very medium. The extent of involvement and decision making in activities like intercultural operations is 48 percent in harvesting of crops 45.33 percent, storage of farm produce is 42.67 percent; 42.00 percent in sale of farm produce and in subsidiary occupation like animal husbandry and dairy business is 38.67 percent and financial management is 36 percent only (Unati et.al, 2011).

Bala (2010) cited in his working paper regarding engagement and participation of women workers in almost all activities of agriculture but there is discrimination in wages even if they do same type of work as male labour. Further despite of their extensive and active involvement in agriculture of India, they are not considered for decision making in farm activities. Women participation in agriculture will be acknowledged when women farmer will actively participate to build and improve their knowledge and gain access to new and necessary information to make use of most of them in their farming activities. By linking the knowledge and information flow amongst women socio economic progress can be achieved (Dhaka et. al, 2012).

Farid et.al (2009) discussed the major role of women in farming & non farming activities especially in post ha harvest operations, homestead gardening, livestock and poultry rearing, selling labour etc.

The primary need of women working or seeking employment in various agricultural and non –agricultural activities is to meet the family needs and to enhance the family income.

Women' Contribution in Agriculture and Allied Activities

Swaminathan, the famous agricultural scientist, describes that it was women who first domesticated crop plant 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 begun cultivating those of interest from the point of view of food, feed, fodder, fiber 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.

Women in India are major producers of food in terms of value, volume and number of hours worked. In rural India, the percentage of women who depend on agriculture is as high as 70%. In 2009, 94% of the female labour worked in cereal production, while 1.4% worked in vegetable production and 3.72% were engaged in fruits and spice crops. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Indian women represented a share of 21% and 24% of all fishers and fish farmers respectively. Rural women play a vital and crucial role not only in agricultural production i.e. crop production but also allied activities such as horticulture, livestock post-harvest operation, tending animals, agro-forestry, fisheries etc.

Most of the work that women do, such as collecting fuel, fodder and water, growing vegetables and keeping poultry for domestic consumption go unrecorded in the census country. Many women who work on family land are not recorded as workers. Rural women engaged in agriculture form 78 per cent of all women in regular work. They are a third of all workers on the land. The traditional gender division of labour ensures that these women get on average 30 per cent lower wages than men. A recent study conducted by Women and Population Division of FAO revealed that in developing countries women provide 70 percent of agricultural labour, 60-80 percent labour for household food production, 100 percent labour for processing the basic food stuffs, 80 per cent for food storage and 90 per cent for water and fuel wood collection for households. Women produce between 60 to 80 percent of the food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production, therefore, women's role in food production ensures the survival of millions of people in all regions. Women's livelihood strategies, and their support and means of ensuring food security are diverged and complex, from cultivating field crops to livestock rearing, home gardening, gathering etc. They make above contributions despite unequal access to land, inputs and information.

Rural women farmers perform numerous labour intensive jobs such as weeding, grass cutting, picking, cotton stick collections, separation of seeds from fiber. Women are also expected to collect wood from fields. This

wood is being used as a major fuel source for cooking. Because of the increasing population pressure, over grazing and desertification, women face difficulties in searching of fire wood. Clean drinking water is another major problem in rural areas. Like collection of wood, fetching water from remote areas is also the duty of women because a rural woman is responsible for farm activities, keeping of livestock and its other associated activities like milking and preparation of ghee are also carried out by the women.

Within pastoralist and mixed farming systems, livestock play an important role in supporting women and in improving their financial situation and women are heavily engaged in this sector. An estimated two-thirds of poor livestock keepers are women. They share responsibility with men for the care of animals, and particular species and types of activity are more associated with women than men. For example, women often have a prominent role in managing poultry and dairy animals and in caring for other animals that are housed and fed within the home. When tasks are divided, men are more likely to be involved in constructing housing and herding of grazing animals, and in marketing of products if women's mobility is constrained. The influence of women is strong in the use of eggs, milk and poultry meat for home consumption and the income from these products. In some countries small-scale pig production is also dominated by women. Female-headed households are as successful as male-headed households in generating income from their animals, although they tend to own smaller numbers of animals, probably because of labour constraints. Ownership of livestock is particularly attractive to women in societies where access to land is restricted to men

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. 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. She has very hectic life. She rises before dawn and ends at dusk and walks miles to collect water, if there is to be found. They are also responsible for collection, preparing dunk cakes, an activity that also brings additional income to their families. She works all day in a field, sometimes with a baby on her back. If she is lucky, droughts, blight or pests don't destroy her crops and she raises enough to feed her family and may be has left over to sell. But in some rural areas, there is no road to the nearest market. In spite of this, her work is considered as 'unproductive'. Moreover, her work is not counted in many economies "as economically active employment." Even though rural women supply half of the Pakistan's food production, yet her own food security is always at risk.

During the harvesting season, utilization of women labour is maximum, carrying bundle of harvested crop to the stop where threshing would be done is a heavy task which is performed mostly by women. Each bundle is carried as a head load by women, mostly bare footed, walking over the sharp shrubs of the harvested fields. Men rarely participated in this task. It was observed that majority of women is self-employed and work in dangerous environments.

Main Challenges Faced By Female Farmers in Agriculture Sector

1. Women have unequal land rights. They hardly enjoy land ownership rights directly in their names. Limited rights or access to arable land further limits livelihood options and exacerbates financial strain on women, especially in women- headed households.
2. Women have limited access to use of productive resources.
3. Women perform all un-mechanized agricultural tasks and perform multiple tasks which add more burden to them due to lack of equipment and appropriate technology.
4. Women have little control over decision making process, either inside home or outside home. Without access to capital or household decision making abilities women lack the resources that are for their labour stability and stability of their household.
5. Few women holding of agricultural productive resources such as land, animals and machinery.
6. Poor women farmers are less able to purchase technology to adapt to climate change due to lack of access to credit and agricultural services. They often have low productivity due to an inability to invest in things such as improved seeds and soil replenishment.
7. Women farmers in agricultural sector suffer from high illiteracy rate among them. They do not know their legal rights.
8. Women earn less wages, especially in joint, informal and private sector.
9. Miss applying some laws and regulations in favour of women such heritage legislation.
10. Lack of market intelligence and inadequate information put women farmers under unfavourable situation with weak bargaining power with the buyers.

Suggestions

These are the following suggestions for the recognition of women contribution in agriculture:

1. Recognition of labour work of working women in the rural economy may be accounted in monetary terms.
2. More facilities should be provided to poor rural women for land, agricultural and livestock extension services.
3. Priority must be given to women in accessing credit on soft terms from banks and other financial institutions for setting up their business, for buying properties, and for house building.
4. Ensures should be taken to enhance women's literacy rates. A separate education policy for women may serve the purpose.
5. Women must be involved in decision-making bodies that have the potential to introduce structural changes. This action will bring some changes in the gender relations in the society.
6. Minimum and equal wages should be fixed by state government for women agricultural labours and the rates should be reviewed periodically.
7. Women must be aware regarding their existing rights, access to judicial relief and redress, removing discrimination through legal reforms, and providing legal aid, assistance and counselling.
8. Conscious efforts are needed for training of female agricultural workers in the rural areas in alternative skills.
9. There is a need to make available cheap credit to needy agricultural women to start self-employment and as a result of that our rural women may get additional opportunity for gainful employment.
10. Addition to above, some alternatives employment programmes and opportunities should be provided to agricultural women labour in rural areas.

Conclusion

Rural women are the major contributors in agriculture and its allied fields. Her work ranges from crop production, livestock production to cottage industry. From household and family maintenance activities, to transporting water, fuel and fodder. Despite such a huge involvement, her role and dignity has yet not been recognized. Women's status is low by all social, economic, and political indicators. Women's wage work is considered a threat to the male ego and women's engagement in multiple home-based economic activities leads to under remuneration for their work. Women spend long hours fetching water, doing laundry, preparing food, and carrying out agricultural duties. The nature and sphere of women's productivity in the labour market is largely determined by sociocultural and economic factors. Women do not enter the labour market on equal terms when compared to men. Their occupational choices are also limited due to social and cultural constraints and lack of supportive facilities such as transport, and accommodation in the formal sector of the labour market.

Women's labour power is considered inferior because of employers' predetermined notion of women's primary role as homemakers. As a result of discrimination against female labour, women are concentrated in the secondary sector of labour market. Their work is low paid, low status, casual, and lacks potential upward mobility. The majority of women in the urban sector work in low paying jobs. Finally it is concluded that agriculture is central to economic growth where women can learn the best way to grow and cultivate their own nutritious food and sell at markets. So closing the gender gap in agriculture is imperative if we want to grow productivity and ensures food security.

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