

Role of women in Rural Development

Encountering the real ground problems

ABSTRACT

- ✧ Indian population is 48.1% women and 51.9% men.
- ✧ Female illiteracy is 62% whereas the male illiteracy rate is 34%.
- ✧ The labour force participation rate of women is 22.7%, less than half of the men's rate of 51.6%.
- ✧ In rural India, agriculture and allied industrial sectors employ as much as 89.5% of the total female labour.
- ✧ Women have extensive work loads with dual responsibility for farm and household production.
- ✧ Women's work is getting harder and more time-consuming due to ecological degradation and changing agricultural technologies and practices.
- ✧ Women have an active role and extensive involvement in livestock production, forest resource use and fishery processing.
- ✧ Women contribute considerably to household income through farm and nonfarm activities as well as through work as landless agricultural labourers.
- ✧ Women's work as family labour is underestimated.
- ✧ There are high degrees of inter-state and intra-state variations in gender roles in agriculture, environment and rural production

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1. INTRODUCTION

Problems for Indian women begin at birth. Even today boys are considered more desirable than girls in some families, because they offer parents security in old age as the parents traditionally live with the oldest son. Girls are often seen as a burden because of the dowry that must be supplied at their wedding and when married they leave the family. Newspapers and TV reports frequently report stories of female babies being killed, or women committing suicide because they have not produced a son.

The low standard of living of many in the developing world results from the dualistic nature of their societies.

That is, the gap between those who have access to goods and services in a community, and those who do not have access to goods and services.

In some states, Women have had greater access to the means to economic development than women in other states. You gain access to economic resources through changes in society that allow women to participate in development.

In Kerala, in southern India, development programs have focussed on a broad-based approach for many years. Development programs have addressed the issue of equity from the outset. The available development resources in Kerala were placed where they could be most of use to the

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majority of the population, who live in rural areas. In Kerala, gender equity has also been well addressed. Many development programs in Kerala are focused on women like women's health issues, contraception, women's education and on improving the position of women and girls in their contemporary culture. Hence, to make rural development successful role of women has to be addressed at the Micro level. Womens are contributing immensely for the development of our country especially in rural areas.

2. GENERAL PROFILE

● Population

India's estimated population in mid-1996 was 954 million. Rural population accounted for 71% (1991 census). India is a country of extreme diversities in language, religion, caste and socio-economic class. Hindus account for 83% of the population and Muslims 11%. There are also other religions - Christians, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jains and Jews. The population growth rate is a little under 2%. Population density is 273 per sq. km. The total fertility rate in 1992 was 4%. Women constitute 48.1% of the population. In 1992/93 only 9.2% of the households were female-headed.

The sex ratio in India is 93 women to 100 men. This situation of a strongly male-biased sex ratio is attributable to infanticide or neglect of girl children. This ratio is 9.4 in rural areas compared to 8.9 in urban areas. The excess of men in urban population is really attributable to higher male migration to urban areas.

● Education

The adult illiteracy rate in India was 48% in 1995. Women had 62% illiteracy, whereas men had 34%. Both male and female literacy rates are substantially lower in rural areas than in urban areas. This rural-urban difference is more pronounced in the case of women. Among the rural female population in the age group of 7 years and over, the literacy rate is 30.4%, whereas it is 63.9% among the urban female population. Moreover, the difference between male and female literacy rates is much higher in rural areas compared to urban areas. Both gender and residential different-ials in the literacy rate vary considerably across the states.

● Labour

The Indian work force participation rate is 37.7% (1991 census). The rate for women is 22.7%, which is less than half the rate of 51.6% for men. The pattern of women's participation in the labour force varies across the country depending upon geographic region, caste, socio-economic class and formal and informal sectors. The rural female participation rate is 27.2%, nearly thrice as much as the urban female participation rate of 9.7%. The percentage of labourers employed as main workers is higher among men than among women. In the case of marginal workers, this proportion is larger among women than among men. The majority of the main workers (66.8%) are employed in agricultural and allied industrial sectors. The proportion of women employed in this sector is 80.7%, compared to 62.7% for men. In rural areas 89.5% of the total female employed are engaged in the

agricultural and allied industrial sector. In urban areas manufacturing, processing, servicing and repair, when it is in the household, absorbs larger proportions of the total female employment compared to men. The reverse is true when it is other than household work. Industries which employ more women than men are bidi and match manufacturing, cotton textiles, cotton spinning, cashewnut processing, tobacco stemming and redrying, canning, preserving and fish processing.

The Human Development Index (HDI) rank of India in 1997 was 118th out of 146 countries, indicating low life expectancy at birth, low educational attainment and low income. This demonstrates difficult developmental challenges confronting India in human resource development. The Gender-Related Index (GDI) rank of India in the same year was 118th out of 146 countries. This illustrates the human development gap was further aggravated by substantial gender disparities.

● **Agriculture**

Rural Indian women 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 land-owning status of farm households. Their roles range from managers to landless labourers. In overall 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 one-hectare farm, a figure which illustrates women's significant contribution to agricultural production.

Women provide one half of the labour in rice cultivation in India. In the plantation sector women are the crucial labourers. Depending on the region and crops, women's contributions vary but they provide pivotal labour from planting to harvesting and post-harvest operations. Traditionally, women had usufruct rights to the community land. But after the land reforms, land titles were given to men, denying women's access to land. In general, women in tribal households enjoy more decision-making power than women in many other Indian households because of their greater contribution to household income.

● **Crop production**

India has a variety of crops grown in irrigated and rainfed areas. Rice, wheat, jowar, maize and bajra are the major foodgrains. Oilseed, sugarcane, cotton and jute are the important cash crops. Likewise, tea and coffee are important plantation crops. India's agricultural production systems also include a wide range of horticultural crops.

Rice is widely grown in Southern, Eastern and Northeastern states. Wheat is mainly grown in Punjab and Haryana. Jowar and Bajra are important foodgrains in dryland areas. Assam and West Bengal are famous for tea, whereas Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are coffee and coconut producing states.

In the highly diversified Indian context, no simple gender division of labour exists with regard to crop production. In certain areas in India, women play a key role as seed selectors and in seedling production. Their knowledge on seeds and seed storage contribute to the viability of the agricultural diversity and production. As weeders, women contribute to crop management. Women prepare and apply green and farmyard manure. As integrated pest management practices are introduced, it could be expected that women's work will increase due to more labour-intensive activities.

- **Livestock**

In India, livestock plays a multifaceted role in providing draught power for the farm, manure for crops, energy for cooking and food for household consumption as well as the market. In animal husbandry, women have a multiple role. With regional difference, women take care of animal production. Their activities vary widely ranging from care of animals, grazing, and fodder collection, cleaning of animal sheds to processing milk and livestock products. In livestock management, indoor jobs like milking, feeding, cleaning, etc. are done by women in 90% of families while management of male animals and fodder production are effected by men.

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. Dung composting and carrying to the fields is undertaken by women. 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. The vast majority of the dairy cooperative membership is assumed by men, leaving only 14% to women.

- **Forestry**

The Indian population, particularly the rural, is highly dependent upon forests. Fuelwood contributes 84% of the total household energy consumption. In India about 16% of the total geographical area is covered by woodland and forests.

Gender roles in using forest resources vary widely depending upon the region as well as socioeconomic class and tribal affiliation. Rural Indian women's interface with the forests is varying - gathering, wage employment, production in farm forestry and management of afforested areas in the community plantation. In India, women are the major gatherers and users of a much more diverse range of forest products than men. Depending upon the sociocultural variations among different communities, primarily Non-timber Forest Products (NTFP) are collected by women and timber by men. In several parts of India, large proportions of the population depend on NTFP as their main source of livelihood. Apart from fodder and fuel, women collect food, medicinal plants, building materials, material for household items and farm implements. Sal and Tendu leaves are primarily collected by women. Because, women are the ones who have traditionally

been collecting forest products. They possess the knowledge of properties and potential uses of these products.

- **Fisheries**

India is among the top ten fish producing countries in the world contributing about 3% to the world marine fish catch. About 5 million people in the coastal areas carry out fishing and allied activities for their livelihood.

In India, nature and extent of women's participation in fishery varies across the states. Fish drying/curing, marketing, and handbraiding and net-mending are the main areas of women's involvement in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Women are also involved in shrimp processing in these states. In addition, in Andhra Pradesh, women are engaged in mollusc and shell collection on a seasonal basis in a few places along the coastline. However, marine fish capture is a men's domain. Among the mangroves of Bhitarkanika on the Orissa coast, both women and men fish in the fresh water estuarine areas. Men cast nets while women and children catch fish with hands. But fishing by boat in the flood tides is exclusively performed by men. In contrast, women's participation in small-scale fisheries is very limited in West Bengal. Even ancillary industry, which in the other Indian east coast states is a women's domain, is dominated by men, as a relatively low number of days in a year is spent on actual fishing. In the fishing villages, fish drying/curing is performed by both women and men who do not belong to the fishing community. In coastal aquaculture, women are involved in

prawn and seed collection to a very limited extent.

- **Environment**

Sharp decline in common/real estate property land on one hand and the deterioration of the remaining land have jointly contributed to hardship for the rural community, particularly for women of the poor households. Deforestation has increased time and distance involved in grazing and collection of fuel and food. Distance to forests or other sources of fuel, type of farming system, etc. have explained increases ranging from 45 minutes to 5 hours in women's work time. Moreover, it has also threatened income generating opportunities for women by affecting livestock rearing and collection of NTFP. Reduced or non-availability of NTFP has shifted women from self-employment to wage employment. In areas where traditionally men also collected fuelwood, deforestation resulted in decrease in men's participation, as it was no longer possible to collect fuelwood in bulk.

Women play a key role in both land use and management. They supply inputs from the forests as fertilizer to the soil as well as fodder for the cattle, which produce fertilizer for the soil. In India there are women-headed movements for forest protection such as Chipko and Appiko. Women have also been the source of knowledge relating to conserving and maintaining the quality of water. Depleting water resources have also impacted women severely in terms of longer walk and more work, as they are principal collectors of water. Nonetheless women in different states have varying

degree of involvement in water collection. In Mizoram in the north-eastern hills women have the knowledge of animal ecology that male hunters acquire. In the island ecosystem of Lakshadweep, off the coast of Kerala in the Arabian Sea, women are more conversant with the resources around their homes and along the reef and shore, while men who go further afield to fish and collect coconuts are more knowledgeable about land, lagoon and sea.

- **Rural production**

Women in rural India generate income in various ways. Women are highly involved in processing of the NTFP, particularly in small-scale enterprises. This includes basket, broom, rope making, tasar silk cocoon rearing, lac cultivation, oil extraction, and bamboo works, etc. Women constitute 51% of the total employed in forest-based small-scale enterprises. However, this does not mean that men do not have any role in these activities. Among the scheduled-caste weavers in Orissa, men collect grass for basket making while women cure it and make the basket. In the Jeypore Tract (Orissa), men and women are equally involved in collection, processing and marketing of forest products such as grass, bamboo and resin. But among some tribals in Arunachal Pradesh, all the tasks related to basket-making are considered men's work.

- **Food security**

In India, food security as a national objective was placed on the policy agenda much earlier than in other developed and developing countries. With the Green Revolution technology,

India has achieved self-sufficiency in foodgrains. However, India had a share of 40% of all those people in the world that were regarded by the World Bank as being below the poverty line in 1990. Data for 1993/94 suggest 19% of the total population is below the poverty line. In India, rural poverty was 39% whereas urban poverty was 30% in 1994. Approximately 35% of the households below the poverty line are headed by women. Women have a share of only 25.7% in earned income. The proportion of pregnant women (age 15-49 aged) with anemia is as high as 88%.

Women's key role in the production of major grains and minor millets illustrates their invaluable contribution to the food security. In addition, women play a crucial role in ensuring supply of food as food vendors and post-harvest processors of livestock and fishery products. As major buyers of family food and meal-makers, women ensure adequate food security. As primary providers of nutrition to the young children, women are the major decision-makers in ensuring nutrition to the next generation.

3. FOCUS

Given the diversity of the agro-ecological system and the resulting wide varieties of farming systems, it is important that state level efforts in gender planning are supported by gender/sex segregated data pertinent to local situation. The current efforts on creating agricultural data and gender information in farming systems across the country should be co-ordinated and the available information should feed into the planning process.

Planning at the local Panchayat level should be gender-sensitive and should have gender/sex-segregated information to support for local development efforts. Agricultural education institutions and training centers should develop regular curricula to integrate a gender approach in all technical areas of agricultural sector. Existing policies related to targeting women and gender-equity should be widely communicated to all involved development work including women clientele.

Review of the land right policies and implementation of land distribution for gender equity and women's land rights. Farmer's right initiatives should explicitly address concerns of women farmers

4. PRACTICAL APPROACH

To make the role of the women more helpful in the development of the nation's economy, the following points must be considered:

- a) Develop programmes to train Panchayat leaders in gender-integrative participatory approaches and local planning.
- b) Develop programmes for rural women to build leadership skills for managing agriculture community-based development activities.
- c) Develop economic and political literacy programmes for rural women to utilize development inputs effectively.
- d) Support agriculture extension in-service training programmes and other relevant agricultural curricular activities to support gender-sensitive extension agents.

- e) Put in place appropriate institutional mechanisms for information exchange and cooperation between the agencies that focus on women's affair and agriculture-related technical activities.
- f) Support women-managed rural production and marketing ventures in horticulture, floriculture and post-harvest processing in commodities.
- g) Provide technology training and input support to women to take advantage of emerging high-value agribusiness sector including bio-technology and forest products.

5. CONCLUSION

As a foundation for effective participation, the governments should remove all obstacles which stand in the way of the rural population freely joining and organizing groups of their choice. In particular, they should promote the creation of womens associations and cooperatives at local, regional, and national levels, support these, and concede them rights of self determination. The rural women population should have the opportunity to participate in development institutions, and take part in deciding on, implementing, and evaluating developing projects, especially projects concerned with rural employment. The various social, economic, and cultural service institutions need financial support and training for their functionaries, without their autonomy being interfered with. Especially the energy of the young women should be mobilized for rural development activities.

Before rural development can be more successful, the important role of women has to be acknowledged. Moreover, they have to be fully integrated and given the possibility of acquiring knowledge and skills, and of utilizing them as well.

The government should also abolish the legally based

discrimination of women fixed in inheritance rights; give them equal access to land, livestock, and means of production; make it possible for them to participate in business activities; and guarantee them a right to membership, credit associations, and similar organizations.

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