

Promoting agricultural education among rural women: a critical intervention for sustaining farm and home*

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In India, about 833 million people constituting 68.84% of the population live in rural areas, of which 405.17 million (i.e. 48.6%) are women. Out of 481.7 million workers in India, 348.5 million constituting 72.3% live in rural areas. Similarly, out of 149.8 million women workers in India, 81.3% live in rural areas. Further, 77.3% of the women workers living in rural areas are engaged as cultivators and agricultural labourers¹. In states like Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, the proportion is more than 80%. Though the proportion of women workers in agriculture is decreasing like that of the men workers, which is quite obvious and natural as development progresses, the stake of rural women for agriculture continues to be high. It is this population that supports Indian agriculture in a big way.

Why agricultural education for women?

As agriculture is becoming more complex and risk-prone, achieving higher and sustainable growth would depend on how successfully we adopt scientific knowledge, modern technology and innovations on the farm. In this situation, can we pin our hopes on rural women for sustaining agriculture? The future scenario of agriculture would depend largely on the attitude and capacity of these rural women to more effectively participate in and contribute to agriculture. But, are we doing enough to usher the change? Critical to this change is accumulation of human capital and human development in agriculture, particularly that of the women. The level of human capital available in a household (usually measured as the education of the head of household or the average

education of working-age adults in the household) is strongly correlated with measures such as agricultural productivity, household income and nutritional outcomes². The data suggest that female household heads in rural areas are disadvantaged with respect to human capital accumulation in most developing countries³. Therefore, rural women should first be recognized as an important human resource for agriculture, and adequate attention must be given for development and management of this human resource by promoting agricultural education among them.

Women generally have to perform their triple role comprising reproductive, productive and community-managing roles⁴. Reproductive role includes not only reproduction, but also the care and maintenance of workforce in the family. Therefore, almost the entire gamut of home-management activities such as food provisioning, childcare, household resource management, etc. comes under reproductive role of women. Community-managing role comprises the activities undertaken primarily by women at community level to ensure provision and maintenance of scarce resources of collective consumption such as water, healthcare and education. Balancing of the triple roles is therefore critical for achieving efficiency in their roles and increasing welfare of the family. In this context, agricultural education, which includes both farm science and home science education, has an important role to play. Access to agricultural education can promote adoption of science and knowledge-based practices, and hence, improve the quality of participation of women in these activities. It would also pave the way for informed decision-making by women within households and outside. In the medium and long term, access of rural women to agricultural education would bridge the persisting gender gap in access to agricultural knowledge, which in turn would create conditions for accelerated dissemination and application of knowledge and technology in agriculture and home management. The process would create new

avenues of income and employment for rural women and youth, particularly those who are not even considered as workers in strict economic sense, and help in tackling many problems that agriculture and rural India are facing, thereby contributing to sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas.

The present scenario

India has a well-developed formal education system in agriculture with UG, PG and Ph D courses to develop human resources for agricultural research and development. But access of rural women to agricultural education is almost absent. India has one of the largest extension systems in the world for disseminating knowledge and technology. But the reach of women to scientific and modern technological knowhow in agriculture is also limited. At present, a number of schemes such as the National Food Security Mission (NFSM), Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), National Horticulture Mission (NHM), Bringing Green Revolution to Eastern India (BGREI), etc. are being implemented to boost agricultural production in the country. All these schemes have in-built training components for the participating farmers, including women. But research shows that training imparted under various programmes by agencies often does not match the gender needs⁵. Moreover, the training programmes often focus on narrow domains, and as such do not provide a holistic understanding and learning of the farm and home-related problems and solutions. As rural women are engaged in a wide range of activities, a few training programmes in certain specific areas do not really equip them with the kind of knowledge and skill that is required for accumulation of human capital and expansion of human capability.

Making agricultural education work for women

The absence of well-structured vocational programmes has created a commu-

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nication gap in effective transfer of technology from lab to land⁶. Therefore, there is a need for expansion of non-formal education, especially in respect of knowledge and technological empowerment of a vast section of the work force in rural areas. The most important challenge is to develop agri-courses with proper structure and content, and to package and deliver the same to meet the needs and match the capacity of rural women and youth. Need-based diploma and certificate courses ranging from crop production, horticulture, animal husbandry, fisheries, etc. to other need-based areas such as home and natural resources management, while encouraging agripreneurship development, would go a long way in supporting the process of agricultural and rural transformation. However, in order to create demand for these courses, some critical policy changes such as provision of scholarships for women, making certificate and diploma courses a mandatory eligibility criterion for certain positions in the organizations at village, panchayat and block level, and preferential treatment of diploma and certificate holders for microfinance, enterprise development and participation in development programmes are needed.

In the XII Plan, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research has proposed the National Agricultural Education Project (NAEP) to improve and sustain quality of higher agricultural education in India. Under the project, enhancing the reach and effectiveness of agricultural education to farmers, rural women and other stakeholders through non-formal education has been identified as one of the activities. But less than 2% of the project budget of INR 1550 crores has been earmarked for the activity, which is minuscule considering the scale of the problem. How can we then take agricultural education to rural women? Therefore, it is paramount that an exclusive programme on agricultural education for rural women and farmers should be developed as an integral part of the broad agricultural growth strategy.

As M. S. Swaminathan has said, sustainable food security will be only a dream without the participation of women. Recognizing the importance of women in agriculture and rural development worldwide, the United Nations International Day of Rural Women is celebrated on 15 October every year. If the transformation of agriculture is really something to happen in India, then empowering rural women through a well-

designed and well-targeted agricultural educational intervention is a completely inescapable and non-negotiable policy option.

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3. FAO, The State of Food and Agriculture, Women in agriculture – closing the gender gap for development, FAO, Rome, 2011.
4. Moser, C. O. N., *Gender Planning and Development – Theory, Practice and Training*, Routledge, London, 1999.
5. Sadangi, B. N., Mishra, S., Dash, H. K., Sahoo, P. K. and Pandey, H., *Indian J. Extension Educ.*, 2005, **41**(1&2), 70–73.
6. ICAR, Draft document National Agricultural Education Project, 2012.

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