

Gender sensitivity in agricultural extension

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Agriculture is the mainstay of the global economy and women play a significant role in the sustainable development of the economy. They contribute in agricultural activities often at par with men by justifying the ancient African proverb 'without women we all go hungry'. Women play the main role in agriculture from manually growing crops to agro-processing to homemaking. More than half of the world's food is grown by women, but worldwide her hard work has been unpaid¹. Most of the time their inputs are less recognized, their importance and contributions are never acknowledged, because their service does not contribute enough in the direct material income^{2,3}. Urbanization and migration has resulted in a shift towards feminization of agriculture. It has also been documented that delivery of Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) has not equally benefited men and women farmers in rural areas. Though women are increasingly responsible for farm work, agricultural extension and information on new technologies are almost exclusively directed to men⁴. India has approximately 482 million workers of whom, 150 million are women, 122 million are in the rural areas and the remaining 28 million work in urban areas. Figure 1 indicates that although the overall female work participation rate is much lower than the overall male work participation rate, the female work participation rate in India has almost doubled from 12.11% in 1971 to 25.50% in 2011. Work participation of women in India indicates that 96% of them are under the unorganized sector. Further it shows that the male work participation rate in rural India is almost stagnant while female work participation rate has tremendously increased from

13.42% in 1971 to 30% in 2011 (Figure 2). Both the male work participation rate and female work participation rate in urban area has increased from the baseline year, i.e. 1971 (Figure 3). Though both have increased over the period from 1971 to 2011, the shift in female work participation is more than that of male work participation rate in rural as well as urban India. As per 2011 census, 97.6 million females are involved in agriculture, which forms around 37% of the total agricultural work force. It has been estimated that by 2020, women participation will be around 115 million (ref. 5).

The gender division of labour in agriculture means that female and male farmers usually have different extension needs. However, extension services worldwide remain dominated by men. It can also be observed from the T&V system of extension delivery which underscored the selection of contact farmers as a mechanism for passing on information to other farmers based in the same area. Most of the recommended criteria for selecting the contact farmers (e.g. education/literacy, title to land, farmer's association/membership) were largely biased against female rural farmers⁶. It has been reported that pluralistic extension services have hardly targeted women farmers as many advisory services programmes tend to be mostly concentrated on productive activities dominated by rural men farmers^{7,8}. Further, issues were raised in the majority of the developing countries about EAS being predominantly staffed by men, which has resulted in systematic exclusion of women farmers and female-headed households from direct access to many forms of agricultural advisory services. Studies show that only in few

countries such as the Philippines, have women field staff been deployed in sufficient numbers and with sufficient resources to become effective agents of change among women farmers. It is estimated that globally only 15% of extension agents are women. Male extension agents frequently target male-dominated farmer groups and focus information and inputs on their needs, sometimes because it may not be culturally acceptable for them to interact with women⁹. A shortage of women extension workers may limit the possibility to successfully promote change and innovation among women farmers. Particularly in those societies where local gender norms restrict women's interaction with men who are external to the family, it can be difficult for women to participate in extension activities. A study conducted by Lahai *et al.*¹⁰ of agricultural extension services in Nigeria found that women farmers who were supervised by women extension officers were more likely to participate in extension activities, adopt recommended technologies/practices than those who were supported by men. The women supported by female extension workers also expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the service provided.

At the level of national governments, the potential of public extension delivery systems to reach women farmers is not fully achieved. Many governments have failed in their obligations to ensure that services are delivered effectively to disadvantaged groups and particularly to rural women¹¹. One reason for this is the socio-cultural bias which has often hindered women's active participation in farmer training centres, extension meetings and most importantly, access to

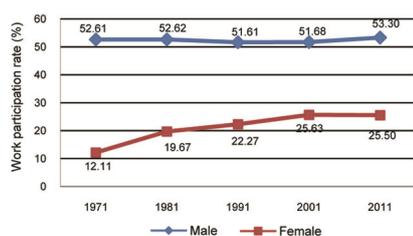


Figure 1. Gender-wise work participation rate.

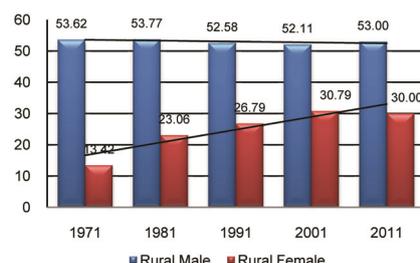


Figure 2. Gender-wise rural work participation rate (%).

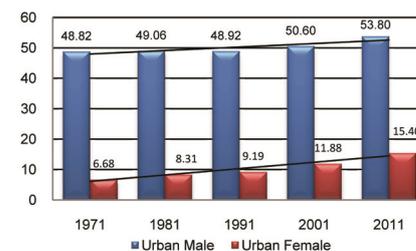


Figure 3. Gender-wise urban work participation rate (%).

agricultural inputs (e.g. fertilizers), services and economic resources such as credit⁷. Among the main factors, which make it difficult to increase the number of women extension workers are the low number of women trained in agriculture and the difficult conditions of working in the field. An evaluation of gender mainstreaming activities in Middle Eastern and North African countries found that although great efforts were undertaken to recruit women extension agents, they were generally reluctant to work in remote and inaccessible areas, particularly in countries such as Yemen and Egypt. This was further exacerbated by the lack of adequate financial incentives¹².

A wide range of traditional and reformed extension and advisory delivery systems have been tried in many developing countries, but very little has been achieved in systematically considering a gender perspective in the provision of agricultural advisory services because women are exposed to a range of challenges than men, that prevent them from accessing EAS. A study¹³ found that most of the Indian extension personnel at district (100%) and block (97%) level were male while only one female extension personnel (3%) was found at block level. This shows wide disparity and a need to increase the number of female extension personnel to keep balance in gender to attend the clients accordingly. A recent study in India, Ghana and Ethiopia revealed important gender gaps in access to agricultural extension in these regions mainly due to the limited participation of female farmers in extension-related meetings and the lack of incentives for reaching these female farmers¹⁴. Other studies have also stressed that EAS provision in the agricultural sector has been more often biased against rural women farmers as they often lack access and control over productive resources and technologies that are affordable and appropriate to their needs^{8,15}. In India, rural women face strong social and cultural barriers as well as direct resistance from male folks from the community and family towards social and economic liberalization, decision making and use of farming equipments¹⁶. When

women do participate in extension activities they may not be provided equal recognition for their responsibilities and skills. This is because farmers and farming activities continue to be perceived as 'male' by policy makers, planners and agricultural service deliverers, thereby ignoring the important and increasing role women play in agriculture.

Many systems have laid greater emphasis on promoting various agricultural extension projects without understanding the practical and cultural obstacles that prevent women from accessing the most needed services. This has largely resulted in women's unequal access to EAS in rural locations. Mostly, the policy debate on EAS delivery has not fully concentrated on addressing rural population needs from a gender perspective. To overcome these challenges, there have been reforms in the existing EAS systems and an array of innovative practices developed to continuously empower rural populations, with an attempt to ensure that women and disadvantaged groups are fully benefited from rural EAS delivery systems. With the lack of a gender sensitive approach to service delivery, challenges still hinder the implementation of such innovative EAS systems. In India a policy dialogue activity has been conducted by DANIDA to increase the number of women extension agents. One of the greatest achievements has been to create a number of regular posts for female staff in an environment where 99% of the staff is male. At the national level, a new 'Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension' was adopted in 2001, which included a section on gender mainstreaming in agriculture, which also addresses the need to increase the number of women extension workers. DANIDA-supported projects have played an inspiring role in promoting the new extension framework¹⁷.

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