

The hand that rocks the cradle, feeds the nation

Agriculture has always been a work in progress, but firmly rooted in the past establishment of civilization since time immemorial. No wonder agriculture is called a form of culture¹. Some historians believe that it was women who first domesticated the crop plants, thereby initiating the art and science of farming. The role of women in agriculture has changed dramatically in developed and developing countries. India's estimated population² is approximately 1,081,229. The agricultural population of India² is 559,659. The Indian population has 48.1% women and 51.9% men. In rural India, agriculture and allied industrial sectors employ as much as 89.5% of the total female labour.

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 55–66% of the total labour, with percentages much higher in certain regions³. In the Indian Himalayas, a pair of bullocks works 1064 h, a man 1212 h, and a woman 3485 h in a year on a 1 ha farm, a figure which illustrates the significant contribution of women to agricultural production.

Women contribute considerably to household income through farm and non-farm activities as well as through work as landless agricultural labourers. In India around 70% of the population earns its livelihood from agriculture⁴. Women are credited with being vigilant guards and custodians of traditions, helping to ensure security of food at family level directly or indirectly.

Despite such a huge involvement, the role and dignity of women have yet not been recognized. The status of women is low by all social, economic and political indicators. 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, gender bias in the labour market, and lack of supportive facilities such as child care, transport and accommodation in the formal sector of the labour market. Women's labour power is considered

inferior because of the employers' predetermined notion of the women's primary role as homemakers.

Gender differential emerged as a major issue in the pattern of labour distribution and access to resources in the agriculture sector. Sustainable agricultural development requires women's empowerment as planners, managers, scientists, technical advisers and most importantly, farmers. The proposition that 'the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world', is becoming extremely important and meaningful⁵. Rural women play a crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields, including crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post-harvest operations, fisheries, etc. The actual and potential role of women in the society has been ignored.

As a result of the discrimination against female labour, women are concentrated in the secondary sector of the labour market. Their work is low-paid, low-status, casual and lacks potential upward mobility. Majority of the women in the urban sector work in low-paying jobs. The major challenges lie in integrating brain (technology), brawn (physical work) and bank (capital) in a mutually supportive manner so that both men and women can play the active role in improving the productivity, stability and sustainability of major farming systems⁶.

Women should have knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan their lives, more control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from the shackles imposed by the prevailing customs, beliefs and practices. They should become active members in the development process rather than mere beneficiaries of programmes and services. Essential to empowerment is the acquisition of knowledge and skills in modern technologies such as soil testing, use of high-yielding varieties, scientific use of seeds, bio- and chemical fertilizers, pesticides, water, etc. Compilation and documentation of relevant technologies and a network for technology dissemination are essential. Planners, social-welfare agencies and women's development organizations should provide a rightful place to women. It is necessary to expand the networking of support services so that women are freed from some of their gender-imposed roles. Women

must be provided opportunities to have control over production resources that would lead to better life for their families and children. Women mostly work in groups. There is a need to organize women's societies for various activities involving group engagement⁷. A strong and effective women's cooperative movement is desirable to boost the economic upliftment process of rural women and their families. Women should have access to financial resources of the family. They should assume larger roles in making decisions related to setting up of small cottage and agri-based enterprises. Trained rural women should form a mandatory component of all agencies and organizations engaged in rural development. Suitable training methods should be evolved and materials developed, keeping in mind the needs of women farmers and their level of education and awareness. It is important for the trainers to have a full understanding of the role and contributions of farmwomen, so that extension services could be devised and geared to serve the specific needs and interests of women in agriculture.

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