



AGRICULTURE: THE BACKBON OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is critical to the process of the development of the community. Bringing women into the mainstream of development has been a major concern of the government since independence. Yet, despite significant steps taken by the government, the participation of women in all spheres of life varies in the context of differences in the social economic, cultural and regional factors. It is being increasingly realized that the goal of poverty all alleviation cannot be achieved without the full and active participation of women who constitute a large section of the work force in the country. In order to empower women and bring them into the mainstream, an enabling environment with requisite policies and programmes, Institutional mechanisms at various levels and adequate financial resources has been created. The Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment has special components for women in all its programmes and a certain amount of funds is earmarked as 'women's component' to ensure a flow of adequate resource for women. Women empowerment can be better achieved through entrepreneurship which is an adventure to do something new or a strong desire to pursue an independent occupation. It may be an inner urge to make use of skills and talents in a positive and profitable way. The futuristic outlook and planning are the two vital attributes of an entrepreneur. Women have these two qualities by birth. Concerted effort must be put in to raise the level of women entrepreneurship in SSI. Social activists, NGOs, Government agencies and corporate sector should play an active role in the transformation of women and in driving the women to explore entrepreneurial opportunities in small scale industries.

Key Words: Women Empowerment, Agriculture, Development, Employment, Social activists.

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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment in the context of women's development is a way of defining, challenging and overcoming barriers in a woman's life through which she increases her ability to shape her life and environment. It is an active, multidimensional process which should enable women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. Since time immemorial, women have played, and continue to play, a key role in conservation of basic life support system, such as, land, water, flora and fauna. Rural women play a crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields, including crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post-harvest operations, fisheries, etc. Without total intellectual and physical participation of women, it is not possible to achieve the goals of rural uplift. In spite of all this, it is unfortunate that because of centuries of inertia, ignorance and conservatism, the actual and potential role of women in the society has been ignored, preventing them from making their rightful contribution to social progress. It is also because of distorted and/or partial information about their involvement in agriculture and consequent devaluation of their contribution that they are denied their rightful status as active producers in agriculture and access to developmental resources and services contributing to their marginalization. Women must be empowered by enhancing their awareness, knowledge, skills and technology use efficiency so that agricultural production multiplies at a faster pace, environmental degradation is reduced and conservation of resources is practiced earnestly, thereby, facilitating overall development of the society. All this signifies the importance of having a full understanding of the role and contribution of farm women so that the extension services may accordingly be devised and geared to fully integrate them in agriculture by better serving their specific needs and interests. It is the concern for their integration in the process of agricultural development, which has today become instrumental for policy debates, research initiative and organizational efforts from women's perspective.

Sectoral Concerns and Constraints:

Women have to do jobs that are time and labour intensive such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, intercultural, harvesting, threshing, and post-harvest operations like, shelling, cleaning, grading and processing. They also contribute to decision making processes for crop production, seed production and management, post-harvest management of agricultural and horticultural produce, biomass utilization, livestock management, marketing and financial management. In addition, women take up small ventures to generate additional family income. Therefore, the role of women in agriculture and allied occupations, and household activities needs proper recognition. Women constitute a major component of agricultural workforce. They have, however, lagged behind in use of improved crop production and processing tools and machinery. Now, a number of gender neutral and simple

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devices/equipment for crop production and processing have been developed. Their adoption by women will not only help improving agricultural production but will also elevate the status of women through better jobs and greater role in the economy of the family. In addition to their role in agricultural production, women are gainfully employed in agro based allied activities like dairying, animal husbandry, poultry, goatery, rabbit rearing, beekeeping, floriculture, horticulture, fruit preservation, post-harvest technology, value added food products, etc.

Dairying:

Dairying as a profession fits very well in the framework of rural economic activity. It is compatible with inherent routine chores performed by women. Women's involvement in dairying will not only provide them employment but will also bring in social change. The National Dairy Development Board has steered a cooperative development programme designated to promote and support self reliant autonomous, member-owned and controlled cooperatives. This has helped in recognizing the very important role played by women in dairying and to raise the potential of women in contributing positively to the evolution of dairy cooperatives and women's leadership in these areas.

Beekeeping: An Ideal Enterprise for Women:

Beekeeping is an ideal, economically-viable hobby. A few bee colonies (boxes) can be kept in a kitchen garden or backyard of the house. The honey produced there from adds to the income of the farmer. Beekeeping can be taken up on a commercial scale now, as we have available with us the high yielding Mellifera type, commonly called Italian bee. Also, beekeeping requires less labour and attention and can be taken up as a profession by the farmwomen. There is less initial investment but returns are quick. Beekeepers should be encouraged with good support price and easy marketing, with appropriate loan for this low cost adventure. The farm women, families and unemployed youth can be encouraged to adopt this hobby which could turn into a large scale profitable business.

Mushroom Cultivation: A Women Friendly Profession:

Mushroom growing is one agricultural activity in which women can play a vital role without sacrificing their household responsibilities. Mushroom cultivation is simple, low cost, suitable for rural areas, is labour intensive and can provide employment in both the semi-urban and rural areas. Mushroom cultivation will improve the socioeconomic condition of farmers, families and solve employment problems of both literate and illiterate, especially women.

Rural Based Low Cost Nutritional Foods as an Enterprise for Women:

A large number of low cost nutritional products grouped under infant food, health beverages, nutritious snacks, convenience foods (even for people on fast), specialty foods (for patients under stress condition) and home preserves have been developed which require simple processing methods and have the ability to fulfill the nutritional requirement of our population, especially the vulnerable segment of our society. Baby corn, quality protein maize, nutritional grains, etc., are the gift for people under stress conditions and can be used to develop a number of products. These products are a great source of rural entrepreneurship, particularly suited to women, due to low capital requirements.

Coconut Sector:

Coconut plantation plays an important role in the rural economy by generating income and employment. It is a major sector, which is women dominated. The role of women in coir sector is as high as 80 per cent and 60 per cent in coconut processing and broom making, respectively. Involvement of women in coconut based handicrafts is up to 40 per cent. Women generally work as groups and hence, there is need to organize women's societies with a view to empower women socially and economically.

Lac Cultivation:

Lac cultivation is one of the supplementary sources of income in most of the tribal areas of the country, mainly Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and West Bengal. There is large involvement of women in lac cultivation, processing and lac-based small scale cottage industry like sealing wax, bangles and ornaments making, etc., where women give more than 60 per cent physical input. Women in lac processing factories share around 55 per cent of the total skilled labour input.

Household Appliances:

Improved *chulha*, biogas, solar cookers, solar heaters, photovoltaic energy operated appliances, etc., have great scope of adoption by women. This must be encouraged and if necessary, subsidized.

Agro processing for Additional Income:

Agriculture as a source of cheap raw material cannot survive alone. There has to be some kind of processing to add value to farm produce, which will lead to better income and employment of women. Many simple farm-produce-processing technologies have been



developed using minimum equipment and small investments. Women should be trained for handling these equipments/gadgets.

Rural Entrepreneurship:

There is need to design programmes which could gainfully utilize the services and skills of women in relation to their involvement in agro based allied activities. This would also help in generating self-employment and rural entrepreneurship. Some of the ventures would include agro service centres' sale of quality seeds and other agricultural inputs; advisory services and consultancy; village-level marketing; multipurpose warehouses and controlled atmosphere storage; hiring of implements; micro propagation; hatcheries for fishery; production of biofertilizers; biocontrol agents; beekeeping; livestock feeding and health management and artificial insemination; food processing and testing units; post-harvest management units; social agro forestry; agro horticulture; cultivation and management of medicinal and aromatic plants; utilisation of crop residues; mushroom cultivation; poultry; piggery; goatery; agro based handicrafts; child health care centres; use of renewable and unconventional sources of energy; low cost household equipments and appliances etc. Entrepreneurship skills can help in building confidence and self awareness through income generation. Various activities can be taken up by rural women for income generation while being at home and by organizing themselves in 'self-help groups'.

Financial Institutions:

Various economic activities, investment outlet enterprises are needed to create employment opportunities including self-employment avenues and income generation, particularly for downtrodden women in rural areas. For financial support to these ventures, a rural network is required to provide credit on appropriate and easier terms. Regional rural banks should continue to play an important role in empowerment of rural women through various credit schemes. Various financial institutions have special financial schemes for women.

These include KVIC, NABARD, cooperative societies and regional rural banks. They provide loan opportunities to rural women for dairying, poultry, beekeeping, food processing and preservation, mushroom cultivation, spices processing, potato chips, *dalia* and other cottage industries. These agencies provide loans to women up to five lakhs without any security. Other facilities include, 13.5 per cent rate of interest up to a loan of Rs. 2 lakhs; relaxation of registration and respective fees related to land mortgages involved in security for a loan in rural areas up to the limit of Rs. 3 lakhs; convenient and easy installments in case of long term loans and provision of immediate cash under a limit as working capital; loans for housing and consumption loans to raise status of rural women; and special credit



schemes for enterprises related to computers and other electronic equipment at easier terms. The Group finally made the following recommendations.

Recommendations:

Empowerment of women, demands recognition of their rightful place in the decisionmaking process. Women should have knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decisionmaking, greater ability to plan their lives, greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed by prevailing customs, beliefs and practices. They should become active members in development process rather than mere beneficiaries of programmes and services.

- Essential to empowerment is acquisition of knowledge and skills in modern technologies such as soil testing; use of high yielding varieties; scientific use of seeds bio- and chemicalfertilisers, pesticides, water, etc. Compilation and documentation of relevant technologies and a network for technology dissemination is essential.
- Small entrepreneurial outlets involving agribased allied professions should be created to ensure self-employment for rural women.
- Planners, social welfare agencies and women's development organisation should provide a rightful place to women. It is necessary to expand networking of support services so that women are freed from some of their gender imposed roles.
- The NARS, ICAR and SAUs have developed several agrotechnologies directed at reducing drudgery of farm women. Use of these technologies must be ensured by dissemination of information. Women should also be freed from sociocultural bindings. Progress towards latter can be improved by obtaining feedback and suitably modifying the procedures in this respect.
- Technologies which are labour saving, drudgery reducing, income generating and productivity increasing should be given wide publicity and their use encouraged through pragmatic extension.
- Infrastructural facilities like road, electricity, cool chain, etc. must be developed in rural areas for increasing entrepreneurial opportunities.
- Women must be provided opportunities to have control over production resources that would lead to better life for their families and their children.



- Women mostly work in groups. There is need to organise women's societies for various activities involving group engagement. A strong and effective women's cooperative movement is desirable to boost economic upliftment process of rural women and families.
- Women's dairy cooperatives' success in Bihar, should be extended to other parts of the country for which a working group of technocrats from milk unions and universities should collaborate to develop integrated approach for empowering women in dairy sector.
- Women should have access to financial resources of the family. They should assume larger role in making decisions related to setting up of small cottage and agro based enterprises.
- Collaboration between university and banking sector for implementation of the findings of research alongwith ease in procedure for granting bank loans to rural women, should be facilitated.
- Various economic activities, investment outlets and enterprises are needed to create employment opportunities which must be accelerated for the upliftment of rural women. This would need creation of a network to facilitate provision of credit at appropriate and easier terms through rural banks.
- Entrepreneurship Development Centres should be created in agricultural universities to integrate entrepreneurial skill development among rural folk, particularly women for building self-confidence and self-awareness in them through income generation. Women should be made direct recipients of technology to provide access to sources of income.
- Trained rural women should form a mandatory component for all agencies and organisations 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 full understanding of the role and contributions of farmwomen, so that extension services could be devised and geared to serve specific needs and interests of women in agriculture.
- Feedback and follow up mechanisms for rural women's programmes should be strengthened and the National Agricultural Research System should play a major role in this endeavour.

- Media should be encouraged to play a strong role in projecting success stories of rural women entrepreneurs and women farmers.
- Procedures should be devised and implemented for recognizing outstanding rural women entrepreneurs and farmers at state and national level.

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