

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN AGRICULTURE

A Pathway Towards Sustainable Development



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Gender Sensitivity and Social Inclusion in Extension Programmes

Binoy Tripura¹ & Ranadhir Sarma¹

Introduction

Gender and socially inclusive extension services are designed to meet the specific needs and challenges faced by both men and women in their primary occupations, with a particular emphasis on marginalized groups. The goal is to ensure equal access to resources, information, and opportunities for everyone engaged in agricultural and related activities. This approach acknowledges the significant role women play in agriculture, which accounts for over 40 percent of the workforce, with a notably high female labor force participation rate of 62.9 percent (Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2021-2022). It also recognizes the barriers women face, such as limited access to training, financial resources, and decision-making processes. Women are fundamental to society, serving as the backbone of families and driving community growth and development. Despite historical discrimination and marginalization, there is growing recognition of the importance of empowering women in recent years.

Understanding Gender and Social Inclusion

Gender refers to the social roles, behaviors, norms, and interactions associated with men, women, boys, and girls. It is a social construct, with its meaning varying across societies and evolving over time (CIWA). In contrast, Sex relates to the biological differences between males and females, which remain consistent across cultures and are unchanged over time. Gender, however, involves societal expectations of the roles, responsibilities, and traits assigned to women and men, and these expectations can differ across cultural contexts.

Social Inclusion refers to the process of ensuring that all individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, can fully participate in political, economic,

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and social life. Exclusion often stems from legal systems, labor markets, or discriminatory attitudes and perceptions. Disadvantage may be based on factors such as gender, age, location, occupation, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship status, disability, or Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity (SOGI), among others. Social exclusion deprives individuals of their dignity, security, and the opportunity for a better life. To foster sustainable inclusive growth and reduce poverty, it is crucial to address the underlying causes of structural exclusion and discrimination (CIWA).

The Need for Understanding Women and Disadvantaged Groups' Role in Agriculture

Women play a substantial role in agriculture and allied sectors, primarily through their involvement in family labor. Many of the tasks they perform contribute significantly to the productivity of agricultural enterprises. For example, transplanting is a task that is predominantly carried out by women across the country. To improve the efficiency of this operation—such as ensuring deeper placement of seedlings or reducing the number of plants per hill—training should be directed towards women rather than men. Similarly, women are largely responsible for the feeding of cattle, which directly impacts milk production. Therefore, any messages about balanced nutrition for cattle aimed at increasing milk output should be communicated through training programs specifically targeting women, rather than men. For extension workers and development agents to effectively address gender disparities in agricultural practices, it is essential to understand the gender-specific roles and responsibilities within various agricultural sectors. Identifying which tasks are performed by men and which are carried out by women helps tailor interventions appropriately. Additionally, the needs of disadvantaged groups, who make up a significant portion of the farming community, should not be overlooked. For agricultural growth to be truly inclusive and sustainable, it must be accessible to all, including marginalized groups. This requires a focus on ensuring equal opportunities for women and other disadvantaged populations within the agricultural sector.

Gender Based Roles of Women in Agriculture

When analyzing socially assigned roles, it is essential to consider the full spectrum of activities typically undertaken at the family level in a rural household. A comprehensive list of such activities should be identified, ensuring that all relevant tasks are accounted for. Based on the nature and location of these activities, they can be categorized into three main groups:

1. **Domestic Activities:** These include tasks related to the household and family care, such as cooking, cleaning, mopping, sewing, child care, nursing sick or elderly family members, purchasing household provisions, feeding family members, and tutoring children.
2. **Productive Activities:** This category covers tasks related to agricultural and economic production. In crop production, it includes land preparation, sowing, weeding, transplanting, application of manures and fertilizers, harvesting, threshing, and winnowing. Dairy-related activities, such as cleaning cattle sheds, chopping fodder, mixing feed, feeding cattle, taking animals to veterinary or AI centers, purchasing concentrate feed, milking, and selling milk, are also part of this category. Additionally, other productive tasks like weaving, basket making, and tailoring fall into this group.
3. **Community Resource Management:** These activities involve managing and utilizing shared resources within the community, such as collecting fodder from village common lands, gathering dung from village gochar or forests to meet household energy needs, and other activities related to the collective management of natural resources.

This classification helps in understanding the broad and varied roles that women, men, and other family members play in rural households and agricultural production, highlighting the need for tailored interventions that address both individual and collective responsibilities.

The Need for Gender Analysis

The concept of "gender" refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and attributes assigned to men and women, while "sex" pertains to the biological and physical differences between them. Gender plays a crucial role in analyzing various aspects of agriculture, including roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities, incentives, costs, and benefits. Numerous development projects, government programs, research studies, and theoretical models have demonstrated that understanding gender dynamics is key to enhancing agricultural productivity and improving access to agricultural services, particularly for women. Gender analysis of agricultural production requires examining men's and women's participation across two key areas: their roles in agricultural activities and their roles in household responsibilities. This analysis is essential for identifying gender disparities and ensuring that interventions are targeted to promote gender equality and enhance agricultural development.

Gender Analysis at the Household Level

Extension programs and agricultural policies often depict the rural household as a unified entity, with all members working together towards common goals under the leadership of the family head. However, in reality, the household is a complex, dynamic social unit that evolves in terms of its composition and objectives over time. Family members of varying ages and genders engage in distinct activities that fulfil specific responsibilities. While the division of labour along gender lines remains a persistent feature, it has profound implications for agricultural production and organization. Men's and women's roles and privileges differ across socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts, which is why assumptions about gender roles must be avoided. Gender dynamics can vary widely even within a single country, as demonstrated in studies from Nigeria, where differences were observed between rural communities just kilometres apart. Therefore, it is problematic to treat "rural women" as a monolithic group or to develop policies for "women in agriculture" without conducting thorough, context-specific research. This highlights the need for adapting extension services to specific circumstances, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach. Empirical research is essential to develop policies and services that accurately reflect the diversity of gender roles within rural contexts (Olawoye, 1989; Berger, DeLancey, & Mellencamp, 1984).

Gender Analysis in Agriculture

Gender analysis in agriculture reveals that rural women, alongside men, are engaged in various productive activities essential for household welfare, agricultural productivity, and economic development. Despite this, women's contributions are often marginalized and undervalued in traditional agricultural and economic analyses. In many cases, agricultural policies and research have been overly focused on men's contributions, while women's roles have been underappreciated. Women are often misclassified as "economically inactive" in agricultural statistical surveys, a misconception that stems more from methodological flaws than from reality. Agricultural extension services have also failed to prioritize reaching women farmers, despite their significant involvement in farming activities. Policymakers and administrators often perpetuate the assumption that men are the primary farmers, while women are seen merely as "supportive" figures in the household. This perception persists despite substantial empirical evidence showing that women play a vital role in agricultural production (Samanta, 1994).

Changing Social Structures in Agriculture

As rural households evolve, so do the gender roles within them. Notably, rural women are assuming greater responsibilities for household food security and the well-being of their children. A significant marker of these changes is the increasing number of female-headed households in developing countries. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, women head around 45 percent of rural households in Kenya, 35 percent in Malawi, 30-40 percent in Zambia, and 15 percent in Nigeria (World Bank, 1992a; FAO, 1993).

Typically, female-headed households are among the poorest and face lower levels of food security. However, in regions where female headship is more common, such as in the Caribbean, female-headed households may not be a reliable indicator of agricultural output, household welfare, or income status. In contrast, in areas where women have independent access to agricultural resources and services, such as in parts of the Kenyan Highlands, women have demonstrated the ability to enhance farm productivity, efficiency, and profitability, even when managing their farms alone or with occasional help from migrant husbands. These examples emphasize the importance of ensuring women have the necessary access to resources, training, and services to maximize their agricultural potential.

The challenges rural women face in agriculture are multifaceted, rooted in a combination of legal, cultural, ecological, economic, and infrastructural factors. Their ability to improve agricultural yields, profit, and efficiency is shaped by these constraints, including the lack of control over land and productive resources, limited access to credit and agricultural services, and a lack of representation in agricultural policy decision-making. These barriers hinder their participation in agricultural production, particularly in market-oriented activities, and perpetuate gender disparities in rural development.

Key Constraints Affecting Rural Women in Agriculture

1. **Legal and Cultural Status:** Women's legal and cultural position often restricts their control over agricultural resources, such as land, labour, and capital. Cultural norms frequently limit women's access to decision-making in agriculture and household economics.
2. **Property Rights and Inheritance Laws:** These laws influence women's access to land, which is the primary productive asset in most agricultural economies. When inheritance laws favor men, women are excluded from owning or inheriting land, thereby limiting their agricultural production capacity.

3. **Ecological and Economic Factors:** Women are disproportionately affected by ecological challenges like poor rainfall, limited fuelwood, and climate change. Their roles often involve balancing household duties with agricultural production, which is impacted by environmental factors such as unpredictable weather and market fluctuations.
4. **Agricultural Services Design and Management:** Traditional agricultural extension programs often overlook women's needs, focusing instead on male farmers, especially in programs promoting cash crops. Women's exclusion from agricultural extension services reduces their access to vital information and resources.

Enhancing Women's Access to Extension Services

Agricultural extension services, historically designed to aid male farmers, must shift to accommodate the needs of rural women. Innovations like women-only cooperatives, specialized training for women, and the use of technologies (e.g., video technology for illiterate women in India) have helped bridge the gap. These initiatives provide rural women with the knowledge and resources necessary to enhance productivity.

For instance, in India, organizations like TATA Industries and BAIF Development Research Foundation have introduced women's groups to agro-industrial development. These groups provide opportunities for women to engage in activities beyond traditional agriculture, such as dairy production, thus improving their livelihoods. Similarly, SEWA's video programs have empowered illiterate women by enhancing their advocacy and access to resources.

Gender-Sensitive Approaches and Social Inclusion in Agricultural Extension

Gender equality in agricultural extension can be achieved through various strategies:

1. **Strengthening Women's Political Participation:** Increasing women's representation in political bodies ensures that agricultural policies and programs reflect their needs and challenges. Training women for leadership roles within agricultural ministries and extension services promotes gender-responsive decision-making.
2. **Financial and Advisory Support:** Offering financial assistance and advisory services to female leaders in farmer groups ensures they can participate in policy formulation and administrative decision-making, influencing agricultural development in favor of gender equality.

3. **Engaging the Entire Rural Community:** Gender-sensitive approaches should not only target women but involve men in discussions about the benefits of gender equality. This ensures wider community support for gender-inclusive policies and programs.

Designing Inclusive Extension Programs

To design gender-sensitive extension programs, several key principles must be followed:

1. **Recognizing Gender and Social Equality:** Agricultural extension programs must acknowledge the distinct roles and challenges faced by women and men in agriculture.
2. **Promoting Equality:** Efforts should focus on eliminating social and economic inequalities between men and women, especially those faced by socially disadvantaged groups.
3. **Participatory Approach:** Women and men from marginalized groups should be involved in decision-making and implementation processes of extension programs to ensure their needs are addressed effectively.
4. **Continuous Monitoring and Flexibility:** Programs must be adaptable based on feedback from the participants to respond to the changing needs and challenges of women in agriculture.

Why Agricultural Extension Needs to Be Gender-Sensitive

Agricultural extension services must be gender-sensitive because:

1. **Women's Significant Role:** Women play a critical role in agricultural production, especially in subsistence farming. However, their involvement has often been overlooked in extension services.
2. **Differing Needs of Men and Women:** Women and men engage in different agricultural tasks and face different challenges, requiring tailored extension services to meet their specific needs.
3. **Access to Resources:** Women often have limited access to assets such as land, credit, and information, making gender-sensitive extension services crucial for improving agricultural productivity.
4. **Extension Personnel Training:** Many extension personnel are unaware of gender-specific challenges in agriculture. Training them in gender analysis and gender-sensitive planning is essential to address the unequal access to resources and knowledge.

Strategies for Mainstreaming Gender in Extension Services

Several approaches can improve the gender responsiveness of extension services:

1. **Targeting Women as Extension Clients:** Programs should target rural women specifically and adapt criteria for contact farmers to include women who are active farmers. These programs should also be held at convenient times and locations, with provisions like child care.
2. **Hiring Female Extension Agents:** Employing female extension agents ensures that women have a relatable and accessible point of contact within extension services. Women agents can better address the specific needs and concerns of women farmers.
3. **Training Male Extension Agents:** Male agents should receive training on how to interact with women farmers in a culturally sensitive way and to encourage women's active participation in extension activities.
4. **Designing Gender-Sensitive Materials:** Extension materials should be designed to cater to women's roles in agriculture, such as providing information on small-scale farming, livestock management, or agro-processing, which are often managed by women.

Conclusion

Gender equality and social inclusion in agricultural extension are essential for ensuring that rural women can contribute fully to agricultural productivity. By addressing gender biases and providing tailored support to women farmers, agricultural extension services can play a pivotal role in reducing gender inequalities in rural communities. Empowering women through gender-sensitive extension programs not only enhance agricultural productivity but also promotes broader social and economic benefits, such as improved health outcomes, poverty reduction, and community development. Thus, ensuring that agricultural extension programs are designed with gender equality in mind is a crucial step toward achieving sustainable and inclusive rural development.

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