

Role of Women in Food Security

Shashikala S

Assistant Professor Dept of Sociology GFGC Vijaynagar Bangalore

Abstract

Relevant and consistent with the recent growing interest to assess the contribution of women to economic activities in Sudan, this study seeks to assess women's contribution to their household food supply and nutrition. As for the contribution of the research, the research is expected to contribute to improve the understanding of the important contribution of women to economic activities and in particular in providing and improving household food valuing the potential role of women in reducing hunger and malnutrition. Agricultural production (farm and livestock products) with supplemental resources (processed and preserved food items) and substitute resources (forest trees and wild food products) represent the available resources for the household food consumption in rural areas. Income generating activities along with other possible income sources (cash crops, trees products, pension, assets, remittance from migrants, and savings sources) provide household with income to afford foods. The finding of this study implies that in most rural areas. Women are more capable than men in terms of the ability to use and allocate the available resources for the purpose to improve food security for their families. For the purpose of this paper, improvement of the household food security refers to the expanding availability and accessibility of nutritional food on sustainable basis. In this regard this study has indicated that women in rural play a crucial role in improving their household food security, as they contribute to food production, enhance dietary quality and consumption diversity. Therefore, based on the findings in this paper, the major policy implication is that crucial role of women in this context can greatly be enhanced through adoption of supportive national and local development policy.

KEYWORDS: Skills of Women, Sustainable Agriculture, Food of Production

Introduction

Agriculture in developing countries is heavily dependent on manual labour and the major contribution is from women. The situation holds good in India too, where women provide over 75% of the agricultural labour. However, most of these women are used as manual power, without any opportunity to participate in the process of decision making. As most of these rural women are illiterate and deprived of any exposure to mass media and the outside world, their knowledge is confined to traditional practices, although there has been continuous up gradation of agricultural practices due to advanced research and economic pressures for maximizing the production and profitability.

Over the years, with gradual realization on gender equity, we are able to realise that women have been putting in more labor not only in terms of physical output but also in terms of quality and efficiency. It has also been observed that except for heavy physical labor like soil excavation, women are able to perform other farming

operations more efficiently than the men. Inspire of their diligence, there has been wide discrimination in their wages, and women are offered only half of the wage compared to men. This has demoralized rural women and prevented them from taking greater initiatives.

Although India has achieved self-sufficiency in food production, sustainability in food supply is a big challenge in view of the growing population. The demand for food is likely to increase further due to increasing consumption pattern arising from higher income level of the common people, who did not have the purchasing power earlier. Hence the strategy to enhance the food production should be to introduce improved agricultural production techniques to optimize the crop-yields at the macro-level and intensify community initiatives. While the scientists and agricultural extension officers have a greater role in introducing appropriate technology and systems to enhance the crop production, women can play a significant role in improving the production efficiency and profitability. Hence special efforts should be made to recognize the role and potential of women in food security.

Contribution of Women to Food Security

There are several ways to improve the capacity of women to enhance their contribution to agriculture and agribusiness. Firstly, their skills can be upgraded to reduce their physical strain, labor time and to improve the quality of work. Secondly, women can be involved in special production activities, which require tender care and continuous attention. Thirdly, post-production activities to avoid wastage add value to the produce and reduce the marketing cost. All these activities contribute in improving the food supply situation and in ensuring food security at a reasonable cost.

Realizing the scope for empowering rural women in the above activities, BAIF Development Research Foundation a voluntary research organisation involved in sustainable management of natural resources and poverty alleviation has introduced several field activities to empower rural women. The results are very encouraging and deserve replication on a wider scale.

Improving the Skills of Farm Women

The rural women acquire necessary skills for various agricultural operations by observing others in the field. However, over the years, various new techniques have been introduced to reduce the manual labour and to use different external inputs to enhance the productivity. There are a wide range of agricultural implements used for tilling, weeding, planting, intercultivation, pest-control, harvesting, threshing, cleaning, drying, etc. With the introduction of any new technology, it is mostly the male members, who get the opportunity to undertake training and make optimum use while the women generally have to learn from other users. In fact many societies do not consider women to have any capacity in operating machines or even motorised implements and tools. The time has now come to change this situation. Equal opportunity must be given to women to participate in training and they should be encouraged to make use of all the tools. The scientists and technicians involved in developing new techniques and tools should also be oriented to design such tools, which can be easily operated by women.

Participation of women in agriculture related activities can be encouraged by inviting both husband wife to attend short courses of 4-6 hours, being organised in their own village. Enhancing the capabilities of farm women to use improved techniques will not only help in increasing the production, but also in reducing their strain and time spent on farming activities. Training of women in judicious and appropriate use of agro-chemicals at proper stages of crop growth would further lower the cost of production and reduce environmental pollution, while increasing the yields.

Conservation and Sustainable Agriculture

Experience in high input agriculture in India to enhance the production has indicated that all is not well. While elite farmers, who manage their farms scientifically were able to optimise the use of inputs like improved varieties, irrigation and agro-chemicals for economic crop production, a large number of small holder have ended up with miserable failures. There are several examples, where farmers have lost their soil productivity and crop yields due to excessive use of water for irrigating their crops. Use of fertilizers in higher doses, at inappropriate time has resulted in either failure or higher cost of production. Improper use of agro-chemicals, particularly crops like cotton has forced thousands of farmers to lose their crops. Unable to repay the debts, hundreds of cotton farmers committed suicide in the recent past. This reconfirms that intensive use of external inputs may not be sustainable under all situations.

It has been observed that in case of small farmers, particularly in backward areas or in arid zones, it is necessary to encourage them to build up their farming operations gradually with marginal use of external inputs. Use of improved varieties of farmyard manure, vermicompost, green manure and biofertilizers can significantly enhance the production in backward area where agriculture is under gross neglect. Similarly, the use of biopesticide as a part of the integrated pest management can not only reduce the cost of crop production, but also protect the crops more effectively.

During the recent past, BAIF has been encouraging rural women to take up vermicompost production not only to boost their crop production, but also as an income generation activity. Even in backward areas of Uttar Pradesh, BAIF has encouraged the landless women to form self help groups and collect dung and agricultural wastes from community fields and forests for vermicompost production. While these women are able to generate substantial income, the farmers who buy vermicompost are able to improve their soil-productivity and crop yields. An interesting case study of Mrs.Jugra Devi, a landless women belonging to scheduled caste from Bijemau village in Pratapgarh district of Uttar Pradesh presented in Annexure 1 reveals that vermiculture can be a good opportunity for the landless to sustain their livelihood.

BAIF has also been promoting NADEP composting where the quality of the agricultural waste is not suitable to feed the earthworm. Such composting activity has helped in improving the crop production, where farmers have not been using farmyard manure in adequate dose or chemical fertilisers. This activity has also reduced the environmental pollution as a lot of waste is recycled to the field, instead of lying dumped around the households and fields. It was interesting to note that women took

greater interest in compost production as compared to men. Involvement of women in crop nutrition management is a new trend, which can be expanded further and replicated all over the country.

Women in Food Production

Horticulture requires intensive and tender care which can be handled very efficiently by women. As women are regular in attending their farm duties, they can maintain a close supervision on their flowering plants, fruit and vegetable crops and maximise the production and profitability.

Sericulture is another area where women have performed better than men. This is mostly an indoor light activity but requires frequent attention and careful observation. Rural women who are underemployed but unable to migrate in search of employment can conveniently take up silkworm rearing.

Activities like establishment of kitchen gardens, production of oyster mushroom using agricultural wastes, production of grafted and budded plants, raising of plants in the nursery, establishment of flowering plants, vegetable and fruit orchards can be handled by women groups. As women can grow them with tender care, the quality of these products can be of high standard and fetch better value.

In Vansda taluka of Valsad districts in Gujarat, BAIF has promoted a nursery of mango and cashew grafts through tribal women. Each group of 4-5 women are able to raise about 5000 plants and earn a net profit of Rs.6,000 - 8,000 per member every year. The larger benefits of this programme is easy availability of good quality grafts in the interior areas, almost at 50% of the price in the market. Earlier, the farmers had to buy mango grafts at Rs.35-45 away from their villages and hence the small farmers never bothered to plant good quality fruit plants. These grafts are now available at Rs.15 - 20 at their doorsteps. The fruit orchards already established under the same programme serve as good demonstration. Hence the demand for the grafted plants has also grown significantly. In this process, over 10,000 ha of marginal and wastelands have been brought under fruit orchards by the poor tribals, who have now come out of poverty. Women have the major share in this success.

Collection of minor forest produce, particularly oil seeds like neem, pongamia, *Madhuca indica*, ('Mahuva') is another area where women can play a significant role. It is estimated that neem seeds worth Rs.1000 mill. are wasted uncollected in the field. The reasons for such neglect are lack of awareness about their uses and value and inadequate facilities for processing and marketing. If these problems are solved, oilseed collection can be an attractive part time work for the rural women to generate additional income while the country can significantly boost its GNP through these products which are presently wasted.

Livestock husbandry is another important activity which can be handled very efficiently by women. It has been observed that women manage the dairy animals and small scale poultry better than men. A woman can easily take care of 3-4 cows and a family maintaining 3 crossbred cows can produce 7000-8000 litres of milk and earn an annual income of Rs.15,000-18,000 per year. In case of small animals and

backyard poultry, women take good care of them as the men seldom have interest in such minor activities.

Food processing is an important area to reduce wastage and add value to the produce. Small scale food processing is a popular activity very well accepted by rural women. The advantage of this activity is that the technology is indigenous, well known to local women, requires low investment and has a ready market in both rural and urban areas. Such small scale processing can bring down the cost, while the benefits can be shared by consumers and producers. Grass root level infrastructure to store food grains after the harvest and supply to the needy during lean season can ensure food for landless and small farmers. Realising its significance, many women groups in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka have established their grain banks, within the available space and resources of their members.

The women participating in food production can be assured of food security for their family as well, while generating gainful self-employment to come out of poverty. Active involvement of women in food processing and distribution will also lead to sustainable agriculture and ensure food security. Documentation of successful participation of women in enhancing food production and extending such knowledge among larger sections of the community can further boost the food production in the country.

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