

WORKING WITH WOMEN GROUPS:
INDIA EXPERIENCE

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1. Women in Agriculture – A Profile

Women represent one of the crucial development force in the world. As per the World Economic Profile, they form 50% of the World's Population, contribute 60% working force, making upto 30% of the official labour force and contribute 50% in the food production (FAO). At the home front, nearly 84% of all economically active women in India are engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Agriculture employs 4/5th of all economically active women; they make 1/3rd of the agriculture labour force and 48% self-employed farmers. There are 75 million women as against 15 million men in dairying, the number of women engaged in animal husbandry accounts for 20 million (as against 1.5 million men).

2. Development Bias

Despite such significant contribution of women in crop husbandry, animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry and post-harvest technology those engaged in formulating packages of technologies, services and public policies for rural areas have often tended to neglect the productive role of women. Gender discrimination rooted in law and custom is pervasive and it impedes socio-economic development. While investment in women programmes is central to sustainable development, women still face many barriers in benefiting from developmental programmes. **Women contribute but 80% towards food production but receive only 2-10% extension support (FAO).**

There has been, however, a significant shift in the approach towards well being of women from **“Welfare during Fifties”**, to **“Development during Seventies”** to **“Empowerment during Nineties”** & to **“Participation during 2000”**.

Of late women's contribution to agriculture development has been documented and it has been confirmed that women in India are integral part of agriculture development and users of technology.

The 9th Five Year Plan had identified **Empowerment of Women** as one of the objectives of the Plan and had stressed on the preparation of '**Component Plans for Women**' in every sector of development. It was felt that there is now need to "**Engender the Development Process**". An attempt in this direction would require identification of major constraints, which hamper the productivity of women farmers, and recommend appropriate policy and institutional measures to overcome those constraints. These measures may be in terms of **separate training for them, preferential membership in the rural cooperatives, access to technology, credit and marketing; and imparting new skills through a combination of theoretical training, practical demonstrations supplemented with hands-on experiences in the field.**

3. *Women in Development Plans: Agriculture Sector*

It was for the first time in the 4th Five Year Plan that an effort was made by Ministry of Agriculture to address the training and extension needs of women farmers with new and improved technology through "**Farmers Training and Education Programme**", in which a net work of **150 Farmers Training Centres** were established to **seal the visible gap between the recommended Package of Practices and the farm women's knowledge and skills about them.** In this Programme, a linkage of the supply of production inputs with improved technical training, supported by Farm Radio Broadcast and Functional Literacy was provided. **The unique feature of this programme was that for the first time, a cognizance of women's participation in agriculture was taken.**

The experience of the programme had shown that the States which gave due importance to this programme, especially in terms of curriculum planning and syllabus formulation (based on true status and needs of women farmers), achieved very good results. It was, this programme, which focused many issues that had to be categorically considered while planning and

implementing agriculture support programmes for women farmers. This programme for the first time mobilized women to form groups; who jointly discussed and resolved agriculture problems.

During the 5th Five Year Plan, **the transfer of technology approach through T&V System of Extension was launched on pilot basis** in mid-1970s in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and then spread over the country. The **Training and Visit system of Extension was not able to reach the farmwomen** because it was based on the assumption that information given to one family member got automatically disseminated to other family members. So, **the technical advice related to activities performed by women farmers was channelized by male extension worker to the male family member. Moreover, the concentration of the system was only on important crops rather than on diversified agriculture in which women are generally involved. So, the system failed to address itself to women farmers.**

The **intervention of the planning mechanism for the development of women, in fact really started in 6th Five Year Plan (1980-1985).** The earlier Five Year Plans (1950-1979) treated the issues of women's development as a subject of "Welfare" and clubbed these with other categories of welfare, such as the old, the disabled and the destitute. On line with the focus of the 6th Plan, agriculture sector launched **Special Projects for Women in Agriculture with the assistance of DANIDA**, an aid agency of Danish Government. The project was launched in **11 districts of Karnataka State.** Institutional Training to farmwomen followed-up with the Village based Pre-Seasonal Training was the main training component of the programme. **Mobilization of women into groups for channelizing other Support Services to women farmers** was the main extension component of the programme. The Programme is at present being implemented in all the districts of the state except Bihar. **The Project "Women Youth Training Extension Programme (WYTEP)" is in the 3rd Phase, which is essentially a Consolidating Phase of women's groups, in which the groups are being provided a common activity along with the concept of the Thrift Activity.** At present 176 Assistant Agriculture Officers (Female) are working in the

Extension System of Karnataka State, providing direct and indirect training/extension support to women farmers. Women under this project were being provided low-cost/no-cost technologies till very recently, but now they demand of middle level/advanced technologies.

7th Five Year Plan (1985-1990) stressed that special attention may be paid to improve the existing skills of women by imparting new skills under various programmes like Farmer's Training, Fodder Production, Post-harvest Technology, Training in Horticulture, etc. Two more women specific projects in agriculture sector were launched in the States of **Tamil Nadu and Orissa** during the 7th Plan with the assistance of DANIDA. **‘Tamil Nadu Women in Agriculture (TANWA)’**, Tamil Nadu started in July, 1987, covering 6 districts of the State in the First Phase. Village based training to women farmers were provided in the various circles/sub-divisions of these 6 districts. Multiplier Training by the trained farmwomen was a special component of this programme. At present the project is in its Phase-II and all the districts of the State excepting Ranganathan are being covered under the Project. 55 teams of three-member women officers have been inducted in 27 districts of the State. 165 Women Agriculture Graduates are at present providing direct Training & Extension Support to women farmers under TANWA in Tamil Nadu.

It has been observed under TANWA in Tamil Nadu that some of the conveners of women groups, besides being leaders and advisor of farming practices to women farmers are generally being consulted by male farmers also for various agriculture operations of that area. The trained women of Tamil Nadu, under TANWA have all been given an Identity Card, which these women use scrupulously for getting timely agriculture inputs and other benefits on priority basis.

A project with Danish assistance was also started during the 7th Plan in 4 districts of **Orissa in 1987. The main strategy of the project was to induct Women Village Extension Workers in the various circles of these Districts.** Lady Village Extension Workers (LVAW), after receiving a capsule training of 14 months in agriculture and allied fields were posted in the blocks of the 4 identified districts. Each LVAW addresses 40

women farmers of the circle in which, she is posted. **The LVAW generally impart training in 43 skills of agriculture and allied fields, which have been identified and are relevant to the farming system to their circle. The “Training & Extension for Women in Agriculture” (TEWA), Orissa** is at present in the Phase-II stage and 8 erstwhile districts of the State are being covered under the Project.

During the 7th Five Year Plan, one more project with the **Dutch assistance was also launched in 6 districts of Gujarat in 1989.** The women farmers are being provided training by peripatetic team of the Farmer’s Training Centres, which were strengthened under Project. The Project also provides Specialized Vocational Training to young girls. The **“Training of Farm Women in Agriculture” (TWA), Gujarat is in the Phase-II, covering 12 districts of the States.** Formation of women groups, Study Tours, Mahila Goshtis, are some of the important extension components of the Project.

The strategy of the 8th Five Year Plan (1990-1995) was **to increase participation of women in economic activities by getting them organized, along the cooperatives and trade union lines and expanding their access and control over resources through legal and administrative action.**

During the 8th Plan, 2 more projects, one with the assistance of Danish Government and other with the Dutch Government was started in **Madhya Pradesh (M.P) and Andhra Pradesh (A.P)** Both these projects, aim at providing training and extension support to women farmers through Peripatetic Teams of the Farmers’ Training Centres. Eight districts of M.P., and 6 districts of A.P. are respectively being covered in these 2 projects. Both these projects have entered the II Phase and 13 districts of M.P. and 12 districts of A.P. are covered under these projects.

Central Sector Scheme of Women in Agriculture was also launched during the 8th Five Year Plan on pilot basis covering one district each of the 7 States of the Country, viz. HP, Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, UP and Kerala. The scheme envisages **motivating and mobilizing farmwomen to be organized into groups, so that agriculture support**

services, such as input, technology, extension, credit, marketing intervention etc. are being channelized through them. Besides regular technical training in agriculture and allied areas, managerial, organizational, entrepreneurial, skill development training is being provided to women farmers, so as to help them develop into “Self-Help Viable Groups”, which can orchestrate their own activities, after the project period. Most of these women groups have become Common Activity Groups and are making efforts to consolidate these activities by linking it with the formal markets.

9th Five Year Plan has identified **empowerment of women as an objective of the 9th Plan and called for the preparation of component plans for women in every sector of development.** In line with the thrust of the 9th Plan Approach Paper, the Central Sector Scheme of Women in Agriculture was extended to cover 15 districts in 15 States with an estimates cost of Rs.4.67 crores.

Special Sub-Programme on the **“Empowerment of Women Farmers”** were also launched during the 9th Plan Period with UNDP Assistance under UNDP Food Security Programme in the States of **Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.** One Additional Support Sub-Programme has also been launched with UNDP Assistance in Super Cyclone Affected Districts of Orissa. All these Sub-Programmes essentially aim to address gender issues in agriculture, sustainable dry land agriculture, and re-generation of waste and fallow lands, appropriate technologies for women farmers and Natural Resources Management. Women Groups are being provided Micro-capital Assistance as Revolving Funds under these Projects for use in purchase of Agricultural Inputs/Lands Lease, Land Development Activities, Risk Coverage and Hiring of Equipment. Alternative Public Distribution System is being initiated under these Projects by setting up Community Storage Bins, Seed Banks etc. Women Groups are being encouraged to take up Collective Farming for which Training & Extension Support is being provided under these Projects. Most of these Programmes are being implemented through the NGOs.

Addressing gender concerns is one the priority areas under Innovation in Technology Component of World Bank

Assisted National Agricultural Technology Project (NATP) which was launched during the 9th Plan Period and is working on development of new Institutional Arrangements for technology transfer that involves participation of all the stake holders responsible for generation and dissemination of technology. At present this project is being implemented in the 7 States of the country viz. Punjab, HP, Orissa, Bihar, Maharashtra, AP and Jharkhand.

The Agricultural Policy has also highlighted incorporation of gender issues in the agricultural development agenda recognizing women's role as farmers and producers of crops and livestock, as users of technology, as active agents in marketing, processing and storage of food and as agricultural labourers. The policy states that high priority should be accorded to recognition and mainstreaming of women's role in agriculture. Appropriate structural, functional and institutional measures would be initiated to empower women and build their capacities and improve their access to inputs such as land, credit and agricultural technology.

4. Working with Women Groups

Bringing women into Self Help Groups (SHGs) has emerged as one of the most successful achievements of the women specific projects in Agriculture Sector. These Self Help Groups were not the part of the original project design but grew directly out of the experiences gained in early stages of these project implementation and they are now viewed as **key institutions**, which are vital to ensure the sustainability of project interventions. To ensure a high level of women's participation in the project process, it is essential to address the women as a '**Group**'. this collectivization is in itself an **Empowerment Strategy** and laid the foundation for formation of Self Help Groups. The majority of the Self Help Groups are of women only, and are highly participatory, providing unique opportunities to help women to grow in self confidence and take more active role both in community and decision making process which affects their own life.

The main thrust, therefore, during 10th Plan Period is **organizing women into small, homogenous Self Help Groups and channelize all agricultural support services such as training, extension, information, credit, input, marketing etc. through these groups.** All agricultural projects are using, with commendable success, women Self Help Groups, supported by NGOs and Animators to mobilize women and bring about self reliance and confidence amongst the women members.

These Farm Women Groups are being equipped through skill upgradation, specialized training and extension activities to undertake more remunerative on-farm and off-farm activities.

Women are being trained in different specialized areas like Crop Husbandry, Animal Husbandry, Horticulture, Bio and Organic Farming etc. Training is also being provided to them in communication, managerial, administrative, accounting and entrepreneurship skills, in order to aid them with confidence to deal with officials. Women members of these groups are also being taught to take up **group activities like food processing, value addition, packaging and marketing.** Special Facility Centres are being developed where these women groups can collectively work to market their produce.

The essential features of these Self Help Groups are:

- ☞ ownership of Group by the members;
- ☞ collectively break the socio-cultural-societal constraints;
- ☞ mutual help as the foundation of the groups;
- ☞ forum for collective learning;
- ☞ forum for inter agency dialogue and cooperation;
- ☞ cost effective technical and financial delivery mechanism;
- ☞ de-jure and de-facto female heads of households essentially constitute the members.

Mature Self Help Groups assist in formulation of new groups and efforts are being made to promote Self Help Groups' Cluster/Association/Federation. These Groups are also being encouraged to take up thrift and saving activities. National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD) and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) have launched special projects to provide micro credit to assist these Self Help Groups. The

growing response of Banks to group lendings have facilitated women's access to credit and their involvement in income generating activities.

A number of micro-level studies have revealed that group related activities and credit worthiness has lead to:

- ✍✍ increased self-confidence, self esteem and autonomy of women group members;
- ✍✍ enhance their ability to articulate needs, make demands and enforce rights both as an individual and in groups;
- ✍✍ increased their access and control over economic and social resources and the political process;
- ✍✍ increased participation in planning and decision making process at family and community levels;

Efforts are now being made to form the Association/Federation of clusters of groups so that these groups can:

- ✍✍ Share experiences and take collective actions;
- ✍✍ Undertake collective knowledge building and leadership;
- ✍✍ Support weak groups;
- ✍✍ Solve inter-group and intra-group disputes/problems;
- ✍✍ Promote new groups;
- ✍✍ Monitor the progress of members of Self Help Groups towards empowerment;
- ✍✍ Lobby for policy change and resource mobilization;
- ✍✍ Promote the presentation of SHG in appropriate forum.

5. Extension Approach to Tenth Plan: Women Farmers

In the context of meeting the holistic needs of increasing agricultural production, yet do so in a sustainable manner, agricultural extension has a crucial role to play. Reforms in the system during the 10th Plan envisage an extension service more broad-based and holistic in content and scope, thus beyond agricultural technology transfer. Its normal task of transferring and disseminating appropriate technologies and agronomic practices would not be sufficient. Extension agencies, services and workers will need to exercise a more proactive and participatory role, serve as knowledge/information agents,

initiating and facilitating mutually meaningful and equitable knowledge based transactions among agricultural researchers, trainers and primary producers. All this needs to be done in the effective and cost efficient manner.

Technology generation and its application during the 10th Plan will have to focus more strongly than before on the themes of optimization by producers of their available resources, sustainability, coping with diversity by adapting technology more specifically to agro-ecological or social circumstances and creation of a policy environment that promotes profitable, productive and sustainable farming.

Reforms in agricultural extension already initiated and proposed to be undertaken on wider scale has envisaged **Mainstreaming of Women in Agriculture** as one of the Key Areas of Reforms during the 10th Plan Period.

6. *Mainstreaming Women in Agriculture*

Mainstreaming Women in Agriculture: Gender concerns need to be mainstreamed in the agricultural extension process. Public extension systems, which must disseminate new technology and information, are still largely male dominated. Hence the necessity to target women is to ensure that they receive information relevant to their work, particularly, with reference to crops and livestock.

Improving access to extension and training: Women farmers usually have been neglected in extension efforts. Gender inequality had so far not been challenged by the agricultural extension system in the past. However, with the changing scenerio, the need for innovating changes in extension approaches has assumed center-stage. Under these innovations efforts will need to be made both by the central and State governments to improve extension services to reach farm women through (i) extension policy reorientation that explicitly recognizes farm women as agricultural extension clientele; (ii) training of men and women extension staff on women's role in agriculture and rural development and how agricultural extension work could be organized and conducted to meet women's needs in agriculture and rural development activities;

(iii) training of women on decision-making in the context of farm and home management; (iv) training of women farmers on agricultural marketing, particularly with respect to post-harvest processing, on farm value addition and market requirements/demand.

Redesign of extension services to reach women farmers:

Extension services are being redesigned to focus on women through (i) appropriate training/sensitization of extension personnel towards the role and contribution of women in the total agriculture system; (ii) increasing the proportion of trained female extension workers to gradually ensure that at least one-third of all extension workers are women; (iii) sensitizing male extension workers to the needs, approaches and perspectives of women through appropriate training and orientation programmes thereby dispelling the notion that only women can address extension needs of farm women; (iv) improving communication between women, researchers, marketing agencies and extension workers required for the development of technology suitable for women; (v) developing appropriate extension methodologies that recognize the multi-dimensional role of women and the socio-cultural barriers, in which women farmers operate in a rural society; (vi) establishing Head of the Farming family as the target group, for extension services and assuming that the information will automatically trickle down to women farmers.

Expanding the sphere of women extension workers:

The number of female agricultural extension workers would be increased through (i) re-examination of all service cadre rules for hidden gender biases; (ii) improvement of female attendance at agricultural institutes and school; (iii) building incentives such as scholarships and stipends for more women to take up undergraduate and post graduate courses in the agricultural and allied sciences; (iv) redesigning of agricultural training curricula to include women's concerns; (v) ensuring that women are adequately represented in all the training programmes whether domestic or overseas, (vi) redesigning of training facilities to make them suitable for large numbers of female students and trainees; (vii) inclusion in the teaching curricula for extension workers, greater analysis and extension methods that take into account women's time, mobility and cultural situation; and

(vii) exploring the specific role of farm women in the marketing of agriculture produce.

7. *Policy Framework for Mainstreaming Women in Agriculture*

To ensure the usefulness and relevance of the research and extension programmes to women, the following criteria must be considered while planning the programme:

- ✍ The Planning of extension programmes must be based on accurate and appropriate data, which reflect the true status and need of women farmers. Build in reliable database by conducting base-line Surveys or local need assessment before initiating women specific programmes.
- ✍ Women's development must be viewed as part of the development of the total community, and must be provided with adequate resources at all levels. Make efforts to prepare the main target group as farmwomen who work with their own hands & secondary target group could be husbands so as to modulate the household approach.
- ✍ Training for women should also concentrate on the skills needed for motivation, employment, leadership and participation.
- ✍ Group approaches, compared to methods of extension that are geared to individuals, have the potential to extend the research and extension efforts to women farmer and to increase the impact of the extension work. Women Farmers Interest Groups (FIGs), Self-help Groups (SHGs) has emerged as one of the major strategies in development of women. **Various schemes have shown that strong women's groups contribute substantially to the development and convergence of service and activities. Group extension for women will help to replace the top down approach with bottom up approach in technology transfer and these groups will demand for information, technology and management techniques and the extension workers would respond to the group demand.**
- ✍ Women's programmes must recognize the balance, which exists in the workloads and working conditions of men and

women. Many programmes designed for women neglect the already heavy burden of the work they carry.

- ✍ ✍ Mission approach should be adopted for women in agriculture programmes.
- ✍ ✍ To provide a framework and a platform for continuity, Animators and Facilitators should be employed from the local women leaders. They could then work as “Krishak Mahila Mitra Kisan” or “para-professionals”.
- ✍ ✍ Women’s programmes should provide income to women and power, which accompanies it to empower women farmers.
- ✍ ✍ Training and extension programmes for women must meet the need for increased managerial, organizational, entrepreneurial and decision-making skills, along with the technical skills, related to production, post harvest processing, value addition, marketing small scale industries etc.
- ✍ ✍ Women’s programme must recognize and address health, nutrition and family planning issues also.
- ✍ ✍ Traditional social norms and values still dictate lives and interaction of people in our villages. In a class conscious stratified society, communication linkages male rural women by make extension functionary cannot be that readily established. Technical advise in activities performed by women may have to be channelized via male family member. In such circumstance, inherent difficulties of reliable messages transmission are met; not to mention the absence of practical teaching and direct feedback from the intended beneficiaries. So, there is a general agreement the employing more female agricultural extension workers will help to reach the rural women more satisfactorily.
- ✍ ✍ The incidence of female-headed households is growing, due to changes in land holding systems along with population growth. The NSSO Report has indicated that 18% households are headed by women but micro-level studies reveal the figure as 30 to 35 %. The males migrate from rural areas to urban areas in search of jobs, leaving women to look after the farm. In addition, as a consequence of demographic factors such as death of husband, or desertion, women assume headship. Studies undertaken on characteristics of female-headed households show that such households are the most poverty stricken

households. Special programme have to be undertaken for the **Female Headed Households**.

- ✍ ~~Most~~ Most of the frontline worker i.e. Agriculture Assistants/Agricultural Demonstrators and Village Extension Officer are men. Hence, the communication is obviously from men to men. So the interest, aptitude and exposure of the staff members are primarily directed to farm operations, performed by men. This aptitude is both the cause and the symptom of inadequate technical recommendations and advise for agricultural activities performed primarily by women. Without useful technical advise on women oriented production activities, extension is unable to serve the entire technical requirements of agriculture in general, and farmwomen in particular. Under the circumstance, the extension need of farm women are often seen in terms of Home Science, sewing, clothing, cooking and child care etc. leaving aside the activities of agriculture. So there is an urgent need of **“Gender Sensitization”** of planners, policymakers and implementers of the agriculture programmes to the needs and requirements of women farmers. Further, the curriculum of the agricultural education need to focus on women as a co-partner in agricultural production so that in the absence of women agricultural graduates men can also handle women issues.
- ✍ ~~Extensive~~ Extensive use of modern information technology may be promoted for communication between researchers, extension workers and women farmers. “Local” radio and new FM transmitters open up possibilities of area specific broadcasts exclusively for the farm operations done by women farmers. All India Radio, Private FM, Doordarshan, Private Cable Network are being promoted for more rapid and effective dissemination of information so advice to women farming communities may be promoted through these media followed and backed up with face to face contacts.
- ✍ ~~Women~~ Women farmers perceive marketing as the major constraint in enhancing farm incomes through the agro-based activities. Marketing extension so far has not received the attention it deserves. Production will now need to be significantly dictated by market requirements.

So, there is a need to give adequate thrust on marketing extension.

✍️ **Promotion of Private Extension Services** by the allocation of public resources. Public funds must be made available to NGOs, Farmers Associations, and Para-professionals of private foundations for conducting extension work for women farmers.