

WORKSHOP ON WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE IN SOUTH ASIA

Throughout the South Asian region, women account for about 39 percent of the agricultural workforce (Ramachandran 2006)¹, working as managers of land to agricultural labourers. The well-recognized low status of women in South Asia (Smith and Haddad, 2000)² also has implications for women's involvement in agriculture and the returns to women of their inputs into agriculture. Experience and research findings from South Asia indicate that women's involvement in agriculture is not supported by a corresponding recognition of women as key stakeholders in agriculture. Women continue to have limited access to productive resources and services, markets and marketing facilities. Women's involvement in agriculture and their status in their households and communities also have implications for access to food for them and other vulnerable household members such as children.

Overlaid on these factors are changing food consumption habits, new technology and integration of world markets, all of which are influencing food and farming practices across countries. There is an increasing shift towards high value and processed food and increasing consumption of meat, eggs, fish, milk and dairy products. These changes have significant implications for agriculture in general and farming communities including women in particular.

A key aspect that is central to the issue of women in agriculture and has generally been overlooked is an understanding of the interdependence and social relationship between women and men that determines gender relations (White 1997)³. Development programmes and policies have largely tended to focus on women in isolation with little effort to work alongside men and include them in restructuring social relations to mainstream gender. If women's empowerment is to be achieved and sustained in agriculture, it must be complemented by programmes that include working with men to bring about the desired structural change. Gender mainstreaming should, therefore, be a cross-cutting theme across all programmes.

It is in this changing agricultural context and the socio-cultural context of South Asia that it becomes imperative to analyse the role of women through all stages of the agriculture value chain, from seed collection to crop production and marketing and consumption. Such an analysis can help identify key issues, opportunities and constraints to the involvement of women in agriculture. It can also help facilitate the development of approaches to address these, document experience and lessons for wider dissemination and enable dialogue for the development of appropriate policies and programmes for mainstreaming and institutionalising gender in agriculture.

1. ACCESS TO PRODUCTIVE RESOURCES & SERVICES

A major constraint to mainstreaming women's issues in agriculture is the lack of access to and control and ownership of productive resources such as land, water, credit, agricultural inputs, training and extension services. Since most agriculture development activities are

¹ Ramachandran, N (2006). *Women and Food Security in South Asia : Current Issues and Emerging Concerns*. Research Paper No. 2006/131. United Nations University, UNU-WIDER.

² Smith, L.C., Haddad, L. (2000). *Explaining Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries: A Cross-Country Analysis*. Washington, DC: IFPRI.

³ White, S. C. (1997). *Men, Masculinities and the Politics of Development*. Gender and Development. Vol 5, No.2

linked to asset ownership, women by and large are denied access and rarely control or own productive resources. Land titles are largely in the name of men, and rarely is joint ownership promoted, even under large scale government programmes. Evidence from water users' associations in South Asia indicate that membership is linked to either formal right holders to irrigated land (Sri Lanka) or require head of household status or sometimes a combination of both as in Nepal (Meinzen-Dick and Zwartveen 2003)⁴. Since men tend to fill these roles more often than women, here again women lose out on control and access to a key productive resource. In fact, in a cross-site analysis in Sri Lanka, West Bengal and Kerala, Bhatla et al. (2006)⁵ find that women's property ownership serves as a protective factor against domestic violence.

Since women are not perceived as land-owners and owners of other productive assets, interventions that seek to promote agriculture such as extension and credit facilities and market linkages, largely by-pass women and are concentrated on the needs and priorities articulated by men. This has resulted in a situation where women primarily contribute labour required for agricultural operations and related allied activities, but do not have a voice in decision making related to the use and management of these assets. The increasing rural to urban migration, diversification into non-farm activities, and farmer suicides over large parts of central and western India, has further marginalized women, since the absence of a male representative does not allow them to access and benefit from agriculture development programmes.

Without land rights, women often cannot provide collateral to gain access to credit. For women, tenure rights and rights to complementary assets are a 'strategic gender need' (Moser 1989)⁶ and provide a basic incentive for undertaking agricultural investments such as investments in irrigation, crop diversification, livestock etc that would bring greater gains to women farmers. Notably, however, in areas of restricted women's mobility or higher gender segregation, as seen in parts of South Asia, women may not prefer secure tenure rights through independent/legal titling to land if it jeopardizes their status within the family or creates additional burdens on them to meet household food security needs (Rao, 2006)⁷.

A fall out of the marginalization of women in agriculture extension programmes has been an absence of research and technology development that is targeted at reducing the work burden of women. There has been little analysis of the inter-linkages in agriculture. For example, it has been reported that one result of the widespread use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides is the diminishing growth of natural greens in the field. As these greens, which are usually gathered by women, have provided agricultural households with an important source of nutrition, the burden of providing alternative nutrition sources has fallen on women (based on case studies of the Deccan Development Society, Andhra Pradesh; also reported in

⁴ Meinzen-Dick, R.S., and M Zwartveen (2003). *Gendered Participation in Water Management : Issues from Water Users' Associations in South Asia. In Household Decisions, Gender and Development : A Synthesis of Recent Research*, A. R. Quisumbing, ed. Washington., D.C. : International Food Policy Research Institute.

⁵ Bhatla N., S. Chakraborty, and N. Duvvury. 2006. Property Ownership and Inheritance Rights of Women as Social Protection from Domestic Violence: Cross-site Analysis. In *Property Ownership and Inheritance Rights of Women for Social Protection –The South Asia Experience*, ed. International Center for Research on Women. Washington, DC.

⁶ Moser, C (1989). *Gender Planning in the Third World : Meeting Practical and Strategic Needs*. World Development 17:11.

⁷ Rao, N. 2006. Land rights, gender equality and household food security: Exploring the conceptual links in the case of India. *Food Policy* 31; 80–193

Bangladesh by Hossain et al. 2007⁸). On the positive side, a study of a program to expand vegetable production by landless women in Bangladesh showed that successful agricultural programs also contributed to women's empowerment.

2. ACCESS TO MARKETS AND MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to limited access to markets and marketing opportunities, women in South Asia also face constraints with respect to access to appropriate knowledge and information on markets and related aspects. Agriculture diversification and an integrated farming systems approach offer immense opportunities for both income generation and food security, particularly for women farmers. It is imperative to support such approaches for facilitating women's access to markets, and business development services. For example, it is important to ask whether collective approaches to marketing (as in dairy cooperatives) can provide women with access to other high-value markets. Furthermore, it is important to consider what kinds of marketing arrangements allow women to gain and control income, and the effects this may have on their status in the household.

Moreover, with globalization and the consequent integration with world markets, there is a need to assess the implications of global and national processes, such as global value and commodity chains, WTO related changes in labor markets on agriculture with a particular focus on women farmers. There is also a need to study and understand opportunities, mechanisms and institutions for mitigating the impact of some of these global and national market-related processes on women farmers as well as their households.

3. IMPROVED ACCESS TO FOOD AND IMPACTS ON NUTRITION

It is well known that women are a gateway both to household food security and child health and nutrition (Quisumbing, 2003)⁹. The influence of women's social status on the wellbeing of their children, especially in South Asia, is also known (Smith et al, 2003)¹⁰. In the context of this workshop, it is important to examine the role of women's status and decision-making in the household both for their involvement in agriculture as well as their use of the products of their involvement in agriculture for their own wellbeing and that of their children.

Availability of adequate food (quantity and quality), patterns of consumption and impacts on nutritional outcomes for women and other vulnerable household members are, therefore, dependent on intra-household allocation of resources. Within the context of household dynamics, food security is related to decisions regarding responsibility for food production, earning cash income for food purchases, purchasing and preparing food and finally actual access to food in terms of consumption. In an agricultural context, then, it is important to understand how some of these decisions are influenced by gender-related factors, and to

⁸ Hossain, M., D. Lewis, M. L. Bose, and A. Chowdhury. 2007. Rice Research, Technological Progress, and Poverty: The Bangladesh Case. In Adato, Michelle and Ruth S. Meinzen-Dick (eds.). *Agricultural Research, Livelihoods, and Poverty: Studies of Economic and Social Impacts in Six Countries*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press and International Food Policy Research Institute.

⁹ A. R. Quisumbing, ed. *Household Decisions, Gender and Development : A Synthesis of Recent Research*, Washington., D.C. : International Food Policy Research Institute.

¹⁰ Smith LC, Ramakrishnan U, Ndiaye A, Haddad L, and Martorell R. 2003. The Importance of Women's Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries. Washington, DC: IFPRI.

examine their impacts on household food security as well consumption patterns within households.

Workshop Objective

Following from the above, it is apparent that there is a clear need to analyse and document successful efforts in addressing gender-related concerns in agriculture in South Asia, and to disseminate these to a wider policy audience to ensure successful mainstreaming of gender concerns in agriculture. Linked with this is the need to explore options for more equitable and sustainable solutions for women in agriculture through action research and policy dialogue in partnership with government, civil society organizations, particularly NGOs, and with members of communities in which they work.

With these objectives in mind, the Aga Khan Foundation and the International Food Policy Research Institute propose to organize a workshop on Women in Agriculture in South Asia that focuses on the three sub themes of access to productive resources, markets and marketing opportunities and food consumption and nutritional outcomes.

Overarching objective of the workshop

The workshop aims at discussing strategies that contribute to the process of mainstreaming and institutionalizing successful approaches in agriculture development that have improved and facilitated women's access to productive resources and services, markets, food and nutrition.

Expected outcome of the Workshop

Contribute to the development of an enabling environment for improving policy and practice that addresses the strategic gender needs of women in agriculture, and ensures gender mainstreaming and institutionalization through appropriate institutional mechanisms.

Proposed workshop participants

The workshop is proposed for field practitioners, policy makers, researchers and academicians, institutes/ organizations that have played a lead role in mainstreaming gender/ bringing to the forefront women's issues, international development agencies and corporate agencies.