



Women Empowerment Through Diversification of Agriculture

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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.

Introduction

Women constitute a major component of agricultural workforce. But with 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 empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. It 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.

The Constraints

Women are engaged in tasks which are labor intensive like sowing, weeding, harvesting, land preparation, transplanting and post harvest activities like cleaning, grading, shelling and processing etc.. They have tremendous participation in livestock management activities. Women also contribute in decision making processes in regard to post harvest management of agricultural and horticultural produce, biomass utilization and seed production. Even with this varied spectrum, women are yet to receive proper recognition for their roles in agriculture and allied occupations. With the development of a number of gender neutral tools/equipments for agricultural activities, women, still, have lagged behind in their adoption. There are multifarious concerns of illiteracy, property rights, economic dependence, unpaid household activities etc. which hampers the growth and empowerment of women.

The Possibilities

Possible areas in agriculture and allied disciplines for women are many. They are coherent with their routine, require less capital and can prove to be a catalyst in women empowerment.

Dairying: It has always been an integral part of Mixed Farming System and as a profession it fits very well in the framework of rural economic activity. Dairying is consistent with the inherent daily tasks of women and their involvement will not only provide employment but develop a sense of self-worth. The National Dairy Development Board implements cooperative development and governance programmes across the country with the aim to help create self-reliant, jointly owned, democratically controlled and professionally managed cooperative institutions, responsive to the socio-economic and cultural expectations of their members. This helps 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.

Agro-processing and value addition: Agriculture as a single source of income is not enough. Some sort of processing or value addition of farm products is essential. This particular aspect can be highly profitable as it provides additional income at minimum investment. Value addition can simply involve cleaning/grading/packing of grains etc. or even something elaborate like preserved fruits and vegetables. Many simple farm-produce-processing technologies have been developed using minimum equipment and small investments. Women should be trained for handling these equipments/gadgets. Krishi Vigyan Kendras organize such skill development trainings for women at regular intervals.

Mushroom cultivation: Mushroom cultivation is simple, low cost, suitable for rural areas, is labor intensive and can provide employment in both semi-urban and rural areas. The demand of mushrooms in urban areas is very high and they can be supplied in fresh and dried forms. The technique is easy but demands sincere efforts. Mushroom cultivation is a women friendly profession. It is that agricultural activity in which women can play a vital role without sacrificing their household responsibilities.

Bee-keeping: Bee-keeping is an ideal, easy and less labor intensive enterprise. Its byproducts are honey and wax. Honey can not only be used as a sweetener but also as an ingredient in many medicines as it possesses properties like blood cleanser etc. Wax on the other hand can be utilized in manufacturing creams, polish, ointments, inks and medicines etc. Women can receive training from KVKs or Horticulture Department to get acquainted with the nuances of bee-keeping. This enterprise does not require large spaces and can be started in backyards or kitchen gardens. Ideally, one can develop 8-10 bee colonies in 1 ha area. Farm women, families and unemployed youth can be encouraged to adopt this hobby which could turn into a large scale profitable business. There is less initial investment but returns are quick.

Vermicompost production: Vermicompost production again is an easy and cheaper enterprise. The beauty of it is that it can be produced from farm wastes like leaves, dirt, stems, dung etc. which are readily available in rural settings. Vermicompost can be strained, packed in bags and sold as it is. This is not such an exhausting job and is women friendly.

Plant nursery preparation: Seedlings can be prepared in a small space and sold off resulting in additional income. Nursery preparation if done scientifically can help in setting up a niche

market. Women can learn the technique and prepare about one thousand seedlings in a raised area of 10x3 ft.

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., 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.

Goat rearing: Goat rearing is a profitable venture which can provide an appreciable income. This business requires can be really lucrative if initiated with proper training and breeds. There are new and improved breeds available which has higher milk production and faster growth. Breeds like Sirohi in goats are popular for better growth and milk production.

Gardener: Urban or Semi urban women should exploit this area by getting proper training from KVKs and learning the specifics of gardening. This area is male dominated but women can be equally good and earn their identity along with income. After learning about ornamental plants, their care, seasons, lawns, disease symptoms etc. women can provide gardening services in their nearby areas and can even tie-up with commercial institutions.

Financial Institutions

Initiating any enterprise or venture requires capital but women in our society are mostly devoid of any property or capital in their name, which is termed as “gender inequality”. Due to this, financial institutions play a key role in aiding women owned or women operated enterprises. The three major heads which can help women are- government, banks and non-government organizations (NGOs). There are many government run policies and programmes like National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) etc. As far as banks and financial institutions are concerned, NABARD, SIDBI, KVIC, cooperative societies, regional rural banks etc. provide loan opportunities to rural women for dairying, beekeeping, food processing and preservation, mushroom cultivation, spices processing, potato chips, *dalia* and other cottage industries. NGOs serve as a linkage between women groups and banks and also provide trainings.

Conclusion

Essential to empowerment is knowledge and skill development. Self employment is key to progress of women. Generation of opportunities for women to have control over production resources that would result in additional income is important. Group approach in form of self help groups is highly recommended. It reduces risk and provides with a cumulative capital. A strong and effective women’s cooperative movement is desirable to boost economic upliftment process of rural women and families. Women must rise above gender inequality and should try to gain access to financial resources of the family. They should assume larger role in making decisions related to setting up of small cottage and agribased enterprises.