



Women Are Catalysts for Improving Livelihoods in Rural India

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Abstract:

Poverty in India is rife. Some 43% of children under five are malnourished, and the country is home to a third of the world's poor. Systemic inequality means that those most affected are women and Dalits, who continue to face caste-based discrimination. Although the southern state of Tamil Nadu holds India's second-largest economy, it also has high levels of poverty, particularly in rural areas. Its people – around 22% of whom are Dalits – rely heavily on agriculture to earn a living.

For thousands of years India thrived on natural farming until the Green Revolution in the 1960s. Contrary to its current meaning the term 'green' refers to a period in the 60s and 70s where farmers in India were persuaded to abandon traditional organic methods and grow crops the modern, American way. Extensive dependence on chemical farming has resulted in the land losing its fertility and demanding larger quantities of fertilizers. Pests are becoming immune, requiring the farmers to use stronger, more expensive pesticides. Due to the increased cost of farming, farmers are falling into the trap of money lenders, who exploit and threaten them, forcing many to commit suicide. There are widespread concerns about the effects of chemicals on people's health. In terms of farmers' livelihoods, the Green Revolution has not created growth, it has created poverty and environmental destruction. Amidst a plethora of paradoxes; government subsidies for chemical farming, a backdrop of shocking poverty, gender inequality and caste-based discrimination, a community of women are breaking social barriers and empowering themselves through an organic farming enterprise.

In the remote rural village of Annakanmurum, a small farm holding owned by Senthamilselvi is hosting an organic farming initiative, EcoVeg, funded by international development charity Christian Aid. The aim of EcoVeg is to help poor farmers, especially women and those from excluded, Dalit, communities to become self-sufficient. The project educates farmers about the benefits of organic farming, provides training and help with marketing, and selling their produce for a fair price.

Senthamilselvi, who helps run the project, is from the dominant Thevar caste. She knew nothing of caste discrimination until she did her degree in Sociology. The knowledge she gained changed her worldview and her life forever. She is now dedicated to fighting the oppression of women and caste-based discrimination. In India women have no right to land. Senthamilselvi was only able to inherit from her father because she had no brothers. She used her inheritance to buy land, which she has given to a collective of women to start an organic farming business. 'Organic farming is sustainable. That's why I am doing it: so we don't need to rely on anyone else, we can be self-sufficient. No mother wants to give poison to her child. Our work is to help people

understand that chemical farming is poisoning them. Only women can understand and change this,' said Senthamilselvi.

Introduction:

It is having an encouraging impact. Not only is it producing quality organic vegetables for their community it is also improving rural women's working conditions and their health, and strengthening their financial independence, empowerment and social status. 'Previously we had no idea about business or organic farming skills. Women have no right to land in India and they don't manage the money, even when they earn it. As a women's group, we are working together to build a business,' said G Parvathy, of the women's collective. For a woman from a Dalit community in India, opportunities are scarce. Other than working as a farm labourer on a chemical farm, which causes poor health conditions, alternative options include: back-breaking work as a brick labourer, or enslavement in a matchstick or fireworks factory, with exposure to toxic chemicals, which burn the skin and intoxicate the lungs. Payment is 150 rupees a day (₹1.60)

The women at the Akkanapuram collective are now paving the way to a healthier and more equal community. They now have all the skills to prepare their own organic inputs and pesticides, and to preserve and propagate their own seeds. 'Chemical farming is more expensive than organic farming. It makes you dependent, it damages the soil and the environment. It damages your health it causes skins issues, cancer, stomach infections and stunted growth in children,' said Alagumayil, a

former chemical farm labourer and brick labourer.

Members of the Akkanapuram Collective are growing about nine crops – brinjal, chili, onion, tomato, snake gourd, beans, bitter gourd, ladies fingers, tuberose – in a single season by dedicating a row to each crop. The natural farming method allows them to produce crops at near zero cost. Staff from the EcoVeg programme train the farmers on how to prepare organic fertilisers using cow dung and urine, jaggery and lentil powder, as well as organic pesticides using the leaves of local plants which are all available in the farm vicinity. They have also been trained how to preserve seeds in cow dung so in the future they will not have to buy seeds.

'I'm promoting an alternative livelihood,' said Senthamilselvi. 'In the factories the Dalit women would have been enslaved and dependent because that work leaves them without any skills. For example, in a matchstick mill they work on one specific part of matchsticks over and over again – they don't learn any process. When they leave they have no skills or alternative work prospects.

As mentioned earlier, the inside/outside boundaries for women vary by region and by the socioeconomic status of the household. Several regional factors influence household strategies for the deployment of female labor. One is the regional economy such as the basic agro ecological endowment (topography, rainfall, climate, soil type, etc.). This, in turn, determines traditional farming systems and

crop choices. Another important economic variable is the physical and institutional infrastructure (roads, irrigation, markets, extension, credit), which affects the adoption of improved agricultural technology (see Statistical Appendix Table 1). Variations in the availability of nonfarm employment, in the amount of subsistence versus commercial agriculture, and in the proportion of wage to family labor are also important (see Statistical Appendix Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). All of these factors affect the regional incidence of poverty, and poverty is probably the most powerful determinant of female labor force behavior in India (see Statistical Appendix Table 7). Sociocultural variables as well as economic variables vary by region. These variables include the interrelated structures of kinship and religious belief. Both the North and the South are dominated by the strongly patrilineal ideology of Hinduism. Sons are needed for salvation in the next world and economic viability and continuity in this one. (Gender and Migration in Developing Countries, Belhaven, London. Chant, Sylvia (2003). "Female Household Headship and the Feminisation of Poverty: Facts, Fictions and Forward Strategies", Gender Institute, New working Paper Series, Issue 9)

Materials and Methods:

Genealogical links for at least seven generations. Preferably these women marry someone from a distant village where support expected from their natal kin after marriage will be minimal. Even more than in the South, brides in the North are likely to be viewed by the close-knit joint family into which they man-y as outsiders who need to be closely controlled. On the whole, the

barriers to women's access are greater in the North than in the South. Female labor force participation rates are lower, and female land ownership is far less common in the North (see Statistical Appendix Table 8). Health indicators, such as female infant mortality, and over-all sex ratios are more heavily biased against females in the North. This is strikingly illustrated in Figure 3.1, which presents district level data on juvenile sex ratios (JSR).¹ Even more disturbing is the increase in the mortality of girls suggested by comparison of the 1961 and 1971 data in the figure. Female literacy is also lower in the North than in the South. Purdah, high dowry payments, and violence against women are all much more prevalent in the North (see Figure 3.2). There is also, a strong correlation between these various indicators of women's low status and the high fertility rates that prevail in most of the North. Given the link between female seclusion and socioeconomic (and ritual) status, it is not surprising that the constraints on women's access appear to be stronger among caste Hindus than among scheduled tribes and castes-and stronger among land-owning cultivators than among landless laborers or marginal farm families. Across regions, there is a very clear "hierarchy of labor" that assigns the highest prestige to conventional domestic work for the family inside the home and courtyard. Somewhat lower prestige is attached to collecting fuel and foddei' for the family or helping to cultivate the family fields. And the lowest value is attached to manual work for others because it necessitates not only a woman's physical presence in the public sphere but her involvement in market transactions. This schematic representation is confirmed by

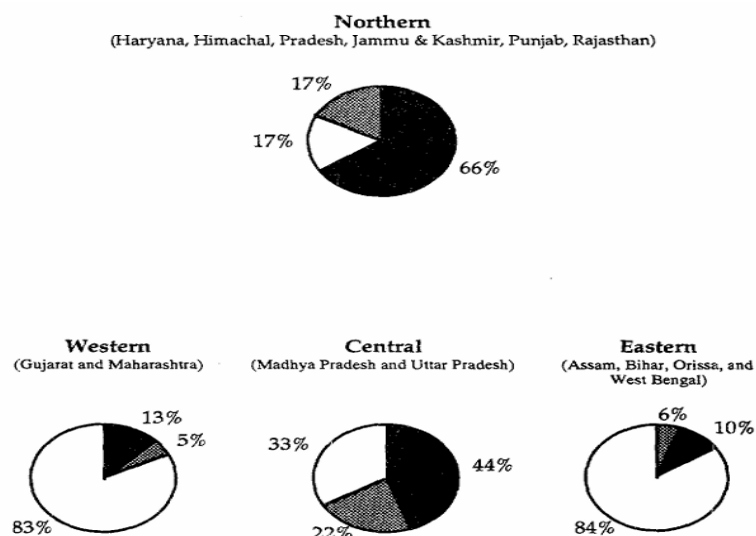
both macro- and micro level data. Show a clear inverse relationship between household economic status and female labor force participation: the households in the second lowest expenditure class had a female 1. A juvenile sex ratio is the number of boys per 100 girls under ten years of age. (Women and Poverty in the Third World, The John Hopkins university Press, Baltimore and London. Cagatay, N. (1998). "Gender and Poverty", uNDP Social Development and Poverty Elimination Division, Working Paper Series, No.5, May. Chant, Sylvia (1992).

Discussion:

There is a strong connection between a woman's access to the outside-particularly to independent income-and her control over the use of family resources on the inside. In fact, the ability to earn and control income appears to be one of the most powerful determinants of a woman's status in the family. Although overall resource levels are lower for poor households and for those from scheduled caste and tribal groups,

women's access to and control over the use of these resources is more egalitarian in such households.¹ There is an inverse correlation between a woman's status in the community (based on the economic status of her household, its ability to support her, and consequently the kind of work she has to do) and her status within the household. At one end of the continuum in Table 4.1 is the female household head who is the most economically vulnerable in the community, but who has full say over the allocation of her household's meager resources. Referring to conventional male-headed households, Parthasarthy (1988, 29) suggests that female wage workers may have a better position within the family because their contribution to the family has more visibility. This is in contrast to women in cultivator households whose unpaid family labor goes into a joint or family product. (Agnihotri, S.B. (2000). Sex Ratio Patterns in the Indian Population – A Fresh Exploration, Sage, New Delhi. Buvinic, Mayra; Margaret A. lycette and William Paul McGreevey (ed.), (1983).

Figure Mortality of Girls and Boys by Region, 1961, 1971 Northern



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