

CREATING SPACE FOR WOMEN FARMER'S VOICES: INSTITUTIONAL AND CAPACITY BUILDING INTERVENTIONS

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Introductory Note

Women play a pivotal role in agriculture, but their contribution is not given due recognition. Women's role as a farmer is hardly recognised as a result of which they have limited access to productive resources, decision-making and markets relating to agriculture. Owing to this ground reality, special efforts are being undertaken by civil society organisations under agriculture and livelihood programmes to respond to gender and equity concerns.

This paper looks at the focused interventions undertaken by five partner organisations of CWS (PRAGATI, UAA, BOJBP, CARR and ADARSA), especially under the programme for 'Up-scaling System of Rice Intensification'¹ in Koraput, Ganjam, Sambalpur, Cuttack and Nayagarh Districts of the State of Orissa in India. The paper shares institutional arrangements evolved and capacity-building initiatives facilitated by the partner organisations to create space for women farmers' voices. It also shares the implications of the discussed interventions on the status of women in general and women farmers in particular.

Experiences of PRAGATI, CARR, UAA, ADARSA and BOJBP in Creating Space for Women Farmer's Voices

1. Creating institutional space for women farmers

Farmers' organisations² facilitated to promote the System of Rice Cultivation³ (SRI) date to varying degree of approach and institutional arrangement. For instance, the process followed in Sambalpur is different from the others. Separate institutions of men and women farmers have been constituted, i.e., i) farmer clubs represented exclusively by men farmers and ii) farm-based Self-Help Groups⁴ (SHGs) having representation of women farmers while in other districts the farmer organisations formed have representation of both men and women farmers. However, percentage of women's representation in these mixed-gender institutions varies from 30% to 50% across the partner organisations. In addition to mixed-group organisations, to enhance the involvement of women, exclusive institutions of women farmers of different types and size such as; Women's SHG (12-18 members), Women's Sub-Circle (15-18 members) and Village Knowledge Centres (10-12 members)⁵ are promoted and nurtured. Again, these institutions operate at different levels, the former two at village level and the latter at panchayat level⁶. The claim made for forming an exclusive group of women farmers is that building collective institutions and empowering them with information can lead to faster spread of messages among themselves.

¹ The programme 'Up-scaling System of Rice Intensification' is being implemented by CWS in 12 districts of Orissa, India, with the support of Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Mumbai, India.

² Farmers' organizations represent groups of 15-20 farmers formed at village level.

³ CWS and the Partner Organizations emphasize promotion of SRI in an organic way to ensure sustainability in rice cultivation.

⁴ Self-Help Groups are organizations of women consisting of 12-18 members constituted at village level.

⁵ Promotion of diverse institutions: Women SHG by ADARSA, Women Sub-circle by BOJBP, and Village Knowledge Centre by UAA

⁶ Panchayat represents a cluster of revenue villages.

Further, in Sambalpur region it can be observed that individual farm-based SHGs have been federated together to form a collective institution at a higher level (preferably Block level). Federation building has emerged out of the need of building up collective strength for pooling and marketing of farm products. Another unique kind of institutional arrangement can be seen in Koraput, where the block-level cooperative institution for Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), comprised of both men and women, is involved in promotion of SRI. Initially the cooperative institution started off with collective marketing of NTFPs, and in a later period included promotion of SRI and marketing of agriculture products in its mandate.

An important feature of organisation building has been that promoting and nurturing diverse institutions like farmer clubs, Women's SHGs, Women's Sub-circles, Village Knowledge Centres, and cooperative institutions of NTFP Collectors contributed significantly in faster adoption and wider expansion of SRI.

These institutions have been instrumental in expanding SRI in their own locality. Besides, the institutions have also been engaged in a number of other activities like mobilising government programmes and schemes, establishing linkage with financial institution, undertaking campaigns against use of pesticides, promoting seed conservation and exchange. While working towards the above areas, in field areas of CARR the farmer organisations can further be seen working together with Water User Associations which are formed by the Water Resource Department of the Government of Orissa under participatory water irrigation system in ensuring proper distribution of water to agricultural fields.

2. Capacity-building interventions to enhance the skills and knowledge of women farmers

Capacity-building programmes are designed by the partner organisations looking into the grass root' situation. The focus areas of capacity-building have been principles and methods of SRI; preparation of organic manure, vermi-compost & bio-pesticides, food processing, and women's leadership. Diverse strategies like cultural shows, video shows, field trainings, exposure visits and sharing of pictorial IEC materials have formed the major components.

Furthermore, additional strategies have been undertaken to encourage and motivate women farmers which vary across the partner organisations. For instance, some of the partners used printed IEC materials focusing exclusively on women's involvement. Annual meetings of women farmers are facilitated in some regions for convergence among themselves and to bring in more number of women farmers into the fold of SRI.

One of the partner organisations (PRAGATI) has adopted an innovative strategy, i.e., using ICT (mediated video disseminations) for exchange of information and experience, particularly on organic practices in agriculture, among the women farmers. Along with organic practices, a focus is also given on SRI. Visual documentation highlighting organic practices followed by women farmers is developed and widely shared. This information dissemination methodology is found to be more popular among the women farmers who are less educated and has been extremely effective in motivating them for adoption and expansion of not only organic practices but also SRI.

Capacity-building inputs do influence the performance of women farmers and their organisations. Capacitated women farmers are increasingly emerging as change agents, and they are engaged as local trainers in imparting training to their fellow members. Again, many of these women trainers hold leadership positions in different institutions like SHGs, Watershed Users' Societies, etc. Awareness and learning among the trainee women farmers have been found to be very high when women are engaged as trainers.

3. Implications of institution-building and capacity-enhancement interventions on women farmers

Women by being members of the farmer organisations have now increased access to training, information, and government schemes. Through Village Knowledge Centres, women have been playing a greater role in information dissemination, exchange of seeds, supply of equipment

(markers and weeders), and organic manure & pesticides. There has been a shift in their role from seed conservers to exchangers. Women farmers are now able to access credit linkage and also bargain with traders for a better market price. There are also instances where women farmers have made innovations like markers for seedling transplantation in SRI, and expanded application of SRI principles to diverse crops like paddy, wheat, ragi (millet).

Increased institutional space has led to emergence of leadership among women. There has been a visible change in the level of confidence of women farmers, and they have been taking up an active role in facilitating training as resource persons.

Involving diverse institutions like SHGs and Cooperatives has been instrumental in creating an environment for working towards strengthening agriculture-forest interface. Women have played a significant role in this regard as they shared overlapping membership in different community-based organisations (CBOs). Another advantage has been that with the involvement of SHGs, timely availability of seeds could be ensured to the farmers which was a challenge for the farmers every crop season.

Adoption of SRI is not restricted to any age group. Women of varying age, from 17 years to 40 years, are into SRI. There are also instances of women members from small land holder's category having adopted SRI in the absence of their male counterparts who have migrated out for earning a living. There have also been some significant changes with women farmers having enhanced access to assets like rice mills from their increased income from SRI and organic farming.

Women's involvement has also increased in agricultural activities such as in seed conservation, treatment and exchange; transplantation; use of technology (like markers and weeders); preparation and application of organic manures, bio-pesticides and so on. Women strongly feel that adoption of SRI in organic ways has led to reduction in health hazards as they no longer have to stay for a longer period in fields sprayed with chemical pesticides which caused skin ailments, headaches and dizziness earlier. Further, usage of weeder in SRI practice has reduced their drudgery as compared in the conventional method of rice cultivation with manual weeding. By using weeder, they no longer have to be in bent-down posture or to stand the whole day in water for weeding, which made women farmer susceptible to illnesses like colds, fevers and skin diseases. With the introduction of the mechanical weeder, men also now participate in weeding activity whereas earlier it was primarily in the domain of women.

'SRI shows the path of enhanced income and healthy life to small and marginal farmers' - is the view of women farmers. SRI gives many benefits – there is more income as yield is higher (avg. 3-4 times more in comparison to conventional method) due to more tillers and panicles along with more and bolder grains. It also contributes in replenishing soil fertility (with increased biomass addition) and in saving seeds and water. Yield of crops cultivated in SRI fields following rice is found to be better and the straw obtained forms a good source for the rural people for thatching their houses and undertaking mushroom cultivation.

More importantly, the role of women farmers is increasingly being recognised by their male counterparts. At household level, they are consulted and their suggestions are sought while taking decisions on agriculture-related matters. There is also increasing recognition of women farmers in the community. They are looked upon as model farmers, and other farmers approach them for inputs, especially in preparation of organic manures and bio-pesticides. There is also increasing appreciation of the contribution of women farmers, and many of them have been honoured by the state government for their involvement in adoption and promotion of SRI.

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