

Poverty squares and gender circles: unravelling agriculture gaps, challenges and opportunities in the Eastern Gangetic Plains

How are development projects dealing with agrarian poverty and gender issues in the North of West-Bengal, India?

Overview

Research was conducted in 4 villages in Jalpaiguri District where two major development initiatives are implemented.

One initiative, Anandadhara (National Rural Livelihoods Mission), aims for a convergence of social and economic empowerment by enabling women to form self-managed, federated self-help groups (SHGs). In addition to enabling access to savings and credits, these women's collectives aim to facilitate knowledge of and access to rights, entitlements and public services.

The other is World Bank funded Accelerated Development of Minor Irrigation (ADMI), which aims to increase agricultural incomes of small / marginal farmers through improved access to irrigation water. This includes minor irrigation schemes - solar or diesel pumps, training on improved and diversified crop farming and marketing, and strengthening water user associations (WUA), with a focus on women's participation.



WOMEN IN THE EASTERN GANGETIC PLAINS DISCUSS IRRIGATION TECHNIQUES NEXT TO A SOLAR PUMP

Recommendations for Anandadhara

- Need to balance credit initiatives with enabling socio-cultural solidarity among women on issues like household and childcare workload, dowry, boy child preference, domestic violence, patrilocal post-marriage challenges etc.
- Support and facilitate non-traditional, gender transformative activities.
- Focus efforts on landless women to generate income opportunities, proposing vocational training, marketing support and social empowerment.
- Address women's domestic workload to reduce household tensions created by SHG commitments. Remuneration for key post holders could improve representation by the poorest as well as improve group mobilization and organisation.
- Improve market access for women through practical changes, e.g. water and sanitation facilities for women, organized transport.
- Develop accessible manuals on the political aspects of social empowerment especially for use at the SHG village level, with for instance, information on homestead land and joint rights, right to education, violence against women etc.

Recommendations for ADMI

- Readjust the official classification of Below Poverty Line target beneficiaries according to changing realities in the village. This will enhance out-reach to the poorest and most vulnerable target groups.
- Ensure that poverty and gender inclusive identification of WUA members goes beyond the numbers game.
- Technology options need to focus on the target group. For small / marginal farmers, low-cost small-scale interventions like shallow hand pumps and homestead irrigation kits are most appropriate.
- Integrate a market access dimension to the programme to look at how gains in irrigation could translate into better agricultural incomes.
- Converging ADMI and Anandadhara programme through the SHGs will improve poverty and gender outcomes.
- Innovative strategies could include collective lease of land and irrigation for women's groups like vegetable cooperatives which could include landless families; participatory livelihoods planning and skills development workshops with women SHG members. Focus on new ecofriendly practices like vermicompost or sustainable rice intensification (SRI) could lower farming costs without compromising on productivity (see Rajarhat Prasari NGO approach in Salbari district)

70% OF LANDLESS WOMEN RELY ON RARE CASUAL AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN THE STUDIED VILLAGES



FIELD SITE LOCATIONS



Research Findings:

For the poorest, agriculture is not the way out of poverty

- Rural is no longer synonymous with agriculture. Over the last 25 years, cultivators have decreased by 60% while the proportion of marginal and landless farmers have increased. At best, only ~20% of the village population owns cultivable land. Of this, less than 10% report agriculture as the main income source.
- Land fragmentation, inflow of migrants, distress sale of land, unreliable agrarian incomes have led to a sharp decrease in the size of landholdings. For marginal farmers, average size reduced from ~1 acre to a third of one acre.
- West Bengal's land redistribution (homestead parcels for all) has resulted in an enormous pressure on land and there is little "common" land in these villages.
- The majority of the population which includes small (1/3 – 1 acre) and marginal farmers (<1/3 acre) need to supplement their agrarian income by farm and non-farm wage-labour.
- Agricultural wage labour is unreliable and non-farm wage labour in the villages is occasional and inadequate. Short term coping strategies are seasonal migration – particularly of young males to become unskilled construction workers - resulting in large numbers of school drop-outs

among this group.

- In the past, many small farmers were compelled to sell land to tea companies in exchange for low-pay permanent labour in the tea gardens. Many of these gardens are now shutting down – also because of high soil degradation and infertility – leaving the labourers with few alternative options.
- Nearly all farmers use hybrid, HYV seeds, which require high inputs (fertilizers, pesticides and improved irrigation) leading to irreversible reliance on outside actors. Such modern practices exclude women who are not expected to spray or buy seeds. Market volatility and dependence on middlemen means farmers do not really benefit from greater productivity.
- There is an agro-ecological crisis: soil infertility combined with increasingly unreliable climatic conditions; a combination of floods and droughts, makes agriculture an insecure and debt prone livelihood. The decline in food crops is a concern for family food security.

Gender inequalities are rife and restrictive

- In the past, this region was known for women's peasant activism such as the Tebhaga struggle for land rights. Currently, the situation is reversed - socio-cultural constraints on women's mobility and enterprise are binding except for the poorest, who cannot



ON RIGHT, A 17 YEAR OLD BRIDE IN UTTAR KHALPARA.

afford to adjust to social norms, and the few “strong characters” who dare to challenge the mainstream.

- West Bengal’s exemplary land reforms and redistribution have broadly failed to empower women: only 6% women reported “owning” land and mostly all in matrilineal communities. Joint ownership of land is not the preferred option for men who are supported by the patriarchal culture to keep many privileges.
- The social norms and perceptions around what women should/ can do means that despite a male-pull out of agriculture, there isn’t a feminization of agriculture or agricultural labour. The ongoing discourse on women’s weakness excludes them from some “heavy” farm work, including irrigation.
- Women remain solely responsible for unpaid domestic work and childcare, which leaves them little time for productive paid work. Lack of reliable wage labour often causes distress and conflicts.
- The gender situation varies among social and religious groups and between landowner and landless families. Decision-making is more gender balanced in some ethnic groups.
- Only landless women work as farm and non-farm labourers, but gendered disparities in wages often deepen their vulnerabilities rather than address their poverty.
- Social, economic and political constraints disable women agricultural labourers to collectively campaign for more gender equality.

Findings from the two projects:

For female entrepreneurship to sustain and enable empowerment, traditional and modern masculine social boundaries and norms need to be addressed and challenged.

ADMI: Improved irrigation for whom?

- ADMI improves access to water for irrigation, resulting in the possibility of year-round cultivation, but marginal, tenant farmers and the landless do not always benefit from the project.
- Irrigation is considered a man’s job. Although officially, women are supposed to have WUA membership and quotas are met; in practice women are rarely involved in making decisions around water. Having quotas for women does not translate to women engaging more actively in WUAs.
- Irrigation is a masculine domain and sector. Without gendering the sector and institutions, it is not possible to effectively target women.
- While the irrigation issues are well addressed (for WUA members), ADMI project does not ensure market links – these risks are transferred to the farmer members.



A WOMEN FROM THE EASTERN GANGETIC PLAINS

Anandadhara

- Poor and landless women who cannot save are constrained in accessing the SHGs.
- Anandadhara enables women to come together, but the challenges to address social, cultural and political challenges are significant.
- Loans taken by SHG members are not always for productive purposes; in many cases, women’s loans finance the work and needs of husbands and sons.
- Gendered disparities in access to land, water, labour, finance, forests, skills and other means of production within a reinforced patriarchal setting limits agrarian enterprise for women.



MEN AND WOMEN GATHER FOR A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION IN THE EASTERN GANGETIC PLAINS



A WOMAN HARVESTS TOMATOES



A WOMEN POSES NEXT TO A NEWLY INSTALLED SOLAR PUMP



WOMEN CALIBRATE A WATER PUMP



A MAN FROM THE EASTERN GANGETIC PLAINS SHARES AGRICULTURAL CHALLENGES

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CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems International Water Management Institute (IWMI)

127 Sunil Mawatha
Pelawatta, Battaramulla, Colombo
Sri Lanka

Email: wle@cgiar.org
Website: wle.cgiar.org
Thrive: wle.cgiar.org/thrive

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