

# **Understanding Gender Discrimination in Agriculture Sector: A Case Study of Sikkim**

## **Summary**

### **1. Introduction**

Discrimination towards women on the basis of gender is present throughout the world in various forms; the difference is just a degree of variation. In agriculture sector too, gender discrimination seems to be prevailing a lot, especially in South Asian countries. The population of Sikkim also depends upon agriculture sector apart from service and tourism sector. Majority of the woman in rural Sikkim are involved in agriculture sector from dawn to dusk and from preparing of land to harvesting and stocking of agricultural products. Presence of women in agriculture sector is immense but they just are agricultural labourers and mostly unpaid family workers. Almost every woman in the rural household is farmers but the male members of the family are often quoted as farmer of the particular household, with financial hold of the said agricultural products. This study attempts to focus and understand the position of women in agriculture sector in rural household in Sikkim.

In Sikkim, 74.84% of people lives in rural areas and are mostly dependent in agricultural sector, followed by tourism. Sikkimese women enjoy better position and opportunities than other parts of India. Being better off doesn't mean equal. Sikkim does follow patriarchal family system, where father is the head of the household and decision maker whereas son is the rightful heir. Patriarchal system is also prevalent in the agricultural sector.

The agriculture being the dominant economic activity of Sikkim, the contribution of women in this sector is also enormous, but yet invisible. Being hilly region and with difficult terrain, terrace farming is done in Sikkim. Both men and equally women are engaged in agricultural activities, with gendered work distribution. Women are mostly unpaid labour lack decision making in purchase and sell of crops.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Women constitute half of the human population worldwide but they are denied of their socio-economic and political rights in all known histories. They have been the

victims of patriarchal domination, perpetrated through a long history. In a conflict situation, the women and children became more vulnerable. It is the women who are given less importance or paid less in whatever work they do, whether it may be the household work or the agriculture work. When it comes to work, it is always valued as the work which generates income is always valued but the work back at home i.e. unpaid is always ignored. It is counted as duty and given less importance. So, their issues need research and exploration.

In the under developed and developing countries, poverty is the major diseases that has affected the majority of the people. When it comes to poverty, the major sufferers are women. They become the bread winner of the family. Being a woman, belonging to poor group, lacking medical facility and education, leads to unawareness. They tend to have many mouths to feed with no skills and therefore end doing menial jobs having unequal situation in the labour market.

In developing countries, more than three-fourths of men's work is in market activities. So, men hold the major chunks of income and are recognized for their economic contribution, on the other hand women's works, which are more drudgery, remains unpaid, undervalued and unrecognized. In contemporary society, women carry a higher share of the total work burden; still they suffer a major undervaluation of their economic status, the status is often equated with income-earning power, where women seems to be lacking behind against men.

The population of Sikkim also depends on agriculture and state being well known for Organic farming has led many to opt for farming. In the process of agricultural farming, like the other women folks, Sikkimese woman also have an important role. About 80% of the women folk are involved in agricultural activities as labourer. They supply the major man power in the agricultural field. It starts from preparing agricultural beds, repairing bunds of the field, soil crushing, and manuring, sowing, weeding, irrigation to the field, harvesting, and preservation of seeds and also the marketing of the product. Women are involved more in agricultural work than the men folk but their work is either not recognized or given less importance. Almost every woman in the rural

households is farmer, but the male members are often quoted as farmers of the particular household.

In some of the available literature one or two aspects of the gender discrimination are touched upon but all the issues are not dealt with. The present research work seeks to identify the problems related to gender discrimination in agriculture sector, analyze the role of women in decision making process and government policies and programmes in raising the standard of women in society. The proposed research work, thus, is an endeavor to fill these lacunae by studying the nature and pattern of status of women in India in general and Sikkim in particular which would facilitate further development in the agriculture sector.

### **1.3 Review of Literature**

Social scientist and researchers have made significant contributions to unravel the various dimensions of gender discrimination in India in number of articles, books, reports and research papers. A thematic review of the available literature covering important books and articles has been made in this following section.

#### **a. Gender Discrimination during the Conflict and Violence**

Any problem arises, whether it may be of political, cultural or economical, it is the women who have to suffer the most. Male member being the head of the state one can say that the war and conflict is the desire of the male members. Their desire make women and children suffer the most. According to Indai Lourdes Sajor (2008), War is an inherently patriarchal activity, and rape is one of the most extreme domination over women.

Inger Skjesbaek and Dan Smith in the book “Gender, Peace and Conflict” says, when war is brought to the civilian population, women suffer. The attack exploits not only the physical vulnerability of the women, but also her subsequent shame and defilement, and all too often the likely rejection by her partner, family and community. In 1972, during the breakaway of Eastern Pakistan, currently Bangladesh, 200,000 women were raped by the Pakistani soldiers. After the war, the government of Bangladesh had the greatest difficulty in trying to persuade the husbands of raped women to accept their

wives (Brownmiller, 1975). Thus mass rape is a way to terrorize individuals, communities and, if done on a large enough scale, an entire ethnic group (Skjesbaek and Smith, 2001).

It was assumed that women's position would improve when the economic prosperity of their husbands improve. However, this assumption denied the unequal power relationships which exist between men and women. Small farmers, mostly women, are increasingly pushed on to marginal plots that are dispersed, remote and usually less fertile. This land may be ill suited to continuous cultivation and vulnerable to land and water degradation, particularly through soil erosion and deforestation (Muntemba and Chimedza, 1995).

### **b. Agrarian Reforms and Gender Discrimination**

Agrarian reform programmes of resettlement and land distribution have not tackled this problem and have failed to recognize the land ownership rights of women. The need for women to secure full and independent land rights have been argued on the grounds of welfare, efficiency and gender equality (Agarwal, 1994).

India has increased its agricultural production manifold since independence. The contribution of women to this effort has been substantial though they are still employed in agriculture mostly as marginal workers. In most states men do the ploughing and irrigating of the land while women sow the seedlings, nurture the plants, harvest the rice, vegetables, tea, fruits and practice sericulture (Seth, 2001). Women perform multi-dimensional role in agriculture (sowing, transplanting, weeding, irrigation, fertiliser application, plant protection, harvesting, winnowing, storing, etc.), domestic (cooking, child rearing, water collection, fuel wood gathering, household maintenance, etc.) and allied activities like cattle management, fodder collection, milking, etc. (Singh, 2013).

When women own or have access to land, they often have a limited access to agricultural support services, such as credit with which they can purchase inputs, and advice and training in agricultural technology. This limited access may arise from a range of factors, including legal restrictions (such as the need for a male signatory); lack of collateral (e.g. land title); lack of information about credit availability; and lack of small-scale services such as micro-credits schemes (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001).

Cultural bias, in many countries, prevented women from active participation in group training, extension meetings and, most importantly, access to inputs such as fertiliser and credit. These services have been predominantly staffed by men. According to the FAO only 15% of extension workers are women (FAO, 1999) and they tended to direct their services to male farmers or head of households, excluding female-headed households and women members of male-headed households (World Bank, 2000).

In the rural areas of hilly regions, women equally share the bread earning responsibility of the family and work along with their men in various agricultural and animal husbandry operations in daily basis. Due to the geographical conditions women in the hilly areas have to undergo hard life and had to indulge in major household activities from rearing of children, involving in household chores, agriculture and allied activities, as well as extending help in the marriage and religious ceremonies of neighbour and relatives (Pande, 1996).

### **c. Gender Discrimination in Decision Making**

Despite the fact that women comprise around half of the world's agricultural workforce, women are often not even recognized as farmers. They face widespread restrictions on decision making about the basic resource for production i.e. land; access to productivity-enhancing inputs such as credit, fertilizer, improved seeds and extension; and control over the produce resulting from their labour and other investment. Women's ability to produce enough food is further hampered by the physically exhausting labor and drudgery associated with farming practices that have remained unchanged for generations (Global Conference on Women in Agriculture, New Delhi, 2012).

Survey and statistics still reveals that women are lagging in most of the sectors than men. Times of India with various statistics and data revealed that rural areas have a better female workforce participation rate of 30.02% compared with 53.03% for male. In urban sector, the participation rate of females' trails at 15.44% against 53.76% for males, women also face a significant wage differential vis-a-vis their male counterparts (TOI, 2014).

As Sikkimese women enjoys better privileges as compared to most of the women in other parts of India, the society being patriarchal in nature still lacks in many aspects specially in decision making. Their views, ideas and concepts are still sidelined by their male counterparts. Women in Sikkim do engage in agricultural activities but the decision of final output or holding of profits is still in the hand of male members or the head of the household i.e. father. The reason could be lack of access to property rights for women.

In agriculture sector, similar to other sectors, roles of women's and men's responsibilities are socially determined. For instance: Women work mainly in the subsistence crops while men are mostly involved in cash crops (Bajracharya, 1994 in Gurung et. al, 2000). Pleasant tasks such as marketing are carried out by men whereas relatively unpleasant tasks like carrying and spreading manure are done by women (IFAD, 1999 in Gurung et. al, 2000). Men and women do not have equal access and control over farm assets including land, labour, time, technology, services, training, etc. (Ahmad and Loutfi, 1985 in Gurung, et. al, 2000).

#### **d. Women Empowerment through Agricultural Development**

Women play a critical and potentially transformative role in agricultural growth in developing countries but they face persistent obstacles and economic constraints limiting further inclusion in agriculture (Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2013). The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) measures the empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women in the agriculture sector is an effort to identify ways to overcome those obstacles and constraints and aims to increase understanding of the connections between women's empowerment, food security, and agricultural growth and allows to identify women who are disempowered and understand how to increase autonomy and decision making in key domains (Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2013).

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is established and setup in almost all parts of the Indian states so as co-ordinate, guide and manage research and education in agriculture including horticulture, fisheries and animal sciences in the entire country (ICAR, 2010). DRWA has been in the forefront undertaking research on issues affecting women and the opportunities in agriculture. (Press Information Bureau, 2016).

#### **1.4 Research Objective**

The primary objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the nature and pattern of status of women in Sikkim in general and of agricultural sector in particular.
2. To understand the status of women in decision making process in patriarchal society, with reference to women belonging to agricultural sector.
3. To understand the government policy of Sikkim in raising the standard of women in general and rural women engaged in agriculture in particular.
4. To identify the problems related to gender discrimination in Sikkim, especially in agricultural sector.
5. To bridge the gap between men and women in participation in agricultural sector.

#### **1.5 Research Question**

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#### **1.6 Research Methodology**

The study is analyzed through descriptive and exploratory research based on both qualitative and quantitative method. The Secondary source includes available

literature, publications, documents, newspapers, etc. on issues related to gender discrimination, women position in general and agriculture sector in particular from global to local level.

This research was done by conducting a field survey with the help of simple random sampling method in the four districts of Sikkim

The samples for the study were targeted to those women who majorly engaged in agricultural activities. 50 respondents from each district with a total of 200 respondents were examined. 3 villages from each of four districts were selected for carrying out agricultural practices was followed.

Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires and interviews with the respondents. Questionnaires were divided into open-ended and close-ended question. In the open ended question the interviewee gave the information that seemed to be appropriate rather than set answers in close ended question. Both types of questions are used under the proposed study. The study is based on in-depth interviews, following face to face interviews along with door-to-door methodology application in order to find out ground reality.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

In the context of Indian Women , Sikkimese women enjoys better position as women in Sikkim have benefitted from educational and livelihood opportunities provided by the state government, but report on various issues that women of Sikkim are facing is also coming up. Most of the rural women are engaged in agriculture related activities where earnings are typically low and uncertain; women continue to be under-represented in the highest levels of bureaucracy. Women in Sikkim are faced with challenges particularly when it comes to property rights, age at marriage, alcohol and drug use, and domestic violence.

## **1.8 Major Findings**

Women has dual situation in agriculture sector. There contribution is enormous but her position is inferior. Their work is less valued and unpaid. Sikkimese society



being patriarchal in nature has lowered the position of women in almost all the sectors including the agriculture sector.

Education was found to be considerably influencing the working pattern and the hours of work, educated women devoted lesser amount of working hours to daily activities as compared to illiterate women, the increase in the level of education, lesser the work burden. The working pattern revealed that education contributed women's status within the family and work load related to day-to-day activities.

The study reveals that the work burden and contribution of females is numerous. However, in majority of the cases, the financial matter relating to household were handled by the male members except in such households where women were heads of households. It indicates that the respondents themselves have to take into account the views or the suggestion to spend the money earned by them.

Due to lack of independent utilization of income earned, she is further marginalized and has poor bargaining position within the household. Women despite of working or generating income the permission to work outside of their house, or for proper utilization of money, or decision regarding the selling of crops, the power lies in the hands of the male member of the family.

It has been observed from the study that women's position in land holding pattern is minimal. Majority of rural women supported self ownership of property, but due to discriminated attitude and patriarchal nature of society hinder women to inherit property.

The study also reveals poor progress of ongoing developmental programmes and schemes in agriculture sectors. Our national policy and state policy extend full support and emphasize equal participation of women in all spheres of life. Regardless of policies, women are not being fully considered as a potential human resource and have been marginalized in terms of benefits from the development programmes.

The study reveals that discrimination was made between male and female children at their household regarding imparting education. The reason for such attitude was economic rather than socio-cultural.

Religious dogma also restricts women's involvement in agricultural sector. Women in menstrual days are forbidden to enter into agricultural field, as menstruating women are seen as the symbol of impurity.

Financial Institution has been set up in the rural areas of Sikkim to uplift the women folk by providing low interest loans, but on the contrary one male member of the family is needed to avail the loan, here women have to play the role of the protected from the protector (male member of the family).

The study reveals that women in rural Sikkim are involved in subsistence farming while men are involved in cash crops farming.

In regards to benefit of training in agriculture sectors, it is male member of the households who receives extensive trainings and pass it on to the female members to execute in the agricultural field.

## **1.9 Recommendations**

The development of women can occur if the perception towards women in the society changes. Both the centre and the state government should take an initiative to influence education, economic, social, cultural and political factors that would benefit the women's education, status and awareness.

Time and again it has been said that women's subordination and patriarchal gender systems could be combated only if a fundamental change was made concerning women's existing lack of rights to property and productive assets. Women's independent right to own and control land and other assets and to rectify existing wage disparity is integrally linked to measures to change the ideology and structures of patriarchy within the family and in social relations.

Education has always been a part and partial of developed society. Educational backwardness is the major reason for women lagging behind men, be it formal or informal education.

Efforts need to be accelerated to improve the communication gap between the females residing in rural areas and government representatives extended by different departments, such as agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, animal husbandry, health,

social welfare, women and child development and other related departments at state level to provide knowledge and to implement related schemes as they generate income.

The study reveals that women in rural areas is found to be hard working, they share the work burden with equal to men in the agricultural field, but when it comes to domestic work, and it's of the opinion that it's the department of the female member of the household. The opinion indicates that the perception is still embedded in the traditional environment. So, proper mechanization of awareness needs to be adopted by both the central and state governments to broaden the mindset of the people residing in rural areas.

While designing the agriculture policies, while providing allocation of resources the policy maker both at state and central level should take into account gender discrimination and inequality of allocation of resources, distribution of income and employment among women population.

More and more involvement of women researchers and agriculturist is required in framing policies at national or local level, and participation of women in voluntary organization specially concerned for the issues in village areas.

Central and State agriculture marketing wing such as SIMFED should more be operated so that the farmers and especially women farmers are not cheated by the middle man. Such wing or the organ should concentrate more on women farmers and encourage them so that they are benefited more and not have to depend upon the male members of the family to bargain for them in selling their products.

The existing women organization and self help groups need to be promoted and strengthened for better participation of low income groups in economic activities. Both central and state government should recognized and encourage small scale and cottage industries based in rural areas.

Both Central and the State governments should frame and reframe policy measures supporting women's access to land, agricultural inputs and services at affordable prices and up-to- standard quality.