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Emerging issues of women health, agriculture crises & women farmers distress in India

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Abstract

India is on the path of becoming an economic superpower but its performance index in health component of human development, particularly that of women is not at all impressive. The health issues of women in India is increasing day by day in different ways i.e. cardiovascular disease, stroke, kidney disease, respiratory diseases and trauma are the leading causes of death for women, women have a higher burden of disability due to NCDs, like back and neck pain, depressive disorders and respiratory diseases etc. So in this way the main goals of reform in women's healthcare is delivering quality healthcare to women, Ensuring equity, and getting a better understanding of issues around the barriers to delivering quality healthcare to women. In another way agriculture in India is undergoing a structural change leading to a crisis situation. The rate of growth of agricultural output is gradually declining in the recent years. The related factors responsible for the crisis include: dependence on rainfall and climate, liberal import of agricultural products, reduction in agricultural subsidies, lack of easy credit to agriculture and dependence on money lenders, decline in government investment in the agricultural sector and conversion of agricultural land for alternative uses etc. Indian economy has been facing crisis in its female farm sector also. Women's domestic work burden, lower mobility, lesser education, and fewer rights and control over assets such as land, livestock etc. has limited their entry into non- agricultural sectors, as well as their range of non-farm options. So in this way, to overcome the hurdles in this sector especially the farmers in the rural areas should be empowered with credit facilities. For this, policy and programs involving timely and adequate investment in agriculture would facilitate farmers' access to technologies and other relevant help in farming process.

Keywords: Women health, agriculture crises, women farmers' distress

Introduction

When we say that India is a developing country, we include in "development" the progress that is witnessed among women too. Generally, women's health receives attention only during pregnancy and the immediate post-partum period. A women's health agenda was first articulated at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. In the resulting Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a roadmap for gender equality and women's empowerment was outlined, with a major focus on reproductive and sexual health (SRH) issues, which were the main killers of women then. At the same time, the issues affecting women's health have undergone a drastic change, and currently NCDs, such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, kidney disease, respiratory diseases and trauma are the leading causes of death for women worldwide. Despite a longer life expectancy, women have a higher burden of disability due to NCDs, like back and neck pain, depressive disorders and respiratory diseases. Social constructs and biases also leave girls and women more disadvantaged, as evidenced by high rates of sexual violence. The advancement of gender equality and equity, empowerment and elimination of discrimination, are critical to women's health and well-being. This can only be achieved by including the gender dimension in planning health programs and research. There is a need to provide stronger evidence to demonstrate the benefits of pursuing such a broader life-course agenda for women's health. This can only be achieved by including the gender dimension in planning health programs and research. Surviving through a normal life cycle is a resource-poor woman's greatest challenge. The persistence of hunger and abject poverty in India and other parts of the world is due in large measure to the subjugation, marginalization and disempowerment of women.

Marginalized women today are the focus of concern and, several of their issues are points of strong debate to bring about positive changes. Whether it is health and nutrition or any other field, women are noticed to be the worst sufferers.

Challenges

- Despite the well-documented health transition leading to a situation where deaths and disabilities in women due to NCDs, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, cancers, injuries and mental disorders, including suicide, are on the rise, little attention is being paid to addressing these issues.
- Women provide the bulk of healthcare worldwide, both in the formal healthcare setting as well as in the informal sector and in the home. Yet women's own needs for healthcare are poorly addressed, especially among rural and poor communities.
- Gender inequality, in biological, environmental and social terms, makes women more vulnerable to certain risks, leading to poorer outcomes. These issues need special attention through independent programs that will be distinct from men's health.
- Extrapolation of health data taken from men leads to under-recognition of the manifestations, severity and consequences of disease, differential access to information and health services.
- Women's household roles impact their health -- such as exposure to smoke and women's limited engagement in physical work. These challenges do not have their solutions rooted in medical health but a holistic approach to public health and inter- departmental partnerships.
- **The goals of Reform:** The main goals of reform in women's healthcare reflect the principles behind universal human rights and the UNSDGs. These include:
 - Getting a better understanding of issues around the barriers to delivering quality healthcare to women.
 - Optimizing healthcare to women through high quality care.
 - Optimizing the experience of women in encounters with the healthcare system through development of a life-course approach.
 - Ensuring equity and achieving value for money.

Trends in Indian Agriculture and Its Crisis: Agriculture was considered to be the backbone of Indian economy and its contribution to the National Income was estimated at about 57 per cent in the early fifties. Indian economy has been facing crisis in its farm sector and its worst face is the suicides of farmers in almost all parts of India. On one side, the country is the largest producer, consumer and exporter of spices and spice products. It ranks third in farm and agriculture outputs. Agricultural export constitutes 10 per cent of the country's exports and is the fourth-largest that exported principal commodity. The agro industry in India is divided into several sub segments such as canned, dairy, processed, frozen food to fisheries, meat, poultry, and food grains. But, on the other hand, when the Indian economy is growing at about eight to nine per cent per annum and moving towards the double-digit figure the rural/agrarian scenario is not doing well. At 1999-2000 prices, share of agriculture in gross domestic product is at 21 per cent in 2004-05, down from 41 per cent in 1972-73; whereas during the same period the share of employment in agriculture using usual principal and subsidiary status declined at a much slower pace from 74 per cent to 57 per

cent only. Ratio of worker productivity in agriculture to worker productivity in non-agriculture is about one fifth. The agrarian/rural sector is lagging behind but it continues to employ a large proportion of the workforce. Agricultural activity (cultivation, livestock and other agricultural activities) was reported to be the principal source of income for majority of the households in all the major States, except Kerala where there are about 61 percent of the households depends on agriculture. Among the major States, more than 80 percent of agricultural households from Assam, Chhattisgarh and Telangana reported agricultural activity as their principal source of income.

- **Causes:** There is a need for analyzing the reasons for the crisis to know what measures could be adopted to face this challenge. However, there are two reasons to be concerned that Indian agriculture may indeed be facing a wider, deeper crisis: (1) The long term growth trend in production and productivity of agriculture, considerably less than required to sustain the projected high overall growth rates in the coming decade, may actually be slowing down; and (2) The growing economic and social disparities between agriculture and the rest of the economy and between rural and urban sectors. Apart from these other important causes observed are as follows.
 - **Declining Growth Rate in Agriculture:** The slowing down of agricultural growth is widely attributed to the slowing down of investment, especially public investment. The Planning Commission seems to share this perception and sees increased investments in irrigation and watershed development as the means to achieve the projected growth. But what is relevant is not the magnitude of investment but its contribution to increasing production capacity. For a variety of reasons peculiar to agriculture, production capacity has not increased in proportion to the quantum of investment.
 - **Liberal Import of Agricultural Products:** One of the reasons for the crash of prices of agricultural products, especially of cash crops, in India was removal of all restrictions to import these products. As, for example, when the Government of India reduced the import duty on tea and coffee from Sri Lanka and Malaysia, their prices in the domestic market got reduced drastically. Thus cultivation of such products became unprofitable and so their production was fully or partly stopped. Since the removal of quantitative restrictions and lowering of import duties were according to the restrictions of the World Trade Organizations (WTO), the crash in the prices of agricultural products is directly related to the liberalization policy of the government.
 - **Reduction in Agricultural Subsidies:** In the post-reform period the government reduced different types of subsidies to agriculture, and this has increased the production cost of cultivation. Cutback in subsidy and control of fertilizers over the last few years has adversely affected the agricultural sector. It has increased the input cost and made agriculture less profitable. The decrease in subsidy to agriculture is part of the regulations of the WTO which is binding on the developing countries. The Table below shows the comparison of some countries regarding subsidies to agriculture and also the percentage of population depending on agriculture.
 - **Lack of Easy and Cheap Loan to Agriculture:** After 1991 the lending pattern of commercial banks, including nationalized banks, to agriculture considerably changed

with the result that loan was not easily available and the interest was not affordable. This has forced the farmers to rely on moneylenders and thus pushed up the spending on agriculture. The National Commission for Agriculture, headed by Dr M.S. Swaminathan, also pointed out that removal of the lending facilities and concessions of banks during the post-reform period have accelerated the crisis in agriculture. When the farmers were not able to pay back loan with high interest, they fell into the debt trap. Studies show that most of the farmers' suicides were due to the debt trap. It is part of the policy of privatization that banks, even nationalized banks, look for profit over their societal responsibilities to the people. Credit is often considered to be the key element in increasing the productivity in agriculture through modernization.

▪ **Remedial Measures for Betterment of Agriculture:** The agricultural crisis is affecting a majority of the people in India. The farmers who produce food materials for the country are in deep suffering. The marginalized people like the Dalits and tribals, who depend on agriculture, are getting unemployed and struggling for their livelihood. The ordinary people, especially the poor, have lost their food security. The crisis in agriculture is a crisis of the country as a whole and so needs urgent attention. Some of the remedial measures are being listed here.

1. Since the import policy was the major reason for the crash in prices of many agricultural products, there should be restrictions on the quantity and customs duty of such products. Quantitative restrictions should be imposed on import of agricultural products. It is required to impose import duty and quantitative restrictions on imported goods to protect our farmers.
2. Subsidy and concessions given to agriculture sector should be increased. This is a must to make agriculture remunerative. One of the main disputes in the Doha Round of talks is the high subsidy given by the United States and European Union to their farmers in spite of the WTO regulation. India should affirm its right to give adequate subsidy to its farmers to offset the rising Cost of cultivation and protect their living.
3. Credit facilities should be easily made available to the farmers, especially since the input cost of agriculture has gone up. The government should seriously think of providing loans to farmers at low rate of interest by banks and other financial institutions. In fact, the M.S. Swaminathan Commission for Agriculture has recommended a low rate of four per cent interest for the farmers.
4. The government should increase its investment and expenditure in the agriculture sector. One reason for the agricultural stagnation is low government expenditure. Investment in agriculture and its allied sectors, including irrigation, transport, communication and farm research, should be significantly increased, and the government should aim at integrated development of the rural areas. Effective implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme canal so become a means of revival of the rural economy as agriculture is already overcrowded.
5. According to the Swaminathan Commission, unless agriculture is made a profitable enterprise, its present crisis cannot be solved. The Commission has suggested 50 per cent more of the total production cost as supportive

price for food grains. So, there is a need for periodic revision of the

6. Procurement prices for farm produce. This will help the farmers to meet the increasing expenses for farm inputs and ensure at least remunerative income.
7. The government should not acquire fertile agricultural land for SEZs and revise the policy on Special Economic Zones as it goes against the interest of farmers and the agricultural sector. When it does take overland for essential public utilities, it should provide just compensation and initiate comprehensive rehabilitation measures. The recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission not to acquire land suitable for agriculture for non-agricultural purposes, to give adequate compensation for the acquired land and to distribute surplus land to the landless farmers should be seriously taken into account when the policy of SEZ is reframed.

Female farmer's distress in India: Women constitute an invisible part of the workforce in India's farming sector, yet they are neither identified, recognized nor supported as farmers. As more and more men have shifted to farm work, industrial and service sectors over time. Women's domestic work burden, lower mobility, lesser education, and fewer rights and control over assets such as land, livestock etc. has limited their entry into agricultural sectors, as well as their range of farm options. According to an International Labor Organization (ILO), over 81% of women in farming are from Dalit and Adivasi sections (ILO, 2010). Even with the increasing feminization of agriculture and the agricultural workforce; this has not translated into recognition of women as farmers despite their critical role in agriculture and allied sectors. This has effectively ensured that women have largely remained invisible as farmers to the government in terms of agricultural policies, schemes, programs and budgets. They are also deprived of formal support systems such as regards credit, extension, insurance and marketing services. The deepening agrarian crisis is in many ways a reflection of the crisis of countless women farmers rendered invisible by the state and society. 15th Indian Census (2011) shows that around 65.1% of female workers depend on agriculture, either as cultivators or agricultural laborers as opposed to 49.8% of male workers. Reports from the National Sample Survey Office also indicate that 63% of all female "workers", and 75% of rural female workers are in agriculture (NSSO 68th Round 2011-12). The predicament of women farmers behooves us to demand for a special joint session of the Parliament to be devoted entirely to discussing the situation of women farmers across India as well as formulation of a clear roadmap ahead towards their recognition, rights and entitlements as farmers. The crisis in agriculture is a crisis of the women farmers as a whole and so needs urgent attention. Some of the major causes of women crises are listed here;

▪ **Land Ownership:** Women's access to land is mediated by a complex web of social, legal, customary norms and patriarchal practices in various parts of India. Despite their presence in agriculture, figures from various data sources reveal that women's ownership of land in rural households ranges between 6-11% (IHDS 2011-12). Figures from the latest Agricultural Census of 2015-2016 indicate that women operated land holdings in India account for 13.87% of all holdings. This comprises about 11.57% of the total operated area. Women's poor asset ownership has important implications for access to agricultural inputs like seeds, credit, extension,

technologies, insurance etc. as well as on their opportunities for human development & freedom from violence.

- **Lack of Tools to Reduce Women's Drudgery & Workload:** Most of the work done by women farmers such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, post harvesting processing of crops are repetitive in nature, involving a lot of their time, physical labor and drudgery. This is in addition to their gender based household works such as cleaning, cooking, fetching water, etc. But there is very little research or development of gender friendly tools and technologies to ease women's workload and drudgery in farming as well as enabling women's access to affordable and usable tools/devices.
- **Gender Disparity in Wages:** Agriculture sector is characterized by decelerating and differential wages on the basis of gender. Even while over 60% of all agricultural operations are handled exclusively by women, female hourly wage rates in agriculture vary from 50 to 75 per cent of male rates, and are too low to overcome absolute poverty.
- **Unequal Access to Credit:** Women farmers are often denied equal access to credit because the land is not in their name. Agricultural labor productivity is, on average, 44 per cent lower on female-headed plots than on those managed by male heads. 34 per cent of this gap is explained by differences in labor market access and 29 per cent by differences in credit access.
- **Access to Extension Services:** Men's and women's access to extension services shows relatively low levels of contact between farmers and extension agents, with disproportionately lower levels of access for women with 18% for women as compared to 28% men (World Bank, 2010).
- **Membership in Cooperatives & Other Institutions:** With Land Ownership being a key criterion for membership, only 7.5% women participate in decision making institutions such as cooperatives as compared to 92.5% of men. Of India's 450,000 cooperatives with a membership of 204.5 million, there are only 8,171 women cooperatives with a total membership of 693,000 women.
- **Inadequate Budgetary Allocations:** Women's growing presence and contribution in the agriculture sector has not been matched with any substantial increase in budgetary allocations over the years. The budgetary allocations reported as part of the Gender Budget Statement (GBS) of the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare for the financial year 2017-18 shows that out of the total budget of Rs.51026 crores, Gender Budget allocation for various schemes together works out to just 8.6% of the total budget, i.e. just Rs. 4388 crores.
- **Poor Representation in Agriculture & Allied Sector Schemes:** Out of 55 odd schemes under the Department of Agriculture (DAC), only about 14 have earmarked allocations for women. Even here, the allocations for women farmers in some of the beneficiary oriented schemes have been pegged at a standard 30 per cent, without any specific rationale or basis to substantiate the same. Given that land ownership is a major criterion for eligibility, women farmers stand excluded from most of the schemes.
- **Women Take on the Burden in Farm Suicide Affected Households:** With increasing incidence of suicides, largely by men in farming households (roughly three lakh

suicides between 1995-2015), women are taking on the entire responsibility of farming, along with taking care of children and repaying debts left behind by the men.

Conclusion

One may sum up the current agrarian crisis in the following terms:

- When we say that India is a developing country, we include in "development" the progress that is witnessed among women too. Generally, women's health does not receive any attention women's health have undergone a drastic change, and currently NCDs, such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, kidney disease, respiratory diseases and trauma are the leading causes of death for women worldwide especially in rural areas. For the betterment of women health it is very important that we need to be aware about different health care programmes, researches, schemes about women health.
- There has been a significant slowing down of the growth of output and yield of most major crops. Some of the causes of agriculture crises in India are liberal Import of Agricultural Products, Reduction in Agricultural Subsidies, Lack of Easy and Cheap Loan to Agriculture etc. Indian economy has been facing crisis in its farm sector and its worst face is the suicides of farmers in almost all parts of India. Multiple risks that the farmer faces— yield, price, input, technology and credit among others. For the development of agrarian it is necessary to communicate with rural people & farmers & introduce them about new schemes, technologies, employment opportunities etc. run by the government for them.
- Women constitute an invisible part of the workforce in India's farming sector. The deepening agrarian crisis is in many ways a reflection of the crisis of countless women farmers rendered invisible by the state and society. Some of the reasons why female farmers are distressed are; Lack of Tools to Reduce Women's Drudgery & Workload, Poor Representation in Agriculture & Allied Sector Schemes, Gender Disparity in Wages, Access to Extension Services etc.

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