

REVIEW ARTICLE

GENDER-INCLUSIVE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION: STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN IN FARMING SYSTEMS

Jitendra Kumar Meena* and Lokesh Kumar

Department of Extension Education,
Rajasthan College of Agriculture, MPUAT, Udaipur

*Corresponding author E-mail: jitendrameena414@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Women play a crucial role in agriculture, particularly in rural areas, yet they often face significant barriers to resources, extension services, and decision-making. Despite forming a large part of the agricultural workforce, rural women struggle with limited land rights, inadequate access to inputs and training, and socio-cultural restrictions. Gender-inclusive agricultural extension services aim to bridge these gaps through targeted policies, increased resource allocation, and capacity-building efforts. This chapter explores the challenges faced by rural women, examines disparities in agricultural support systems, and proposes strategies to ensure equitable participation and empowerment of women in farming and agricultural development.

Keyword: Women in Agriculture, Gender-Inclusive Extension, Rural Empowerment, Agricultural Policy, Resource Access.

Introduction:

Women play a pivotal role in agriculture, especially in rural areas where they contribute significantly to food production, processing, and marketing. Despite their substantial involvement, rural women often face systemic barriers that limit their access to resources, information, and decision-making processes in agriculture. Gender-inclusive agricultural extension services aim to address these disparities by implementing strategies that empower women, enhance their capacities, and promote equitable participation in farming systems.

The Role of Women in Agriculture

Globally, women constitute a significant portion of the agricultural workforce. In Tanzania, for instance, women represent 69.9% of the agricultural labor force. However, only 9% of women have sole ownership of land, and 25% have joint land ownership, highlighting the gender disparities in resource access. Similar patterns are observed in other regions, where women's contributions to agriculture are substantial yet underrecognized and undervalued.

Challenges Faced by Rural Women in Agriculture

Limited Access to Resources

Rural women often lack access to essential resources such as land, credit, quality seeds, and modern farming equipment. Cultural norms and legal constraints frequently hinder women's land ownership rights, affecting their ability to make decisions and invest in their farms. In many cases, women continue working as unpaid family workers and face restricted access to important agricultural assets such as land and capital.

Inadequate Extension Services

Traditional agricultural extension services have predominantly targeted male farmers, neglecting the specific needs and schedules of women. Studies indicate that women receive only between 2% and 10% of all extension contacts and a mere 5% of extension resources worldwide. This lack of tailored support limits women's ability to adopt new technologies and practices that could enhance their productivity.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Gender norms and societal expectations often limit women's participation in training programs and decision-making forums. Responsibilities related to household chores and childcare further restrict their availability to engage in capacity-building activities. Additionally, women's contributions to agriculture are frequently undervalued, leading to limited support and investment in their development.

Strategies for Gender-Inclusive Agricultural Extension

Developing Gender-Sensitive Policies

Governments and institutions should formulate policies that recognize and address the unique challenges faced by rural women in agriculture. This includes ensuring women's representation in policy-making processes and allocating resources for gender-specific programs. For instance, integrating gender considerations into agricultural

policies can help in creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment.

Tailoring Extension Services to Women's Needs

Extension programs must be designed to accommodate women's schedules, literacy levels, and cultural contexts. This involves organizing training sessions at convenient times and locations, using local languages, and employing participatory methods that encourage active involvement. Utilizing information and communication technologies (ICTs) can bridge the information gap for rural women. Mobile applications, radio programs, and online platforms can disseminate agricultural knowledge and market information effectively.

Promoting Women's Leadership and Participation

Encouraging women to take on leadership roles within farmer organizations and cooperatives can enhance their influence and decision-making power. Capacity-building initiatives should focus on developing women's skills in leadership, negotiation, and entrepreneurship. Programs like the African Women in Agribusiness Fellowship by Guzakuza provide training, mentorship, and access to finance, enabling women to thrive in agribusiness.

Case Studies

'Drone Didis' Initiative in India

In Varanasi, India, a group of women known as the 'Drone Didis' have been trained to operate drones for spraying fertilizers and pesticides. This initiative has not only improved agricultural efficiency but also empowered women economically and socially, elevating their status within their communities.

Yamuna Kumari's Agricultural Transformation

Yamuna Kumari, a 23-year-old woman from Bero village near Ranchi, India, transformed her family's five-acre farm by adopting scientific

farming techniques. Through training programs, she implemented practices like drip irrigation and crop diversification, significantly increasing productivity and income. Her success has inspired other women in her community to pursue modern farming methods.

'We Are the Solution' Movement in Senegal

In Ziguinchor, Senegal, Mariama Sonko leads 'We Are the Solution,' a rural women's rights movement that trains female farmers on their rights and agricultural projects. The movement addresses the imbalance where Senegalese women, who form 70% of the agricultural workforce, have limited access to land, education, and finance.

Recommendations for Effective Implementation

1. **Capacity Building:** Invest in training programs that enhance women's technical skills, leadership abilities, and financial literacy.
2. **Inclusive Policy Frameworks:** Develop and enforce policies that ensure equal access to resources and decision-making platforms for women.
3. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish gender-sensitive indicators to assess the impact of extension services on women's empowerment and agricultural productivity.
4. **Collaboration with Women's Organizations:** Partner with local women's groups to design and implement extension programs that reflect the needs and aspirations of rural women.

Conclusion

Empowering rural women through gender-inclusive agricultural extension services is vital for achieving sustainable and equitable farming systems. By addressing the unique challenges faced by women and implementing targeted strategies, agricultural extension can become a

powerful tool for enhancing women's capacities, improving livelihoods, and fostering community development.

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