

Empowering women farmers to achieve food security and gender equality:

An initiative from agriculture laborer to owner,
Gajapati District, Odisha, India



INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT (IWD)

Trócaire has supported specific programmes on sustainable livelihoods in Gajapati District in Odisha since 2009 through its partner organization IWD. The programme intervention area is predominately inhabited by tribal and dalit¹ and other marginalised communities. According to IWD's baseline study, 68% of families in the project villages live below the poverty line and about 80% of the households depend on agriculture to earn their livelihood as small, marginal and shareholder farmers. IWD's work contributes to an important need in the country, as they specifically support women who are engaged in farm work to be recognized as farmers so that they can avail of benefits and services such as access to credit, equal wages, access to opportunities for improving their skills and knowledge in new methods of agriculture practice.

Women in rural villages are invariably engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry and associated processes. In agriculture they perform the pre-sowing, post-sowing, transplantation, weeding, harvesting and post harvesting operations. Modern agriculture promoted by the government agricultural department requires extensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Women spend long hours in the fields which

► Kamala Parichha, S Talasing Village



“Our society thinks that men are farmers,” said Kamala Parichha, one member of the Women’s Farmer Association (WFA) in the Gajapati District. Like many others women in the WFA shared, they don’t own land, yet she labors in the field day in and day out. “We don’t receive recognition for our farm work. We are looked upon as laborers, but we feel that we are farmers, too.”

¹ Dalit: A Dalit is the term used for a section of Indian society traditionally considered ‘Untouchable’. The Constitution of India recognises them as ‘Scheduled Caste’.

means their bodies are exposed to these chemicals and may result in adverse health conditions. However, many women are not aware of the possible dangers of these chemicals and the risks to their health and life. Nearly 74% of rural women do 80% of all the farming in rural India², but the role of women in agriculture is not widely recognized as they are not acknowledged as farmers. Women’s immense contribution to household food security in India remains largely invisible. They are deprived from the opportunity of various farmers’ schemes provided by the government, access to institutional finance as banks do not recognize women as farmers and are excluded from the obtaining knowledge of latest agricultural techniques. Though women are actively involved in many types of productive activities such as agriculture and animal husbandry, they have hardly any control over the income or production. Many women do not have decision making power over their income. Even if they have specific health needs, they are not able to spend money on their own health. Women have been typically and wrongly characterised as economically inactive or playing only a supportive role in agriculture and associated activities as farmer’s wives.

IWD has been working with women of the Saura tribes of Gajapati district in Odisha state through supporting them in improving their livelihoods. IWD has been working with 1,966 households of which 68% tribal, 15% dalit and 17% of other caste families. This learning document highlights the strategies and interventions used by IWD to support women farmers in getting recognition as farmers.

Strategies to facilitate the process of empowering women farmers to promoting food security:

IWD used four core strategies in working with women farmers:

1. Strengthening Women’s Farmers Association (WFA) and building a Women’s Federation

Women are central in agricultural work and play an important role in all dimensions of agricultural production, however they are unable to avail of many facilities that are meant for farmers because they are not officially recognized as farmers. To help address this, IWD has helped women farmers to establish Women Farmers Associations (WFA) at the village level and is also using the Indian local governance structure, the Panchayat Raj Institution, to organize a federation of WFAs of women coming from a number of villages within the same village council area (in India, this is the Panchayat area). The objective of the WFA is to raise a demand for women to be

BOX 1:
Saura are among the most ancient of tribes in India and are found in the southern Odisha districts. Saura villages are situated in extremely inaccessible areas, mainly in thick forests areas where the only accessibility is by foot. Saura paintings are an integral part of the religious ceremonies of the Saura. Saura communities mostly live below the poverty line and live in extremely tough conditions on hill terrains. They own small lands that vary from a tenth of an acre to two acres and grow cereals such as paddy and millet.

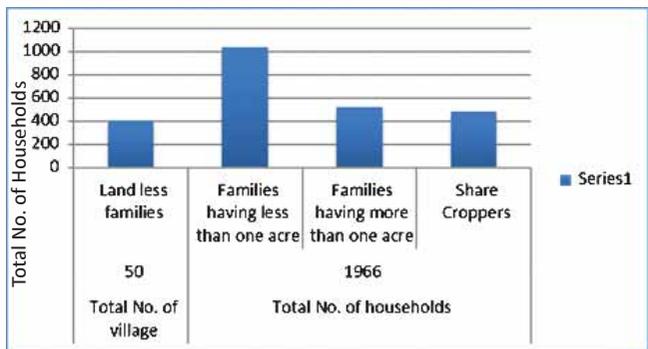


Chart1: Land holding status of households in the Programme Area at Gajapati



Structure of Women Farmer Association (WFA)

² Article “100,000 women, 10 years, one demand: let us own our farmland” by Sabita Parida & Savvy Soumya Misra@catchnews on 2 October 2015. (www.catchnews.com/india-news/100-000-women-10-years-one-demand-let-us-own-our-farmland-1443781029.html)

recognized as farmers and to avail of benefits as farmers including skill development. IWD is currently working with 574 women who are WFA members. 276 of these women are marginal farmers³, 19 are small farmers⁴ and 279 landless farmers who are doing share cropping.

2. Women Farmers Training on improved method of Agriculture and Broader Community Gender Analysis:

The majority of farmers in the project area cultivate rice as their main crop, which is fully dependent on monsoon rains. Over the last several years the monsoon rains have become erratic and uncertain which is adversely affecting rice cultivation. IWD has helped to mobilize farmers to take up other crops such as millet, different varieties of pulses and vegetables which could withstand climate change and has provided awareness raising on the need of growing non-rice crop in the context of climate change.

IWD also carries out training and field demonstrations for women farmers on a System of Rice Intensification (SRI)⁵, the adverse effects of using chemical fertilisers, how to make and use organic manure and compost for better harvest. Trainings were conducted with women farmers on improved and sustainable upland agriculture (ragi and maize cultivation), soil conservation, preparation and use of vermin compost, use of improved seeds, improved method of paddy cultivation, vegetables, pulses and oil seed cultivation for empowering women farmers to play a vital role for restoring

▼ Radha Sabara, S Talasing Village



“Radha Sabar, one member of the Women’s Farmer Association (WFA) shared her experience of attending different training and how it helps her to improve her knowledge and leadership skills. I learnt that by saving a small portion of my daily ration rice and selling it at the end of the month, I was able to save 10 Rupees a month. It was my first training that I have attended. I got training on how to get equal wages under the government rural work scheme, exposure to fishery and how to do organic paddy cultivation has increased our confidence and capacity to oppose gender discrimination practices in terms of exclusion from agriculture training methods conducted by the government, availing credit, and even in terms of addressing wage differences and domestic violence.”



▲ Field demonstration on Line Transplantation at Gosani Block

traditional agriculture. Women farmers were also informed about the availability of benefits under different schemes. The impact of climate change and strategies to reduce the impact on agriculture was also part of discussion in these trainings.

As well as training on specific agricultural practices, IWD has also used a gender lens, working with both women and men in the community to highlight the importance of women being recognized as farmers. IWD has found that these trainings can often be an eye opener and is often a catalyst of individual change and collective action to challenge and promote changes in social and gender norms. Exercises such as analyzing the work division and role of women and men in the agriculture working calendar done with women and men at village level helps to change men’s mindset on women’s role in agriculture, but also helps women to rethink their internalized belief that their role is secondary in agriculture.

³ Marginal Farmer: ‘Marginal Farmer’ means a farmer cultivating (as owner or tenant or share cropper) agricultural land up to 1 hectare (2.5 acres)

⁴ Small Farmer: ‘Small Farmer’ means a farmer cultivating (as owner or tenant or share cropper) agricultural land of more than 1 hectare and up to 2 hectares (5 acres).

⁵ The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) is a methodology aimed at increasing the yield of rice produced in farming and rice growing regions from world knowledge about this. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/System_of_Rice_Intensification

3. Ensuring land rights for women through the Forest Rights Act 2006:

Land ownership enhances women’s status in the family and society, as this helps to improve their status within the family which in turn can lead to increased self-confidence and self-esteem. In India, there are a number of schemes which farmers are entitled to if they own land. One example is the Farmer Credit Card which is only available to landholders. A woman can only ever be considered a farmer legally if she owns land, but the land title is almost always in a man's name. One strategy for helping to secure women’s legal entitlement

▼ Apili Sabara: Single women got forest land title under FRA 2006



to land in Odisha is through the Forest Right Act 2006 which recognises the rights of forest dwelling communities over such forests, which has been an integral part of their lives and livelihood. The law provides an important space for the women, who have often been deprived of their right over the forest and the forest land by the society at large. Since 2012, IWD has support 1326 households to apply for forest land under the Forest Rights Act, and 525 of these received a joint title (both wife and husband name) of forest land. A further 72 single women headed households got land title in their name. 142 WFA members got a land title in their name.

4. Linking with Government:

IWD has been supporting the Women Farmers Associations to build a rapport with different local level Government Departments in order to mobilise resources for use in the communities. IWD organised meetings between government officers and members of the WFA to have direct interactions regarding problems of accessing credit and inclusion of women in trainings organised by the agriculture department. WFAs have also submitted written petitions to agriculture authorities, demanding recognition of women as famers and payment of equal wages in agricultural work. Other lobbying activities have included the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, rural employment scheme, and mid-day meal at school for school going children.

BOX 2 : METHODS AND TECHNIQUES USED FOR STRENGTHENING OF WFA

METHODS

That involve the direct participation of women and men:

- Trainings, workshops
- Exchange of experience(through exposure)
- Celebrating Special Day like Food Security Day and International Women’s Day
- Training on improved and sustainable upland agriculture practice

That involve the community at large:

- Community exchange
- Visit to local neighboring districts (training sessions, field exposure, experience sharing)·
- Visit government offices, government agriculture department at block level and local government offices

TECHNIQUES

Used in educational activities:

- Group work
- Regular discussion
- Field demonstration on Agriculture Practice
- Inviting different government officers as resource persons in the training.
- Ensuring trainings are easy for women to attend by taking into account: time and place of the meeting so that it is suitable for women; conducting the training in local language, pictorial and field demonstration, ensuring staff are gender sensitive.
- Best Farmer Award
- Using the term Women and Men Farmer: Consciously constantly used this term when speaking or writing

Impacts observed in women's life:

Since IWD has mobilised Women Farmers Associations, women are now being acknowledged as farmers in the community. Women are now involved in making decisions on agricultural and community infrastructure planning.

Recognition as a Women Farmer and receiving equal wages:

Many of the men in the communities where IWD works have acknowledged women's role in agriculture is significant and crucial. Women have got the courage to demand for enhanced and equal wages for working as agricultural laborers under the WFA banner. Though equal wages are not paid in all the cases, women's wages have increased and they feel empowered to say no to work if the wages are too low.



▲ Purusatham Bhuyan and Lalita Bhuyan from Lingpur village

Increased in joint decision-making in the households:

Many WFA members are now consulted on key decisions like crop planning to sell the produce which affect the households.

"I was never consulted or participated in decisions relating to cultivating or selling produce, but during these last three years I have been consulted in these decisions. This has had a positive effect and now we are united and able to resolve situations together."

Seukuli Sabar, S Sabara Village

Recognition from Government and Financial Institutions:

WFA has been linked up with the Department of Agriculture which is providing training related to improved methods of



▲ ATMA Block Office meeting, Gosani Block

agriculture, new techniques of sustainable agriculture, preparation of organic manure, pest control and preservation of seeds. The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) is promoting farmers' clubs in every district to provide support to farmers. WFA encouraged NABARD to establish Women Farmers club in 16 villages and mobilised financial support of 136,500 INR (US\$2100) for capacity building of members of the WFA.

In the initial period, members of the WFA were supported with a revolving fund so that they could avoid going to moneylenders and paying high interest rates. But after meetings and discussions with banks and government officers, women in 17 villages have mobilized 857,000 INR (US \$13,229) as agriculture credit in last two years. Radha Sabara from S. Talasing village was named the best SRI cultivator in the Gajapati district and she was awarded by the Odisha Chief Minister.

There is a Block-level⁶ Farmers Information Advisory Committee formed under the Agriculture Technology Management Association (ATMA), which was initially an all male committee. Following discussions with the WFA, four women have become members of the 20 member Block level committee. The Inclusion of women in the ATMA committee shows an increasing recognition of women as farmers.

Increased food security and income:

Agriculture production has increased substantially in 38 villages. 478 women farmers from 25 villages have been trained in SRI and line sowing. By making use of this new knowledge and skill, they have increased food production at an average of 5 quintals per acre. The increased production has helped to reduce the food deficit period.

Fishing is considered to be exclusively the work of men, but members of the WFA in 6 villages have taken up fishing by

⁶ This is the middle tier of India's local governance system, the Panchayat Raj Institute



▲ S Talsing village women doing Line Transplantation

leasing the village ponds managed under the village council. The women in the villages located on the hill slopes were motivated to take up improved methods of turmeric cultivation. Availing seeds from the horticulture department, they have increased their cash income by 3000 INR (US \$46). Similarly, with training and input support, 193 women are cultivating vegetables and are earning an additional income ranging from 1500 INR (US\$23) to 5000 INR (US\$77) after keeping aside what is required to feed their families. The additional income is used for children's education and towards meeting other needs of the families. The members have stopped taking credit from moneylenders and have brought a change in the age-old practice of moneylenders' exploitation.

Bati Sabar, S Talsing Village participated in the SRI training and accurately applied what she had learnt. This gave her good yields and consequently good returns as it resulted in lower costs, lower investment on seeds and the plants were more resistant to insect infestation. She received 14 quintals of paddy in one acre of land with investment of 11000 INR, which is sufficient food for 12 months for her family. Before learning the new technique, her family faced food insecurity for three months a year. Before SRI, she used to spend more than 15000 INR on one acre of land for paddy cultivation. Bati led the village self-help group and WFA, she actively took part in trainings and has become a source of inspiration for other women in her village. In her words, "If a woman is confident, there is no task she cannot do equal to a man."

Challenges faced by the Programme

While the programme in Gajapati has introduced a number of innovative approaches to ensure women are recognized as farmers, it has also faced a number of challenges.

Changing attitudes in communities:

Traditionally people have never acknowledged women as farmers. Men have considered women's role in agriculture as secondary and women have also internalized this belief. Changing this mindset is a slow process and requires regular discussions at different forums and event, systematic involvement of both women and men in trainings and activities such as honoring women farmers as best farmers and consciously constantly using "women and men farmers" when in speeches and resource material. IWD has found that these approaches helps to change attitudes and motivate people to accept women as farmers.

Changing attitudes amongst government officials and bankers:

Government officials and bankers also come from communities and societies where women are viewed as second class citizens. Laws and regulations can often reinforce these perceptions. IWD has found that regular interaction and discussion with government officials and bankers and follow up training can lead to breaking the institutional barriers and extending benefits to women farmers – but this is a time consuming task which requires perseverance.



▲ Seukuli Sabar, S Sabara Village: Brinjal Cultivation

Women have limited access to information:

Women in rural areas lack information and knowledge about their rights and entitlements such as the direct and indirect benefits women can derive from land ownership, different government schemes and improved methods of agriculture. Women tend not to be familiar with government procedures in relation to land registration and do not have the confidence to demand their rights. IWD staff have spent time explaining the different government procedures to women in the community and helping them to demand their rights. Women's increased access to information and education was achieved through regular training on new agricultural methods and related work with government agriculture department, regular meetings with government line department officials for information and ongoing discussions and time with facilitating agency staff.

Staff Rotation:

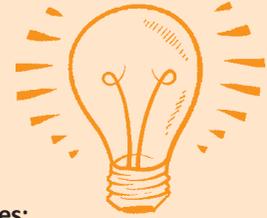
It has been a considerable challenge for IWD to retain staff in the rural area due to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the project areas. IWD has been able to provide safe accommodation for staff in these areas which addresses their basic needs which has helped retain some staff, but it remains an ongoing challenge.

Time required:

Women, particularly in poor families, are engaged both in household work as well as on the land to support their families. For them to give time to participate in various trainings and meeting is also a challenge. IWD has made

Yagidi Sabara, 37 years, from Tamatara Village is now an elected representative in India's local governance system. She explained: "I was selected as the secretary of SHG since I had some literacy skills. I attended many training programmes organised by IWD which gave me exposure to visit Bank and Block office for different issues in my village. My village didn't have road connectivity, and the only way to access the village was by walking for about three hours to the nearest road. I have been repeatedly raising this issue at the District level and at the village council meeting. Last year my demand was approved and the road is now being constructed".

efforts to ensure the location and timing of meetings were suitable for women and the methodologies used in the training were engaging for women. However, addressing the fundamental power imbalance of the different workloads of women and men has been much more difficult.

Lesson Learnt**Changes in men's attitudes:**

It is important to involve men in the process and not only work with women. The focus on the work with men should be on creating awareness and sensitivity amongst men to recognise women as farmers.

Motivate women and help to increase their confidence:

Organising different public events such as observation of Food Security Day and International Women's Day helps to recognize successful women farmers and can increase their confidence and motivate them to continue their work in the community. Some of these women who have been leaders in the WFA and Self Help Groups have since gone on to run and win seats in local elections.

Alternative credit systems:

Supporting the development of revolving funds and accessing institutional credit are necessary to provide alternatives to moneylenders who charge extremely high interest rates.

Dialogue with Government:

Organising meetings with different stakeholders including Government officers has been useful in addressing some of the problems women farmer face. This should involve key advocacy interventions to ensure there is support and recognition for women as a farmer from all levels of government.

Training:

Skill development and information sharing is essential to increase women farmer's confidence levels.

Conclusion

"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women."

Jawaharlal Nehru

"This is the starting point of our struggles and we have miles to go."

Women farmer

from Harishchandrapuru village

Women have played and continue to play a key role in the conservation of basic life support systems such as land, water, flora and fauna. They have protected the health of the soil through organic recycling and the maintenance of crop diversity. Despite their key role in numerous agricultural processes, rural women are exploited by landlords for their personal gain. They are treated as second class citizens or personal property. But in recent times women have very

significant roles to play in every sphere of socio-economic or political life.

Presently the Agriculture Department has accepted the demands made by WFAs and are willing to support women farmers in terms of training, seeds and other inputs. NABARD has agreed to support WFAs for training of members, support for producers group and providing low interest rate credit. The Bank has agreed to provide agricultural loans to women by forming joint liability groups. Women from neighboring villages are now also interested to join the WFA. Thus there is a huge potential for replication and expansion of this program

"Long is the way and hard, that out of Hell leads up to light."

John Milton
Paradise Lost

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