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Women as farmers, feminisation of farming

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Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

What is new in the world of farming today? Well, for one, there is a 'feminisation' of farming in many parts of the world, and South Asia is no exception to that. Before I explain that process, let me point out first that women have always performed important roles in agriculture, whether in less- or more-developed countries and irrespective of time, but have remained invisible as farmers. This is because when women have worked side-by-side with men on the farm, they often worked as part of a family unit of labour. A powerful sexually-based division of labour meant that women's labour and active participation were limited only to certain parts of agriculture and to certain tasks, or even to certain crops. Often, the bulk of this labour was performed under the direct or indirect control of men, who also controlled (or owned) land, resulting in both inaccurate information about and the invisibility of women and also undervaluing of their contributions to agricultural production systems.

Photo: K. Lahiri-Dutt

Consequently, when international development planners attempted to improve agricultural productivity, they generally assumed that men were the

most productive workers—the 'natural' farmers. When these planners used innovative means to increase agricultural production, they took it for granted that increased food production will benefit everyone in the rural community equally. One of the earliest authors to highlight women's roles in agriculture was Ester Boserup. In her book, published in 1970, she showed that part of the reason for women's invisibility in poorer countries was because women were traditionally responsible for what she described as the 'feminine sector' of farming: subsistence farm production that was separate from the male-dominated cash-crop sector. This sector almost always received far less attention from agricultural planners when they considered ways of improvement of agricultural production. Carmen Deere (1976) also supported this view and argued that women's work in the subsistence sector of agriculture allowed the male wages in the sector to remain lower than was necessary to maintain a family. Because of these low wages, women had to support the families through subsistence food-production activities, and so the cycle continued. Yet another scholar, Caroline Sachs, described women as 'invisible farmers' in her book published in 1983, and argued that without attention to gender equity, agricultural development may increase women's workload, decrease their status in rural society, and increase the difficulty with which a woman meets the subsistence needs of her family, resulting in malnutrition and even conflicts over food.

Not only are women's labours in agriculture in less-developed countries different from that in the more-developed ones, their roles have increased during the last two decades, leading to what is generally known as *feminisation of agriculture*. Women have now broader and deeper responsibilities in farming as they increasingly shoulder the responsibilities of household survival, while taking up opportunities thrown up by commercial agriculture, leading to a blurring of traditional gender segregation of roles in the farms. In fact, Deere (2009) suggests that a multitude of factors are responsible for the increase in women's participation in the agriculture sector; a rise in the share of agricultural labour force that is female; an increase in the number of agricultural tasks in which women participate; a greater input in the total labour time that women dedicate to fieldwork or agricultural tasks; an expansion in women's roles in agriculture-related decision-making; and last, but not the least, the under-enumeration of women as unpaid family labour in the past, combined with their greater current visibility as agricultural wage workers or own-account farmers. Moreover, depending upon the existing agricultural and livelihoods system, feminisation can mean slightly different things in the context of agriculture in different countries.

Susana Lastarria-Cornhiel (2006) argues that 'To understand recent tendencies in women's work in agriculture, it is useful to locate them within the broader agricultural context.' Throughout the Global South, smallholder agriculture that produced mainly food crops and animal products for household consumption and for sale in local markets is becoming an unviable activity. Other major changes are sweeping the rural landscape; the recent past is also the time when most of the developing nations pursued neoliberal economic policies, and the effects of global environmental change have begun to be acutely felt. Therefore, the combined impacts of the twin processes of globalisation and climate change on the rural scene will need to be seen in light of feminisation; overall, experts believe that together, these

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processes are leading to an agrarian crisis in most developing nations. Many men have migrated out of villages in these countries, looking for better livelihoods or cash incomes, leaving women to look after farming.

Clearly, to ensure food security in the future, all social and development policies need to focus on women farmers.

A question arises: how many women farmers are there in the world today? A good place to start is to look at the immediate past. Dixon (1982), based on ILO estimates and FAO census of about 82 countries, estimated that the proportion of women in the agricultural labour force was about 42 per cent. There were remarkable regional variations in the nature of the goods and services provided by men and women: for Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East 31 per cent and the highest recorded for Asia (48 per cent). Besides these macro-scale regional differences, one can expect contextual variations in the nature of women's labour across various levels – from the household to ecosystems. Since the publication of this article FAO and its experts have closely looked into the evidence on the roles of women in agriculture and in rural labour markets. They now use the term 'economically active population in agriculture' to comprehensively assess the participation of women in agriculture. The definition of 'economically active' includes all individuals who report that his/her main economic activity is agriculture. A recent (2011) publication www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf (prepared by a team of researchers and Cheryl Doss for FAO gives a more or less accurate picture of women's participation in agriculture as evident from the data. Overall, women still comprise around 40 per cent of the agricultural labour force in the Global South. This report notes that women make up almost 50 per cent of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa – a major increase from the 1980s. In the rest of Africa, the proportion has remained relatively stable: Eastern Africa is around 50 per cent, Southern Africa is around 40 per cent. Within Asia, the sub-regional averages range from about 35 per cent in South Asia to almost 50 per cent in East and Southeast Asia. However, the larger countries tend to mask remarkable increases in the proportion of women in agriculture in smaller countries; for example, the proportion of women in agriculture in Bangladesh now exceeds 50 per cent. The general pattern in Asia suggests that the poorer the area, the higher is women's contribution, and that women generally farm small pieces of land. In South Asia, 70 per cent of agricultural workers are women and 60-70 per cent of rural marketing is done by women. Throughout India, women are more likely to be engaged in agricultural work than men, but much of this work is informally done as part of the family's subsistence. Consequently, official statistics continue to grossly underestimate the female workforce in the region (Krishnaraj and Shah 2004, p. 44). Vepa (2004) estimated that in India alone, close to 33 per cent of cultivators (a census category, implying farmers who own land) and nearly 47 per cent of agricultural labourers are women. Moreover, Doss argues that while women are not the majority of those reported to be working in agriculture, the agricultural sector is important for women. This is because, of those women in the least developed countries who report being economically active, 79 per cent report agriculture as their primary economic activity. Overall, 48 per cent of the economically active women in the world report that their primary activity is agriculture.

The major difficulty lies in self-definition. When a survey enumerator asks rural women about their daily activities, many are likely to reply that working at 'the home' is their primary responsibility, so the potential of under-estimation can arise in this measure. To address the gaps, experts recommend comprehensive 'time-use surveys' to get a more complete picture of how women and men spend their time in rural areas. Again, the data that are generated from such surveys are specific to a context reflecting varying nature of farm duties in different agricultural systems, and are not comparable across the countries. Generally, it is believed that over 75 per cent of the daily time of a rural woman is spent on farming-related activities, including caring for livestock and collecting water.

A question that is often asked is: 'How much of the global agricultural produce comes from women?' A conservative estimate by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 2010 suggests that in the present day, female farmers produce 50 per cent of all food crops. Again, this information has turned into what Cheryl Doss on her (2010) report for FAO www.fao.org/3/a-am309e.pdf calls a 'stylized fact', more in the nature of a metaphor that 'women hold up half the sky'. She shows that the origin of the claim, that women produce 60-80% of the food in developing countries, is shrouded in myth and overlooks the complementary and overlapping roles that women and men play in agriculture. However, Doss concludes that overwhelming empirical evidence points to the importance of women as agricultural producers, although it is not possible to substantiate the claim that women produce 60-80% of the food in the developing countries. A number or for that matter some numerical data do not reveal the full story of women in agriculture: as Doss concludes, 'Better data are needed, but data should not be collected simply to demonstrate women's contribution to food production. Instead, better data are needed to document the constraints that women face.' (p. 19). To put it simply, one should ask *different questions* in order to understand the contemporary challenges for women in agriculture, and developmental policies should create opportunities for those women who are toiling in the fields without recognition and support.

For more, download the recently published monograph by the author:

Lahiri-Dutt K. 2014. *Experiencing and coping with change: Women-headed households in the Eastern Gangetic Plains.* ACIAR Technical Reports No. 83. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research: Canberra. 67 pp

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