

Learnings from Recommendations for a Women-Inclusive Agricultural Policy in the Kerala State of India

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1. Abstract

A policy advocacy effort for introducing women-inclusive agricultural policy in the State of Kerala, India during 2011-12, and the premises and methodologies adopted are covered in this article. The effort was not an initiative of a committee appointed by the government, which is the usual procedure, but was a proactive campaign. Two pro-women agencies of Kerala involving various stakeholders from grassroots entities had reminded the government and other stakeholders that it is high time the state adopt a women-inclusive policy in all planned efforts of research and development in agriculture and the issues that a women-inclusive agricultural policy should address.

2. Policy lag and development issues of women in agriculture

Often one may wonder, in spite of national and international commitments, why corresponding policies and actions do not happen at the cutting edge in many development situations. The lack of adoption of a strong policy for farmwomen's empowerment and gender mainstreaming programs in the agricultural development scenario of India can be considered a typical example of this kind. It will be easy to find fault with the stereotypical mindset of the socioeconomic and political institutions, lack of proactive attitude, lack of competitiveness among the planning and implementation cadres, etc. as the reasons behind such development failures. In such cases of undue policy lags or inertia, mobilizing policy advocacy from the grassroots and showcasing model sets of policy recommendations may serve as an impetus to trigger the desired action from the concerned agencies.



Photo 1. Rice farming women group in Kasaragod district, Kerala, India. (Geethakutty. 30 Nov 2011)

This paper shares the background, methodology and outcome of a policy advocacy attempt done in India.

Women in agriculture of India

In each generation in India, women serve both independent and interdependent roles as unpaid family farm workers, paid farm laborers, agricultural entrepreneurs, and as major decision makers in women-headed farming families. With the introduction of various programs of women's empowerment, livelihoods, rural employment guarantee, microfinance and self-help groups, thousands of women's groups are also actively engaged in agricultural operations. India has international and national commitments for practicing gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in development. Nonetheless, effective policies



Photo 2: Meeting for the policy advocacy on 5th January, 2012 at the CGSAFED office in KAU with team members. (K.P. Sandeep Kumar. 5 Jan 2012)

and programs to address the concerns of farmwomen have not yet been widely implemented in the country. The farmwomen in India still work in environments of deprived rights and low accessibility to farm resources, support services, technologies and benefits. As the SOFA report on women in agriculture of developing countries, (FAO, 2011) highlighted millions of Indian farmwomen working within discriminating framework would gainfully participate and contribute to food security if empowered with effective policies that ensure equal opportunities and support services at the grassroots level.

A case of policy advocacy in Kerala

Kerala is a considered one of the most progressive states of India. The ratio of males to females is balanced, and health status as well as literacy rates among men and women as more or less equal. But in the farming sector, as in other parts of India, women are still subject to socioeconomic gender discrimination. Despite widespread conviction of the need for women-friendly support services and women-inclusive programs among the development personnel, such a policy in agriculture has yet to be implemented in the state. As a member of national and state-level task forces of agricultural extension planning, I had been advocating gender and women-inclusive planning in agriculture in the country. The reluctance or inability noted on the part of the enabling systems for introducing women-friendly programs were enough to remind those concerned that it is time to try a policy advocacy approach with women development agencies and stakeholders from the grassroots in a given context. The present article shares the methodology adopted and tools and procedures employed for recommending a framework of women-inclusive agricultural policy for the State of Kerala.

The campaign was taken up as a joint activity of the Centre for Gender Studies in Agriculture and Farm Entrepreneurship Development (CGSAFED) of the Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) and the Kerala State Women's Commission (KSWC) during 2011-12 with a coordination committee consisting of subject experts, scientists, elected "panchayath" (local

self-government) representatives, field-level officers, social activists, women's commission members and administrators.

Setting premises and objective of the policy

The premises for the policy advocacy attempt were:

- (i) Women in agriculture in Kerala state will be able to surmount the discriminations in development initiatives if women's concerns are given priority in the mainstream agricultural development projects along with comprehensive agricultural projects envisaged exclusively for women.
- (ii) As part of the women-inclusive policy, amendments and criteria that uphold women-centric development are to be incorporated in the existing governing, development and research institutions in the agriculture and allied sectors of the state, with capacity to be built in the systems.
- (iii) The process should proactively advocate, involving all stakeholders and enabling them to be aware of their responsibilities to translate the recommendations into actions at different levels.

Thus, the objectives of the task were set to involve the concerned stakeholders to undertake situation analyses, assess the roles of women in agriculture and allied sectors of the state, identify the gaps and discriminations faced by women in agricultural development contexts, flag issues and concerns to be addressed through the policy and recommend framework for women-inclusive agricultural policy to be adopted by the government, build awareness on the recommendations among various stakeholders, and persuade them for action at different levels to bring about the desired change.

3. Methodology followed for the policy advocacy

(i) Involving and informing the stakeholders

Major stakeholders of the task – women farmers, policy makers, planners, administrators, scientists, development personnel, people representatives, and government authorities – were consulted. Individual letters with a concept note on the women-inclusive policy formulation were sent to all the ministers of the state government, elected representatives of the state. This included local government presidents, members of the state assembly, and members of the parliament of India, secretaries and directors of the departments of agriculture and allied sectors (animal husbandry, dairy, fisheries,



Photo 3: Inaugural session of the women-friendly development programme of Velookkara panchayath, Thrissur District in Kerala State. The Member of the Legislative Assembly Mr. Thomas Unniyadan is handing over a farm tool to the women group leader Ms. Sheeba. (K. Drishya. 21 Nov 2013)

forestry), related commodity boards and commissions of various development sectors, vice-chancellors, directors, deans and selected scientists of farm universities, selected field officers and women activists, and women's development agencies.

The letter was primarily meant to inform these agencies about the necessity of a policy initiative and to seek their views and suggestions on the farmwomen's concerns to be addressed through the proposed policy framework. The general public was informed through mass media about the initiative and invited suggestions for the proposed policy. Although about 1,500 letters were sent, only around 100 persons responded. These responses were mainly from local self-government presidents and women activists; no heads of government or elected representatives of the upper houses responded to the letter. The 'no response' pattern was considered as the reflection of lack of importance or interest attached to the topic among the recipients.

(ii) Situation analysis

The next step was to analyze the content of programs in agriculture and allied sectors in the state by auditing their development programs, websites and annual reports and assess whether women inclusiveness was addressed. Discussions with field functionaries of agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, and dairy, were held and literature was reviewed with respect to the roles and participation of women in farming and the needs and constraints they face.

Focus group discussions (FDGs) and consultations were held with stakeholders from different regions, and categories of the state wherein women farmers, development officers, bank officials, village level elected representatives, women from successful women development programs, and scientists were involved to deliberate on the issues. In such sessions, farmwomen of different categories shared their real life problems. They were persuaded to prepare a 'wish list' that they would like to achieve through the proposed policy by a lead question: "If you are the minister of agriculture/president of the panchayath, which problems of farming would be solved and how?" The major wishes listed by them were: "Ensuring availability of land, seeds, planting materials, training and credit; panchayath level registration of women farmers; special agriculture schemes for women farmers; ensuring availability of user-friendly tools and machinery; laws for joint ownership of the land, etc." The development functionaries had also appended the wish list to bring in structural and/or functional reforms in the development systems and programs.



Photo 4: KAU Vice- Chancellor, Mr. K.R. Viswambharan receiving the recommendations from the KSWC member, T. Devi. Dr. Geethakutty stands next to her. (K.P. Sandeepkumar 22 Feb 2012)

(iii) Framing the policy recommendations

The recommendations were framed within two major sections. The first section focused on the basic issues common to all categories of women in agriculture. The second section had subsections with specific recommendations for different categories: women farmers of women-headed farm families, co-women farmers of men-headed farm families, women farmer groups, women agribusiness operators, paid farm workers, and women engaged in different sectors of agriculture.

(iv) Taking the recommendations to the stakeholders

During March 2012, the recommendation for formulating a women-inclusive agricultural policy was submitted to the Chief Minister of Kerala through the Kerala State Women's Commission. Prior to this, a workshop was held to discuss the recommendations with women in agriculture, elected representatives, and development functionaries. Subsequently, copies of the draft recommendations were sent to all heads of the sector departments. Popular articles on the implications of the policy recommendations were also published.

4. Learnings and conclusions

The interaction and opinion-seeking studies conducted among the stakeholders – especially the women in grassroots efforts, field functionaries at the cutting edge, views of the people representatives of local government and partners of successful women development programs in agriculture formed the base to flag the issues and recommendations. The lack of interest and attention to the topic from the higher-level policy makers was a serious limitation in planning alternatives to reach out to such stakeholders. The recommendations submitted to the government are yet to be accepted and implemented by the concerned agencies. However, the document was able to remind and sensitize at least a section of stakeholders about the need and the possible ways of women's inclusion. This was evident from some of the development initiatives implemented immediately after the effort, such as panchayath level registration of farmers introduced by the department of agriculture. More such responses from the field are awaited from the stakeholders. The document could also serve as a guide to local governments and women development agencies to take up women-inclusive programs and to rectify the existing constraints of women. The author with her team from KAU is extending support to selected local self-governments in the state to take up women-inclusive model projects under agricultural programs on topics like women friendly farm tools, land bank for women farmers, women's health and food security.

Author biography

Dr. P.S. Geethakutty is Professor and Head of the Centre for Gender Studies in Agriculture of Kerala Agricultural University (KAU), Kerala, India. She was head of the Centre for Women and Gender Studies in the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) of India and had served as Visiting Professor of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), as well as at the Leibniz University in Hannover, Germany. She has spearheaded many national and international research projects on gender analysis, from women empowerment, farm entrepreneurship, women's political empowerment and traditional farm knowledge. She had been involved in various committees of women in agriculture at the state and federal level in India.