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Sustainable and resilient farming systems intensification in the eastern Gangetic Plains

Project Highlights 2: Gender



Sustainable and Resilient Farming Systems Intensification (SRFSI) in the Eastern Gangetic Plains

Highlight 2: Gender – Initial Progress

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SRFSI

Focusing on the Eastern Gangetic Plains (EGP), the Sustainable and Resilient Farming Systems Intensification (SRFSI) Project is a collaborative undertaking between more than 20 partners across Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Australia dedicated on improving the livelihoods some of the region's 300 million residents engaged in agricultural occupations. Supported by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and ACIAR through the Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP), SRFSI aims to make agriculture in the region more productive, profitable and sustainable.

Dominated by small farms, the region has the highest concentration of poor rural women worldwide who are increasingly dependent on agricultural activities for food security and livelihoods. However, this reliance is often undermined by extreme weather events, lack of crop and water management technology and limited access to service networks and essential resources, giving rise to vulnerabilities for a multitude of women-headed farm households.

Targeting more than 30,000 farmers spread across eight districts across the three countries, the SRFSI Project aims to address these vulnerabilities, seeking to improve the opportunities and outcomes of smallholder women farmers in the EGP through the adoption of more productive, profitable and lower-risk farming systems thereby reducing rural poverty. SRFSI aims to trial innovative farming technologies such as conservation agriculture and water-efficient production methods as well as policy and institutional mechanisms to improve the lives of men and women in the EGP.

Gender Context

For developmental efforts to be effective, it is critical that agricultural development is gender equitable. Hence, considering the specific needs of each gender is vital for the project to achieve its goal. This is of particular importance in the SRFSI undertaking as, driven predominantly by the outmigration of men, feminization of agriculture across the EGP region has given rise to the genesis of a new caste - that of the 'left behind' women. These women, have become the primary decision makers regarding management of the farm and household in women-headed households (WHH) farm-level decision making is done primarily by women.

The potential benefits (or consequences) of incorporating (or neglecting) gender concerns, however, spans beyond WHH. Even in male-headed households (MHH), women household members and youth also contribute to various aspects of agricultural work – from production to post-production along the value chain. Some landless women also stand to benefit from changes in the farming systems.

Yet, gender equity continues to be severely lacking throughout the EGP region and is particularly acute in the agricultural sector - women are paid at 60-70% of the labour rate offered to men, they also cannot hold land titles rendering them ineligible for formal credit. Social and cultural practices also limit some women's mobility.

Exclusionary practices such as these hinder the development of women in the region and are exacerbated further by historical low levels of education of women. The implications of this issue is perhaps best illustrated by Nepal where only 3% of WHH used mechanical equipment, in comparison to 8% of HH headed by men.

Investment in enabling women with the necessary knowledge and technology has the potential to be of immense benefit to the agricultural industry and to the respective countries as a whole. Women could boost agricultural yields by as much as 20-30% should they have access to the same resources as men. Furthermore, it is suggested that the involvement of women could result to higher rates of uptake and benefits of introduced technologies.

Yet despite these implications, many development projects have, in general, failed to recognise the specific requirements of women.



Male and female farmers at the exposure field visit, Borlaug Institute for South Asia. Pusa, Bihar.

A focus on empowering women through innovation, access to information and training is a prime consideration for an initiative such as SRFSI to be successful, WHHs and other females engaged in agriculture should not just be involved but targeted for inclusion.

Following this principle, the SRFSI project has endeavored to incorporate gender in the development and application of its initiatives. This emphasis has been an encompassing theme throughout the activities; including women in the testing and dissemination of technology, conducting women-only focus group discussions and reflecting the needs and perceptions of women, as a separate entity, through the collection of gender disaggregated data.

Another important consideration when designing EGP strategies is the potential consequences of interventions. For example, while the availability of machinery will certainly reduce the drudgery and time of typical women's work such as transplanting and weeding, such innovations could also place a downward pressure on the daily labour rate offered to women. Already paid at a fraction of men's wage, the introduction of mechanisation for such tasks need to be complemented by other employment opportunities for women labourers. Consequently, the SRFSI project will endeavour to maintain balance in all undertakings, integrating the needs of each gender when evaluating potential benefits of technologies.

Progress

In recognition of the significant role that women play in agriculture, women were a specific focus during the planning and application of SRFSI project activities.

So far, some examples of the current integration of women into the SRFSI project include:

Gender sensitisation

A session on how to mainstream gender in the SRFSI project was presented during the Project planning meeting held in Nepal in November 2014. This was followed by trainings, attended by Australian and developing country partners, ran by Dr Fay Rola-Rubzen and Dr Roy Murray-Prior on '*Engenderising*' the SRFSI Project: *Gender focus in SRFSI* during the field study tour in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. The training included an action plan for incorporating gender into the SRFSI activities and project objectives.

Gender strategy paper

A draft gender strategy paper was prepared outlining suggestions on how to address gender equity in SRFSI. This included gender equity principles such as;

- Recognition of diversity and understanding of gender roles, needs and motivations
- Gender inclusion in all activities – technology dissemination, training, capacity building and extension
- Gender sensitivity in designing and disseminating technologies, in training and extension
- Gender responsive policy suggestions

Participation in Activities

Men and women farmers were both included in technology dissemination. This included both men and women representatives from each participating household, ensuring the SRFSI beneficiaries are gender balanced.

Reports on gender data collected at each activity have been varied; in the Purnea district of Bihar, India, a fairly balanced attendance of women was noted (40-50% of participants) with one field day in the Tikkapatti node even reporting women comprising 70% of attendants. In Nepal, participation rates of women in field days were between 25-38%, with the maximum women participation noted in the Farmer's field day in the Gidha Node. Participation by females in field trials however remain lower, with around 15% in the kharif season and 24% in the rabi season, compared to 85% and 76%, respectively, for men in Nepal. Attention should therefore remain on making future activities more gender balanced.



Maize Zero tillage trial demonstration during field visits at BAU, Sabour research

Gender disaggregated data collection

To ensure that both men and women's needs are taken into consideration, data collected in the group interviews were gender disaggregated. Disaggregated data were collected on various activities (household, farm, off-farm, non-farm); access to inputs, resources (land, labour, capital), information, assets, and technology; labour; coping strategies; benefits; decision-making; barriers/ challenges; and goals and priorities.

Men and Women-only Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

In each of the 40 nodes, FGDs were held, with groups consisting of women-only, men-only and mixed-sex, to provide insight on various issues, problems and constraints unique to each area. The facilitation of women-only FGDs allowed the women to feel comfortable sharing information they may have withheld were the men present.



A women-only focus group discussion held at the Dogacchi Node

Challenges & Recommendations

Reporting on gender aspects of the communities involved has identified several weaknesses which require attention to enhance the success of the project. For example, the need for the appointment of a 'Gender Focal Person' within the team is crucial to monitor the specific requirements and needs of women within the SRFSI jurisdictions, making sure that project activities do not neglect women or inadvertently lead to the exclusion of women.

Furthermore, further gender and socio-economic analysis needs to be conducted to deepen the understanding of the various roles of men and women and their coping mechanisms in the face of the changing environment in the EGP to be able to design appropriate gender sensitive innovations. Implementing suggested actions proposed in the Gender Strategy paper in the project's activities including in the scaling out will ensure that SRFSI benefits each gender more equitably and that the benefits will be more widespread.

Additional strategies to promote gender awareness, equality and empowerment also require attention. In particular, to facilitate the uptake of SRFSI benefits by female members of the community, women should be encouraged to take leadership roles and champion SRFSI throughout their district.

Finally, it is important to monitor the impacts of the various project activities and interventions through both qualitative and quantitative measures. M&E design includes gender disaggregated indicators, and where possible longitudinal case studies be incorporated to monitor the impacts of SRFSI innovations on men and women in the EGP.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, the success of the SRFSI project will depend on specifically considering gender throughout the project's application. Empowering women, a major constitution of the agricultural workforce, will only benefit the goals of the SRFSI project. This should be done through continuing updates of the gender strategy, ensuring the need of all stakeholders - men and women - are addressed. It is through the effective implementation of such strategy and actions that real and enduring change can be realized in the Eastern Gangetic Plains.



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