6558
Research Article
Journal of Extension Education
Vol. 33 No.1, 2021
DOI: https://doi.org/10.26725/JEE.2021.1.33.6558-6565

Women Farmers' Awareness of Government Agricultural Schemes in the North Eastern Region of India

Anushree Baruah* and G. Madan Mohan*

ABSTRACT

The Indian agricultural sector employs 4/5th of the female workforce in the country, with 48% of self-employed farmers being women. Existing literature portrays a wide information gap separating the woman farmer from basic knowledge with regards to increasing production, efficiency, and income of their farm activities. This paper makes an attempt to study the awareness of women farmers in North Eastern Region (NER) of India about active agricultural schemes in the country. The findings reveal lack of awareness of governmental agricultural schemes as a lacuna in the agricultural progress of women farmers in the NER.

Keywords: *Agriculture; Women Farmers; North-eastern India; Agricultural Schemes; Awareness; Government Schemes*

INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector employs about 4/5th of the female workforce in the country, with 48% of India's self-employed farmers being women (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2014). According to the 2011 Census, 42.6% of the total agricultural workforce (which is estimated at 144.3 million) is women and within a decade, (2001 to 2011), the participation of female agricultural labourers has increased from 21% to 23% (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2016). Over the years, agriculture remains the bastion of female workforce in India, with even the male workforce dependency (about 75 per cent) on agriculture being noticeably lesser than for females (about 85 per cent). Despite the burgeoning women labor force in agriculture, rural development schemes are not seen to address their requirements and problems (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2014). In post-colonial India, rural development programmes have gained prominence as a tool to balance the upheaval brought about by the introduction of new technologies; unfortunately, women have been inconsequential elements in the

*Department of Management Studies, School of Management, Pondicherry University, Puducherry - 605 014.

Received : 02-06-2021 **Accepted:** 31-10-2021

implementation of such programmes (Duvvury, 1989).

In the new age, the process of agriculture has evolved to be more complex in nature and hence the, farmers' access to reliable, timely, and relevant information has become increasingly important. Existing literature state that there is a wide information gap separating the women farmer from basic knowledge with regards to increase in production, efficiency, and income of their farm activities. In such a situation, certain regions of India such as the north-eastern region (NER) - comprising the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, which are noticeably lagging behind in agricultural production despite a majority of it's rural population (82%) directly or indirectly involved in agriculture and allied activities - should be closely scrutinized for their information needs (Roy et al, 2014).

A majority of the small-scale agricultural workforce in developing countries is constituted by rural women (Das, 1995). *'If women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent'* (FAO, 2011). Productivity is often low for women farmers as they do not have complete access to extension services and farm inputs (Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2010). Also, as majority of the women farmers are not the land owners, they lose out of being a beneficiary of various government programmes/ schemes (Bedi, 2018). There has always been a gap in the flow of knowledge between ICAR institutions, SAUs and developmental agencies of the North Eastern states. Therefore, special attention needs to be given to train the women farmers engaged in development activities.

The fact that majority of the economically productive women in the NER depend on agriculture as a means of their livelihood calls for special emphasis to be laid on rolling out effective development strategies. Looking back a few decades, rural development projects for women seem to focus on providing training in conventional skills such as sewing, cooking, and crafts; the absence of interventions that could provide knowledge and aid of agricultural technologies, credit, and extension to women farmers, among others, is noticeable (Buvinic et al. 1990). Interventions in such areas have the potential to radically enhance women's roles in agriculture. Literature is replete with arguments that the social rate of

return on agricultural development investment can prove to be higher when such investments are specifically targeted at women. In fact, schemes aimed at improving the well-being of the women would not only be beneficial to them but also create positive impacts on upcoming generations in terms of improved child health, nutrition, and education (Doss, 2018).

Recent policy interventions assure that the state governments have been asked to earmark 30% of cash flow/agricultural scheme expenditures for the benefit of women farmers (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2016) - Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture, National Food Security Mission, National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, Sub-Mission for Seed & Planting Material, Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanization, to name a few. There are schemes launched especially for the benefit of the women farmers, namely Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP). More recently, a number of mobile apps offering agricultural services have also been launched. As far as literature is concerned, there are a wide variety of agricultural schemes from which women farmers can greatly benefit, but the accessibility issues and information gaps are still a reality and stand as an obstacle to the progress of this segment of the population. Considering these aspects, there is a pressing need to assess the information needs of women farmers in the country as well as assess their awareness of the government schemes which have special provisions for women. This paper makes an attempt to study the awareness of women farmers in the NER India with respect to the active agricultural schemes in the country with the following objectives

a) To ascertain the personal characteristics of the women farmers;

b) To assess the awareness of governmental schemes among women farmers;

c) To study the opinion of the woman farmers towards training programmes.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out among women farmers across 8 states of NER of India, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The sample size was 121. The respondents were identified through the extension workers of the respective states and chosen using the random sampling method. Data were collected through informal interviews at training programmes and by administering a pre-tested structured interview

schedule to the women farmers. A 3-point Likert scale with the options Yes (1); No (2); Maybe (3) was used to study the awareness of governmental schemes among women farmers. The data collected were analyzed using statistical tests such as frequency and percentage on Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A) Personal Characteristics of the Respondents /Women Farmers

The majority of respondents were in the age category of 31-50. 67 of the women farmers belonged to the tribal community while 54 hailed from non-tribal communities. A majority of the farmers (55) had primary school education, the second largest fraction (45) had secondary school education, and 18 and 3 of the population had higher education and were illiterate respectively. This implies that over half of the population of among the women farmers had formal education and stand to benefit from extension contact and training programmes, notwithstanding the fact that even the uneducated farmers can benefit from awareness programmes on government schemes. A bulk of the respondents had farming experience ranging in between 11-20 years, which means that the population is aware of the agricultural scenario before and after the advent of agricultural schemes and thus, can weigh the benefits of adoption of the same. Majority of the interviewed were small farmers (64), followed by medium (39), large (14) and marginal (5) farmers' category respectively as per land ownership pattern. The annual family income was 51000-100000 for 60% of the surveyed population, and of the remaining 14% fell in the 0-50000 income category and 26% fell in the 100000 and above income category. 80% of the surveyed population had never participated in any training programme and only 20% of the population had participated in 1 or more training programmes. As far as the extension exposure was concerned, majority of the respondents (80%) reported that they had Low Contact with extension (up to 17 days), 13% reported Medium Contact (18-34 days), and only 07% reported High Contact (above 34 days). This clearly reflects the accessibility and communication gap between extension and women farmers.

B) Awareness of Governmental Schemes among Women Farmers

Table 1 highlights the awareness of governmental schemes among the surveyed farmer population. The schemes considered for the survey are Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture, National Food Security Mission, National

Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, Sub-Mission for Seed & Planting Material, Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanization, and *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* (MKSP). The respondents have been asked to respond with regards to 3 aspects namely, Awareness (of scheme), Familiarity (for availing scheme), and Interest (towards availing scheme). A small segment of the population shows awareness and an even smaller segment shows familiarity of the currently available government agricultural schemes and mobile agri apps. In case of the Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture, 13 showed awareness of the scheme, 4 showed familiarity and 53 showed an interest in the scheme. In case of the National Food Security Mission, 14 showed awareness of the scheme, 5 showed familiarity and 53 showed an interest in the scheme. In case of the National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, 17 showed awareness of the scheme, 2 showed familiarity and 51 showed an interest in the scheme. In case of the Sub-Mission for Seed and Planting Material, 13 showed awareness of the scheme, 3 showed familiarity and 46 showed an interest in the scheme. In case of the Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanization, 16 showed awareness of the scheme, 3 showed familiarity and 42 showed an interest in the scheme. In case of the *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* (MKSP), 14 showed awareness of the scheme, 4 showed familiarity and 52 showed an interest in the scheme. In case of the Mobile Agri Apps, 10 showed awareness of the scheme, 5 showed familiarity and 55 showed an interest in the scheme.

The existing scenario suggests a lack of awareness of existing government schemes among the women farmers and thereby highlights an urgent need to create awareness of agricultural information programmes available/ accessible through training programmes/ extension contact. As for the interest to avail such schemes, a majority of the women farmers show eagerness to avail such schemes and thus, stand to benefit from any training programmes/extension contact in this regard.

Table 1: Awareness of Governmental Schemes Among Women Farmers

Schemes/ Apps	Category	**Yes (% of sample population)**	**No (% of sample population)**	**Maybe (% of sample population)**
Mission For Integrated Development of Horticulture	Awareness	13	57	30
	Familiarity	04	81	15
	Interest	53	17	30
National Food Security Mission	Awareness	14	61	25
	Familiarity	05	78	17
	Interest	53	21	26
National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture	Awareness	17	57	26
	Familiarity	02	86	12
	Interest	51	16	33
Sub-Mission for Seed & Planting Material	Awareness	13	62	25
	Familiarity	03	88	09
	Interest	46	12	42
Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanization	Awareness	16	55	29
	Familiarity	03	86	11
	Interest	42	19	39
Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)	Awareness	14	66	20
	Familiarity	04	85	11
	Interest	52	24	24
Mobile Agri Apps	Awareness	10	66	24
	Familiarity	05	87	08
	Interest	55	25	20

c) Opinion of the Women farmers towards Training Programmes

Table 2 highlights the opinion of women farmers towards training programmes. They have been surveyed on three aspects – current availability, need for training programmes/extension contact, and interest in training programs/extension contact. The results show that an insufficient number of training programmes/workshops remains a lacuna in the flow of communication between the organizations and women farmers. A majority of the women farmers feel that regular training programmes/workshops are to be conducted for the dissemination of knowledge regarding agricultural activities and schemes. Additionally, a majority of respondents also demonstrate interest in attending such training programmes/ workshops, if made accessible to them.

Table 2: Opinion of the Women farmers towards Training Programmes

	Yes (% of sample population)	No (% of sample population)	Maybe (% of sample population)
Workshops/orientation programmes are regularly arranged by agricultural service organizations/ agricultural universities and research institutions/ PRIs/NGOs /banks to provide relevant current information	12	58	30
There is a need for arrangement of workshops/ orientation programmes for creating awareness among women farmers	78	09	13
I am interested in attending such workshops/orientation programmes to gain knowledge of agricultural activities and schemes	66	27	07

CONCLUSION

There is an increased need for extension contact with women farmers in the current day agricultural scenario in developing countries such as India. This study found that women farmers in the NER have limited/restricted access to training programmes/extension contact, implied from their lack of knowledge about and familiarity with nationwide agricultural schemes. Keeping in mind the growing popularity and penetration of mobile phones and the short supply of manpower in government agricultural organizations, the study suggests that ICT awareness and training programmes if built into the extension delivery packages could help effectively in addressing the existing limitations of knowledge dissemination among women farmers.

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