

Farmer Producer Organization: Enhancing the Identity of Women as Farmers

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Bringing about change in the mindsets of women is best achieved by first organizing them in collectives, so that they see themselves as farmers and as major contributors to agriculture. The focus is on enhancing the agency of women and having a clear understanding of FPO systems, operations and resource utilization with a sense of ownership.

Agriculture, once the backbone of the Indian economy, contributes just about 14 per cent to the overall GDP even though about 70 per cent of the population is, directly or indirectly, dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Today, agriculture in India is plagued by many problems such as small land holdings, non-availability of timely inputs, vulnerability in the market and lack of awareness about the potential improvisation in agriculture, thereby, affecting the yield and productivity of the crops, which, in turn, affects the income and interests of farmers.

Women's participation in agriculture is an important aspect because almost 79 per cent participate in agricultural activity, which is higher than the 63 per cent participation of male members (Source: ILO workforce data). This participation is not only limited to the field but also extends to post-harvest operations. Despite this, however, women are not free to take basic and crucial decisions such as crop selection, which is the sole authority of male members in the family in most cases. This lack of participation of women in decision-making is evident from the fact that they have little access to the market and other institutions, limiting them from getting credit support. All these subjugations lead to the lack of recognition of women as farmers and under-rate their contribution in the family as income earners.

The PRADAN team in Bhoura is envisioning the empowerment of the community in social, political and economic arenas against such a backdrop. For economic empowerment and enhancing the agency of women, PRADAN has promoted the Farmer Producer Organization (FPO). The first step in the process was to identify the issues that women farmers face. The team found that women contribute to the major activities of agriculture but have no say in the choice of crops sown. Women were also not able to identify themselves as economic contributors in the family. They say, "In the farming activity, we women do not do anything. The men in our family are the main and major contributors in farming and our contribution is very little."

The PRADAN team is working to mitigate these gaps in farming and elevate the status of women. Over time, the women with whom the team was engaged in various activities realized the need for the collectivization of women to empower themselves. In one of the most remote areas of its operations, the PRADAN team set about establishing an FPO to build a support system for small women farmers, create enabling conditions and a system for them, making them economically stronger, so that they recognize their own contribution.

The PRADAN Bhoura team is working in an area called Dodramau, which has almost 45 villages in its periphery. All these villages are very far from the block and district centres. These areas are not only remote but have very poor connectivity. Almost 90 per cent of the people are engaged in agriculture. PRADAN began this intervention in 2006 by collectivizing the women into a Self-Help Group (SHG). The next step was to strengthen the agriculture practices of the farmers. The team engaged in improving the agriculture practices through interactions, planning, training and crop demonstrations for enhancing the income. However, although there were significant changes in the agriculture practices and in their enhancement of income, women's status did not improve. They still had no say in the farming or any control over the income. They also had no recognition of their own contribution and did not consider themselves farmers. "*Bhaiya hi kisan hai kyun ki woh hal jotta hai* (The men are the farmers because they plough the fields)," is the response of most of the women. Further, despite performing most farming activities—from pre-sowing to post-harvesting—women did not have any say in the process. An SHG member's husband had migrated to the city for work; yet, when the agriculture season started, she called him

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to ask what crop he wanted to cultivate.

When the crop is harvested, women cannot sell the crops. Not only do they have to take permission of the men of the family before selling the product they also seek permission on how to use the money earned from the sale of crops.

Women are engaged in most of the agri-operations. However, they consider themselves as mere supporters in the process because they do not bring in the input material nor do they plough the fields. Some women say, "I am not ploughing the field and without it we cannot do anything, so that's why I am not contributing to agriculture."

Regarding control, access and ownership of the resources, the women say, "*Khet to bhaiya ka hi hai na, wo hi sochega aur batayega ki kya lagana hai* (The men of the family are the owners of the land and, therefore, they will think and plan what kind of crop they want to cultivate)." Just as universally, women have less access than men do to productive resources and opportunities; here also women are less likely than men to own land, adopt new technologies, use credit or other financial services, or receive extension advice. In some cases, women do not even have control over their time.

About accessibility and mobility, the women say, "*Bhoura aur Chicholi kaun jaye, aane jane me badi dikkat hai, gaon me hi jo mil jaye wahi le lete hai* (Who will go to Bhoura and Chicholi? The travel to and fro itself is so difficult. We take whatever we get in the village)." Because of poor connectivity, it is difficult for women to access agriculture-related institutions such as the markets and the Agriculture Department. These limitations restrict their mobility and

their exposure to the practices in the world outside. Moreover, it limits them from using modern technology.

Having restricted mobility, women have no means of gathering information about improved agricultural practices. This results in poor practices because they continue to be involved in traditional agriculture and applying traditional and outdated inputs.

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In addition, at the individual level, women have less bargaining power because small farmers have less land and less production. Some intermediaries take advantage of this and purchase the produce at rates much lower than the market prices because women are ignorant about market strategy. Even if women farmers are aware about the market prices, they are unable to bargain because the volume of their individual produce is very low.

This discourages women farmers. Many of them say, “*Kheti se koi labh nahin hai. Is se achha to bahar kaam karne chale jao* (It's better to migrate to other places for work instead of doing agriculture because there is no profit in agriculture).”

Mitigating these gaps in farming patterns and overcoming other problems can take place when the women are collectivized. The need for collectivizing women has led to the formation of the Farmers' Interest Groups

(FIGs), and other such collectives from 2011 onwards. Later, these transformed into an organization of farmers called the Farmers Producer Organization (FPO). The FPO was registered under the Producer Company Act 1956 on 19 February 2014 and named 'Sampurna Women Crop Producer Company Ltd.' The women of the FPO discussed and finalized the structure and operations of the organization.

STRUCTURE OF THE FPO

- ◆ **Farmers' Interest Group:** This is the forum of primary producers (only women) at the village level. All village-level activities and decisions such as planning of crops, concept seeding of the group, mutual sharing of the produce, and the setting up of any kind of linkages are taken at the FIG. This forum selects one representative for the Governing Board, who leads the agenda of the FIG at the organization level and takes decisions for the FIG.
- ◆ **Representative of Governing Board (RGB):** RGB is a forum to which every village sends one representative. A monthly meeting is held at the office of the FPO and village-level issues related to the operations of the FPO are discussed.
- ◆ **Board of Directors (BOD):** This is the apex body of the FPO, in which governance and operation-level decisions take place. This forum has the power to take decisions for the growth of the FPO and realize its objectives: “To capacitate women farmers, and generate livelihood opportunities for small and marginal farmers so that they become economically stronger and create enabling conditions so that women can

take decisions in farm activities, recognize their contribution to the family economy and provide a dignified life to the women farmers."

- ♦ **Chief Executive Officer (CEO):** Handles the managerial work of the organization, is accountable for every employee of the company and works as per the directions of the BOD. A full-time appointment.
- ♦ **Production Manager:** Strengthens the operations of the company at the field level and is responsible for providing services in the village as per the direction of the BOD. There are eight production managers.

Initially, when the idea of a farmer-based organization was mooted, it was envisaged that it would be a member-owned organization in which, at every level, the members would be the decision-makers. However, to ground this in practical terms, it was important that all the members have a clear understanding about the FPO, its members, how it works, its benefits and importance.

Many events were organized at the village level to create awareness and understanding of these aspects of the FPO and to introduce the concept of collectivization to the farmers. Discussions were held on the status of the members at the individual level and the effect that collectivization would have. Farmers were told how an FIG would benefit them if it were formed in every village and if they work with a common purpose.

To start the operation, some capital was needed; this was raised from the members, enhancing their ownership in the FPO. Members held discussions with the members of the FIG—about shares, its concept, meaning, shareholders, their importance and the difference between a shareholder and a non-shareholder.

Initially, the farmers were not interested in holding any shares and it was quite a challenge to convince them. However, after some time, the BOD of the FPO and the employees were able to raise Rs 4,80,000 share capital from 480 members of the company.

Along with the concept seeding about the importance of the FPO and shareholding, the PRADAN team adopted some strategies in the system and operation of the FPO so that the objectives of the FPO could be achieved:

- ♦ **Planning the utilization of land and resources:** This is a very important aspect of agriculture. If a farmer is unable to make a plan for better utilization of the land, and is not able to map the material to be applied in the crops, it results in poor resource management. In addition, mapping of monetary resources such as how much credit is required and how it will be arranged are also necessary. The FPO covered these through training events such as planning of crops, concept seeding and resource planning, which contributed to greater awareness about these aspects.

Suganta bai from Kajli village has two acres of land. She did not have any idea about the crop potential or about the selection of crops suitable and profitable for her land. She also did not have any idea about the good practices for crops and that was why she was just following her family's instructions regarding the work in the field.

She says that earlier she used to work on the field as labour because she did not have any idea about crops and was not able to identify whether a crop would be good for her land or not. Now, after attending the meetings and trainings, she has the confidence because she now knows about crop patterns and planning. *"Jaisa majdoori mein kaam karte hain, waise*

hi majdoori samajh kar hum kaam karte rahte the; lekin ab hum ye jante hain ki kya fasal lagane se kya fayadaa hoga aur fasal kaise lagani hai (Earlier, I used to work in my fields just like I would work as labour in others's fields; now, I know what crop to grow and how to do it)."

- ♦ *Training and exposure:* Training programmes and exposure visits to improve agriculture were conducted so that members could get an idea about the practical aspects of growing the crop.
- ♦ *Field-level support:* Field-level support from the beginning to the harvesting of crop was provided to members of the FPO.
- ♦ *Post-harvesting support:* Once the crop is ready, there is need to link the produce to the market to get the maximum price. It was important to continue the engagement after the production in order to establish the linkage of the produce and make

farmers aware about the market strategies, so that they take informed decisions about the selling of the produce.

SYSTEM AND OPERATION OF THE FPO:

- ♦ All the activities mentioned above are included in the operations of the FPO; the members of the FPO strengthen the system so that these operations may be performed with ease.
- ♦ The beginning of any season starts with concept seeding activity and the planning of resources. Members then put in their request for all the inputs they may need for their crops to the Field Supervisor of the FPO through their FIGs. The Field Supervisor submits the demands from all the villages to the office of FPO; the CEO collates the requests and presents it to the Board. The Board Members, then, take the decision about the quantity of inputs

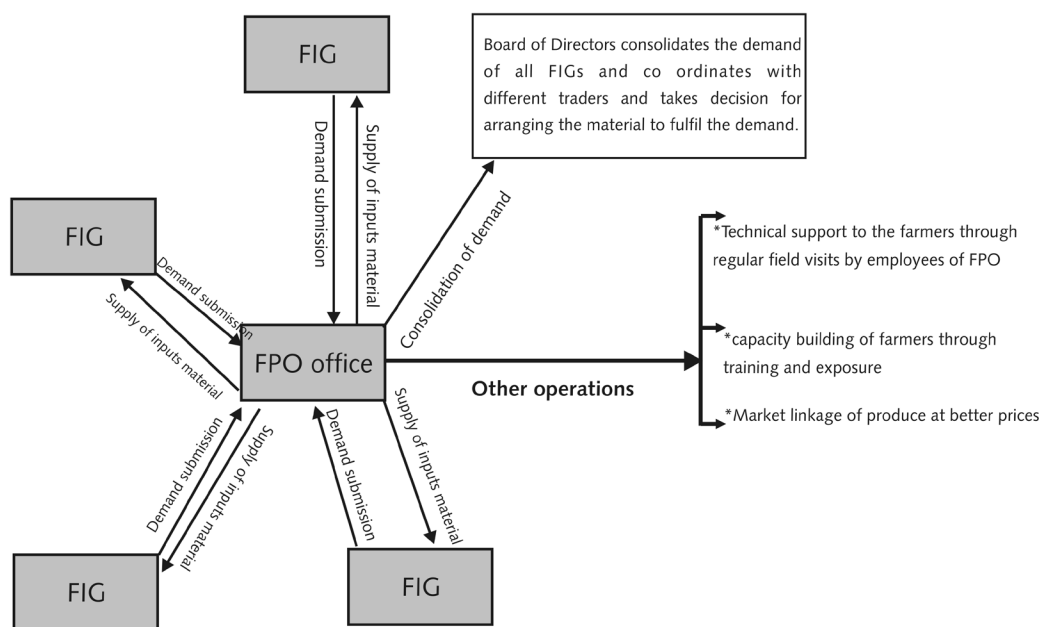


Figure 1: Operational System of an FPO

(seed, fertilizer, etc.) that the farmers will be given. The CEO and the Board Members contact traders and arrange for input material of good quality at reasonable costs. When all the material has been arranged, the Board Members hold a meeting to decide the selling price of the input material, keeping in the mind the condition of the farmers and the financial status of the FPO. Following this, the farmers, from each village, take their input material as per their demand from the FPO.

- ◆ Providing technical support to the farmers about the method of cultivation, sowing and input application takes place alongside the supply of the inputs. Once the sowing is complete, the Supervisor visits the farmers' fields. The next step is capacity-building of farmers by the staff. These training programmes are held at regular intervals to provide support to the farmers to manage the crops. At the end of a crop cycle when the produce is ready, the FPO arranges the market linkage of the produce so that the farmers get better prices.

In each strategy and at every step, the PRADAN team has tried to engage only with the women beginning with planning the resources and building their capacity so that they become aware of the various aspects of agriculture. The focus is on enhancing the agency of women and having a clear understanding of FPO systems, operations and resource utilization with a sense of ownership.

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CHALLENGES

Initially, we thought that women do not have any idea about crops, the required material and market strategies, and this limits their mobility. To begin with, therefore, we adopted a strategy to enhance awareness. However, due to adverse conditions such as no proper roads connecting villages, long distances and

heavy rainfall, they did not find it easy to travel to places or markets. Such factors limit their participation even if they have the knowledge and the awareness about the resources.

Our primary focus of engaging only with women to mitigate their constraints somehow also resulted in increasing their drudgery. Earlier, they used to work intensively inside the home and participate in agriculture. However, the strategy that we adopted to capacitate women and raise their awareness and knowledge intensified their work outside the home also. The challenge for us was to reduce their workload even when engaging them in farming.

There has been improvement in the income figures of families. Some families, which did not have food sufficiency round the year, are now not only producing more but are also selling their produce at higher prices. On the one hand, the income of families has increased and, on other hand, the workforce of women has also increased. They, however, do not have control over the income and are not yet able to exercise their choice about the investment of the income. For example, if women want to purchase jewellery/or some other things for themselves and the man wants to purchase

something else, the man's choice gets preference. In addition, such dominance is not limited only to purchasing or selling but even while prioritizing the health of women over that of the men.

There are so many taboos in society related to women's role in agriculture such as ploughing and *gahani* (threshing technique) which limit their identity as farmers and equal contributors, not only in others' minds but in their own minds as well.

CASE STUDY

Saraswati Bai

"Initially, when we formed the SHG in 2006, the production was not sufficient to provide food security round the year. PRADAN helped us learn about good agriculture practices by which production would increase. After two or three years, when the production increased, and became more than we required for consumption, we were able to sell the produce to the local traders or in the market at a price the traders decided. We knew that, the price was much less than the market prices but we could not take our produce to the market, or *mandi*, because the scale of produce was very little.

We came to know of better agriculture practices, thanks to PRADAN; to follow these practices, however, we needed good quality inputs on time. We purchased the material

from the market. However, the quality of input varies a lot and many times the material was not available on time. We live in very remote villages and it takes us a whole day to get these inputs; sometimes, we need to make more than one trip if some items are not available. We understood the need for collectivizing to improve our situation. From my village, 25 women have joined the SHG and all the women are a part of the FIG. Today, we procure whatever we produce and, with the help of the FPO, link it to the market. Therefore, we are getting better prices for our produce. We are also getting better input material and on time, thanks to the support of the FPO. My income from agriculture has increased to Rs 30,000 and now I am able to send my children outside the village for better education. Because of our collective approach, so many people from the village seek our support in agriculture practices. We have a different identity in the village and that makes us proud farmers!"

Women like Saraswati Bai, who manage the FPO, have made a difference in their own lives and are a motivation to the team to move forward despite challenges. The social, economic and political arenas are not conducive to encouraging women to be decision-makers in agriculture. Yet, women are now heading the FPO and are nurturing and strengthening the right environment for others to bring a change in societal norms as well as in creating economic empowerment.