

Training Women in Farmer's Field Schools: Shifting Equations in Purulia

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Bringing about a paradigm shift in power equations through training women in farmers' field schools, so that they are acknowledged for their contribution in the fields and the decisions they make, is a dynamic decision of the PRADAN team in Purulia—a process and a movement that will have far-reaching consequences

Women are the poorest among the poor. If women are to be at the centre of the change process, the recognition of women as farmers needs adequate attention. Even within a poor family, women are deprived of the recognition they deserve. They work longer hours than the men; yet they are not considered to be farmers. Often, in the various articulations by a state, women belonging to the poorer sections are not counted as a separate category but are, instead, clubbed under the umbrella of 'family'. Any policy, formulated for the poor, supports the family and not women separately. Because their contribution and their plight go unrecognized, women's poverty needs separate and strategic attention.

WOMEN AND AGRICULTURE

PRADAN's Purulia team works with women—the most-deprived section of society. We in the team realized the need for developing a vision for change. With the help of the Gender Equality Programme (GEP), we visualized a different scenario for the women. So far, the endeavours had been limited to collectivizing women into groups, which did not necessarily ensure women's empowerment and did not take into account the plight of the woman farmer.

India's agricultural sector today faces issues of efficiency due to the lack of mechanization. Farm sizes are small and the farmers poor. According to the 2011 statistics, the average farm in India is about 1.5 acres, minuscule when compared the average of 50 ha in France, 178 ha in the United States and 273 ha in Canada. The small farm tradition in India is a result of the first farm reforms of independent India. Known as the Laws of Divided Inheritance, the reforms were meant to limit the accumulation of land by mandating redistribution and dividing the land among male inheritors of the previous generation. The perpetuation of these laws not only limits farm size but also bars women from ownership or inheritance.

According to the recent data from the Planning Commission, 75 per cent of the total female work force is in the agrarian sector and 85 per cent of the total rural female work force is engaged in the agriculture sector. That is, 75 per cent of women work force is engaged in producing 13.7 per cent of the total GDP. In the primary sector, mainly two types of employment options are available. One is own-farm cultivation and the other is wage labourer. Recent statistics indicate that only 9.21 per cent of the rural women have agricultural land ownership. This necessarily does not mean that the rest of the women are employed as wage labourers, but definitely implies that most of them are engaged in agricultural activities in fields that belong to either their spouses or their fathers-in-law.

The agrarian sector offers seasonal employment opportunities; in the busy season, many women are gainfully employed as wage labour; however, in the lean season or in the fall of season, women's labour in maintenance and preparation for farm activities remains unnoticed. Even in the busy season, women are not gainfully employed for the entire period. Instead, they take on the extra burden of working on other people's fields after completing work in the fields owned by their spouses, for which they don't receive any direct gain. Women lack the freedom to be employed gainfully. Their availability to work is highly regulated by the families' decisions and their needs. Adding to this, minimal land rights over the agricultural land shrinks their decision-making powers substantially. The nature of economics has reduced women to subservient and exploited economic agents in the sector.

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Traditionally, women's roles in agriculture are specified by various societal norms that are strictly gendered. These gendered role expectations in agriculture make women more vulnerable, subject them to exploitation and deny them access to resources and recognition in society. These norms not only exert control over women's labour but also on their expression, body and sexuality.

In India, there are regional disparities in the gender norms and role expectations in agriculture; however, the politics behind these remain the same. Patriarchy deploys all possible ways and means to perpetuate the system. In Chhattisgarh, it is taboo for women to sow seeds. In West Bengal, women are not allowed to use the plough, which, as an implement, is considered holy. If the women touch the plough, it is considered a serious sacrilege and calls for punitive action.

Ploughing a field is also attached to the notion of land ownership and land is considered feminine. Only men/owners can penetrate the land with a plough. So denying women the right to even touch a plough actually denies them land rights and allows the landowner to control her sexuality. Also, according to customary laws, because women are not the landowners, they have to depend on their spouses—the owners—for survival. This, in turn, arms the men to control women and their bodies.

Ploughing is considered critical to agriculture whereas the more tedious work such as transplanting, weeding, carrying cow dung and harvesting is considered to be unskilled work and can be performed by women.

Decision-making about whether to fertilize and use pesticides lies in the domain of men because they are the more 'knowledgeable' gender, and the identity of the farmer is attached to it, also an attribute of masculinity. On the other hand, women don't have access to the market or, therefore, to knowledge related to inputs and techniques. Naturally, the agricultural decision-making power, therefore, is assumed by the men.

Women are supposed to just perform certain tasks in farming. Though these constitute the lion's share of agricultural activities and are labour intensive, they remain unrecognized as work and become a part of the gender role that women are expected to perform. Women's knowledge and skills about transplantation, weeding, reserving seeds, etc., are placed lower in the hierarchy of agricultural knowledge.

Furthermore, women are paid at least 20 per cent less than men if both are employed as wage labour. The volume of work is not taken into account. This discrimination happens more because of the perception that women are physically less capable than men. So, the women have no role to play in the decision-making process and, in other respects, they are projected as less capable. Together, these shape them as secondary partners in agriculture.

These perceptions about women are constantly reiterated to establish them as less capable. Knowledge and other resources are withheld from them, and they are strategically imprisoned in family and society, therefore, strengthening patriarchy. The structural indoctrination also makes women fit into the system in which they also begin to think of themselves as less capable and subservient members of society.

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In Purulia, we observed that there are slight differences in the decision-making procedures across caste. Tribal women enjoy a little more space in their community than the women belonging to the OBCs. With an average family size of six and a land holding size of half to one acre, the major decisions in agriculture are taken by the men. A simple exercise to analyze the sharing of tasks

between men and women in paddy cultivation yielded interesting results. Women perform 60 per cent of the work alone; 20 per cent of the work is done by both men and women; and only 20 per cent of the work is done by men alone. This was then contrasted with the amount of control they have over the produce. If a woman tries to dissuade her husband from selling the produce to get money to get drunk, she is beaten up and abused. The husband usually abuses her by saying, "*Tor baaper khacchi?* (Am I eating what belongs to your father?)"

Incidents such as the husband getting married again because his wife has fallen sick and is no longer able to work hard in the fields are not uncommon. If a woman suggests cultivation of a particular crop and the man does not agree to it, he will not plough the field, leaving the woman helpless. She cannot even hire a tractor or draft power on her own to get the field ploughed by someone else. If she were to somehow manage to get it done, she would be subjected to violence. A common form of violence is verbal abuse, "*Aekhon onno lok dia hal korcchis, or ghore gia thakte hobe tokey.* (You have hired another to plough the field, so you have to stay with him from now onwards.)" Or "*Tor baaper jomi je onno lok dia hal korli? Amar bari theke beria ja* (Is it your father's field that you ploughed? Get

lost from my house).” Physical violence usually accompanies such verbal abuse.

Whenever there was a meeting for agricultural planning, the husband’s presence was imperative. On many occasions, if the men were not present, the women went home from the meeting to seek the permission of their menfolk to make little changes in the crop practice; or they brought their spouses or fathers-in-law back with them, to understand what was being said because the women did not consider themselves capable of understanding what needed to be done.

Often, the men did not participate in the agriculture meeting in spite of having been invited. The perception is that women cannot do agriculture. “*Verir ghot, uhader abar budhi/mayechele loker buddhi.* (Flock of sheep with brains/women with brains.)” are what men say in public. In the busy season, women work in the fields, sometimes for as long as nine to ten hours, in addition to completing all the household chores; they are, however, never regarded as farmers and neither is their knowledge recognized or valued.

The team has been looking for a strategy where at least some agricultural knowledge can be provided to the women, without compromising on outreach or quality. The age-old male service provider-driven, hand-holding support in agriculture extension methodology, followed by PRADAN, needed to be changed. Although this approach had proved effective in increasing production, it consistently failed to make available any agricultural knowledge to women. With all the service providers being male, the women developed a hierarchical relationship with them. Obviously, in many places, it resulted in holding the women guilty

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for any crop failure or for not being able to learn.

Moreover, the primary decision-makers being the male members, women found it difficult to follow what the service providers suggested. On the occasions when the service providers directly consulted

with the men, the women found it easy to follow the technique, and because the men were the primary recipients of the knowledge, the women were again unrecognized in the process. The men recognize that because of the women’s association with the SHG institutions, many developments have been possible, both in agricultural productivity and technique. It has not, however, altered the status of women in society. It has not provided women the expected decision-making authority and neither are they acknowledged as knowledgeable agriculturalists in society.

CHANGED APPROACH

Soon after the team integrated issues relating to gender in its approach, the prime focus shifted from family as a unit to the individual woman. The vision around agriculture broadened with the new perspective. The team realized that productivity enhancement may lead to economic benefit in the family but it may not necessarily benefit women. It does not empower women with enhanced mobility or financial benefits. The men do not recognize that the women have an increased knowledge of agriculture even though the team’s primary engagement has always been with women.

The Cluster was the team’s nodal point of communicating with the women, and team members decided to equip the Cluster so that it could orchestrate the agriculture programme towards reducing gender discrimination.

Cluster representatives, and not necessarily the Cluster leader, were trained to do the agricultural planning in their respective SHGs. They underwent various training programmes to mobilize other women to participate in agriculture. A major part of these training programmes comprised a critical analysis of the women's status in agriculture from a gender perspective. They used their new understanding to excite other women to actively participate in agriculture.

The team followed the farmer's school concept in agriculture. The farmer's field school model is based on the adult learning methodology wherein, it is said, that unlike children, adults learn by their experience on planned activity and continuous reflection, followed by a re-plan. A demonstration plot was selected and a farmer's school was organized. Strict norms, such as the participants have to be women only, were put in place. The farmer's school was run on a specific crop or a crop group. Women who had planned to grow that particular crop attended the farmer's school. Usually four to five separate demonstrations were conducted at the various stages of the crop. A brief meeting was designed before every demonstration, during which the women shared their field experience from the previous demonstration. The entire package of practices (POP) was broken down into four or five modules. Each was to be taught in a separate demonstration.

The purpose was to make women more confident about working in agriculture so that they could also think of themselves as farmers and could actively take part in decision-making. A black-board carrying the names of the women attending the farmer's school was

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placed in a prominent place in the village, mainly to establish the women's identity as farmers. Around 3,000 women from three different blocks participated in the farmer's field school.

Although the farmer's school model was able to ensure that the knowledge was transmitted

to women directly and also made women and their names more visible in public, their dependency on men remained high, especially because all the Service Providers (SPs) were male. Moreover, the SPs were being paid; thus, the notion that men were always engaged in productive work was reinforced.

Keeping these points in mind, the team tried to build upon the previous year's experience. In the team's mid-term review, it was articulated that taking the services of a male SP indicates that the core team does not believe that women can also manage the critical knowledge input and disseminate it. In a way, this was dis-empowering and women saw themselves as completely dependent on the males for any knowledge inputs.

The team has gradually abandoned the traditional SP-dependent agriculture intervention and has arrived at a system in which women spearhead the programme. Neo-literate women (women who have attended the adult functional literacy centre for three years) have been encouraged to assume this new role. A decision was taken to broaden the leadership base. The underlying assumption was that through this many new leaders would emerge.

Team Purulia took this opportunity to integrate its pilot adult functional literacy project with livelihood intervention and gender. Women were identified, based on the achievement

data of the literacy programme. They were trained on how to make a plan. In Jhalda-1 Block, the planning process was conducted in the literacy centre. These women made a plan for around 2,835 women across 300 SHGs.

Data about the women, who attended the farmers' field school the previous year, were taken into account. The two sets of data were tallied and another group of women selected. They were to be the agriculture trainers. Women were selected, based on the competencies with a particular crop that they had developed in the farmers' field school.

The entire planning data of a village were scrutinized and the women were segregated, according to the similarity of the crops they were planning to grow. In the first meeting, the women were introduced to the other women that they would train with. Thus, those who had developed a command over the bottle gourd cultivation were introduced to the bottle gourd farmers of that village. A

similar process was followed for all the other crops.

In Barabazar Block, a hundred women were selected to conduct farmer's field schools and act as agricultural trainers. Each trainer was responsible for training an average of five to eight women. The trainer was someone known to the women, perhaps a co-member of their group. It was a non-remunerative role; therefore, the other women welcomed it spontaneously.

The POP, called *Krishi Darpan*, was printed in a large font for the convenience of the trainers. PRADAN Executives provided support to the trainers. There are three levels of meetings between the team and the trainers. Before every demonstration, the Executives discuss the process with the trainers, to encourage them. In the first five to six demonstrations, an Executive's presence with the trainers was mandatory. After the demonstration, the group meets once again for reflection.

Jormani Mandi, now in her 40s, got married at the age of 15 and is a mother of six children. Last year, her husband passed away. Her only education was in the adult functional literacy centre. Being the sole bread-earner of her family, she needed to work harder in the fields than the others. She has been a sincere participant of the farmers' field school. When the idea to teach agriculture to other women was shared with her, she was very excited. She liked the idea of sharing the skills she had acquired from attending the farmers' field school. For her, it was recognition of her capability by the village and her SHG. It was also a way for her to express herself. She often used the example of her own life to motivate other women, "*Amra saradin to kaj kori, kintu kaj kore hocche ta ki? Saradin kaj kori aar rate matal aar hate mar khali; abar amader kichu kore dekhate hobe. Somman pete hobe.* (We work hard the entire day but what do we get in return for that in our life? We work all day long and are roughed up at night by our drunken husbands. The time has come. We now need to do something, we need to gain respect)." She proudly narrates that she has taught cucumber cultivation on a trellis (locally known as *machan*. It's a structure constructed with the help of bamboo, GI wire and nylon thread for the proper cultivation of creeper crops) to Sarubali, Shyamoli, Lilmoni, Jhuni, etc. She concludes, "*Khub bhalo lage je didira sikche, ora rojgar korche; sobai aekhono korche na, oderkeo korate hobe.* (I feel immensely happy that women are learning and earning. However, there are still many who are left behind. We need to rope them in also)."

Through the process, many leaders emerged. Women revelled in their new role and identity. They could consult with the trainers, as and when required. All these steps took the women farmers to a new level of confidence. Interestingly, the entire process was non-remunerative and based on the principle of lateral transmission. The main strength of the approach of it being rooted in the allegiance and cohesiveness of the primary group—the SHG—was that the women assumed the new role quickly and happily.

The team has reached 92 per cent of the target families, in case of vegetable cultivation, 80 per cent have been reached. Another significant achievement is that of the total agricultural families, 67 per cent have been covered through food crop and cash crop intervention. As many as 586 farmers' field schools have been organized and, by August 2013, as many as 157 CSPs/Trainers had completed 1,533 demonstrations with SHG members, generating 9,812 trainee days. PRADAN professionals were present at 20 per cent of the demos. About eight families were covered per SHG, which is quite high. The coverage of the area under each crop per family is also higher than planned.

Introducing women agricultural trainers (69 per cent of the total) for the demonstration entailed a lot of hand-holding both pre- and post-demonstration. However, the team faced the challenge enthusiastically. Although the women quite readily accepted the role of trainers, preparing them for the job required time and inputs. Conducting a series of meetings pre- and post-demonstrations, followed by hand-holding support through the actual demonstration, called for massive managerial abilities.

Whereas the women were ready to participate in the training, the men were not ready for

the shift. The team had to strategize, starting from the planning stage, to address these complexities. Unlike in the past, the team focussed on preparing specific crop planning rather than an elaborate planning for the entire year. The approach seemed pragmatic for the team because the focus shifted away from trying to influence the entire crop choice. The men were then able to see it only as an experiment. The women were encouraged to concentrate on a specific crop and tap the maximum profit from it. The approach has proved to be effective in curbing the resistance from the men.

The women also faced the problem of the curiosity of the men when they demonstrated agriculture to other women. Ensuring women's participation in the farmer's school required that the women leaders as well as professionals step in at various stages. The collective strength of the Clusters played a crucial role in mobilizing women to participate in the farmer's school.

Women have shown their potential for adopting and disseminating advanced agricultural knowledge and techniques. This is a step towards women being recognized as central to agricultural knowledge and practice. The ball has just started rolling. So far, the team's experience has been encouraging. It is true that the team is not equally experienced across locations. Interventions, so far, have been largely directed at the capacity-building of women. The challenges before the team are to effectively link women's authority of decision-making with their enhanced knowledge, and then to surpass it. So far, things have not been in total harmony although there were no major clashes either. Establishing women's authority over production and decisions, based on their new-found knowledge, poses a threat for men. The team has to deal with this aspect delicately.