

Towards Women's Domination in Agriculture

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Women's involvement in agriculture is increasing day by day in Bangladesh. Experts now consider the change as a silent revolution as women are now engaged in sowing, tilling, irrigating and husking—virtually all sorts of agricultural practices. This is primarily due to the increase in men's migration to urban cities and technological changes.

A 2011 report indicates that, from 1999 to 2006, participation by men in the agricultural labor force declined by seven per cent, while female agricultural laborers increased by 103 per cent to 7.7 million. The report notes that as men move from farming to the service industry and other non-agricultural sectors, women are gaining more acceptance as paid farm managers and post-harvest processors. In urban areas, particularly in large towns, there is a predominance of the male population, indicating substantial inflows of male migrants from rural areas to seek employment opportunities in urban areas. Apart from that, high levels of international male out-migration have also created space for females to head households in the rural areas.

Other studies find women's involvement in farming is increasing as ploughs are being replaced by tractors. This trend can be attributed to mechanized methods of farming in the country where tilling lands, which earlier required hard physical labor, is easily done by power tillers now. Agricultural mechanization is visible in irrigation, too. Other types of farm work such as sowing and weeding are also done by women.

Even with their increased participation in the labor force, however, women continue to be paid less than men. Social norms and traditions are changing due to extreme poverty and food shortage, leading women to work in the fields for survival. But the studies point to the fact that about 60-70 per cent of women involved in agricultural practices are wage workers from landless and near-landless households.

In light of this situation, experts suggest the government review its agricultural policies so that women can get training on modern technology, education, and fair wages. All these will be helpful to attain a greater participation rate of women in farming. The government should adopt strategies for gender equity to facilitate greater acceptance by families and communities of women's participation in agriculture. The policy must focus on promoting education for female farmers in modern agricultural technologies, women's equal access to these tools and financial benefits. The strategies should focus on increasing women's roles in rice production, ensuring food security at the household level as well as assisting women in establishing entrepreneurial ventures.

Previously, women were usually involved in agriculture during harvesting stages. But now Bangladeshi women perform about 80 per cent of post-harvest activities. Home gardening, which is becoming increasingly popular, is also done almost exclusively by women. So, with the increased involvement of women in all stages of agriculture, it is now necessary to ensure that women have



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access to fertilizer, cash assistance and other government subsidies for farmers. It has been found that a significant number of women farmers in Bangladesh do not have access to government subsidies because the land they work on is registered in their husbands' names. Although close to half of all farmers in Bangladesh are women, the majority of them have not received their Agriculture Input Assistance Cards (AIAC), which farmers are required to present for getting government subsidies such as diesel oil for irrigation equipment.

According to the ministry of agriculture, nearly 14 million AIAC cards have been distributed since the system began in 2010. But the AIAC program is designed to grant eligibility for obtaining the cards solely to land owners. There are millions of women who have not received AIAC simply because their land is registered under the name of their male partners. Experts consider this a humiliation for the millions of women, as they are strenuously working for food production in the country but are deprived of the right to receive the government benefits. In order to acknowledge the women's genuine contribution to food production in the country, they suggest the government revise its policy relating to AIAC as well. The ownership of land should not be the main criterion for determining the eligibility for AIAC.

Under such circumstances, a silent revolution is taking place as the Bangladesh Bank (BB), the central bank of the country, has recognized the increased role of women farmers by directing all banks to provide loan to female farmers. The central bank data shows about 445,000 female farmers received Tk 12.45 billion in agricultural and rural credits last year.