

In Farm and Off Farm Employment and Condition of Women in Nepal

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According to the 2011 Census, Nepal's population was 26.495 million and has been growing rapidly since then with more than 29 million in 2015. The female labour force participation rate reached 80.1 per cent in 2008 compared to 87.5 per cent for men. Participation rates for men and women have fallen from 1998/99 (from 81.9 for women and from 90.2 for men), reflecting increased education enrollment among young Nepalese. The ILO projects that the labour force in Nepal will grow by 4.7 million or 30.1 per cent from 2015 to 2030. Over the longer term, therefore, the creation of more employment opportunities is critical. Without achieving this, migration of workers in Arab countries, especially young boys and girls will continue to increase.

One of the latest reports of Care International states that female labour force participation in Nepal is 54.3 percent and majority of female are economically active in agriculture. In 2008, 84.3 per cent of working women were engaged in the agricultural sector, while just 4.9 and 3.9 per cent were active in manufacturing and wholesale and retail trade¹. As data show majority of women are engaged in agriculture, it is worth explaining their conditions and status highlighting the key challenges and opportunities they face. The women who are engaged in agricultural activities are particularly regarded as rural women in Nepal as the notion of urban agriculture has not been developed yet.

While writing this article for KFAW, I put lots of thinking to understand what makes women rural and urban? I then started doing some research to understand this concept. According to the UN,

¹ International Labour organization(ILO) country report retrieved from - http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-kathmandu/documents/publication/wcms_322446.pdf

women who live in rural areas and work as farmers, petty traders, artisans, industrial home workers, micro-producers and domestic servants are termed as 'rural' women.

And by this definition, it seems those 80% of Nepali women, who are engaged in agriculture are rural women. These so-called rural women are the ones who actually help to bring food to our dining table every day and make a critical contribution to national food security.

The case study that I would like to share here is about Sita Gurung, who used to be a young girl in 80s. I met Sita while I was travelling with my parents to our grandfather's farm. Sita then used to go to elementary in rural school of the village where my grandfather used to have big farm. And while I stayed there for a few months I became friend with her and we shared many things as child in common. But after our adolescence, we never had time to spend together and Sita was always like a typical rural girl for me.

After thirty years later when I looked back and tried to understand the commonalties and differences between Sita and myself I was very much surprised. I realized Sita has not been able to reach anywhere and is still in the same village whereas I got an opportunity to do many things. A major difference between us is the level of education we acquired, which made me thinking the importance of education for girls and women. She had to drop out from higher secondary school because she was forced to get married by her parents. Sita still works on farm and have three children. She still struggles to get some cash from her husband and other male members of the family as she doesn't earn anything and the work she contributes to her inlaws farm has never been compensated.

I also learnt that she has enormous desires to send her three children to a good school in a city so that her children do not to suffer the hardship that she suffered. As I shared this story, I am thinking of those 80% of women in Nepal who are engaged in agricultural sector and have no opportunity to work outside their parents or inlaws farms. These so called rural women have spent many years sacrificing their childhood innocence and adolescent enthusiasm in their parents' and in-laws' farms doing various agricultural hardships. Regrettably, many rural women like Sita still do not own the land they till, weed, plant, plough, irrigate and harvest. They cannot even freely utilize the land they inherit from their parents.

Now looking at the data globally I realized that this is not only Nepali rural women's plight but this is common challenge when it comes to rural women who are engaged in on farm employment. For example, International Center for Research on Women reports that rural women all around the globe produce half of the world's food and in developing countries women grow between 60 and 80 percent of food crops. However, it is a pity that a large number of economically active women in many South Asian countries, including Nepal have no control of the land they till.

When I tried to understand if Sita owns any land, to my disappointment I learnt that until now she doesn't and she told me there is no possibility for her to own any land legally in near future. According to global gender and land rights database of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in 2011 sole female land ownership in Nepal was just 10 percent. Now I am thinking there are millions of rural women in Nepal who do not have any ownership to the land they till. The question I have now how we all can; including our government help these women secure their rights to land, particularly those rural women who are on farm employed.



Young girls spending time in farm activities in their parents farm.

