

Women's Empowerment as an Effective Strategy to Improve Food Security

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Abstract

In developing countries women are often characterized by lower social status, less input into decision-making, lack of access to resources, and lower mobility, while their inclusion is vital to achieving households food security. The concept is recognized as important for attaining sustainable development goals (SDGs), including SDG-5. The intra-household dynamics that determine allocation of resources and their impact on well-being are in a subject of analysis. It has been seen that households do not necessarily act in an unitary manner. While allocation resources, women and men have their preferences for allocation food and non-food resources and may therefore be involved in distribution of these resources differently, based on their bargaining power within the household. This paper reviews the impact of women empowerment in agriculture on efficiency and food security of households and individuals.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Food Security, Sustainable Development, Efficiency

Introduction

The division of labour on the basis of gender varies from one society and culture to another and within each tradition. Except in few developed countries, women's effort are not noticed by society. As women represent the major force for rural changes, it is impossible to think of development neglecting the women work. Rural women particularly in the developing countries face hardship by performing triple roles, that is, productive role, reproductive role and community participation role in regular life. As compare to male they are less expose to information and technologies.

As more and more women are entering the work force, their role as income earners and breadwinners is a matter of importance while it comes to their empowerment in different aspects. A key feature for sustainable and improved rural livelihoods clearly, is to develop capacity of the principal actors of household well-being, who are women. Most development organizations recognized the linkages between poverty and gender issues, and places great importance on women empowerment as means to reduce poverty and food security.¹

Women's empowerment is the first step to achieve food security in India. If women are given equal access to resources, education, and decision-making power, they can significantly improve agricultural productivity and household nutrition. Many developmental organizations recognize the relation between poverty and gender issues and places great importance on women empowerment as a

¹ International Fund for Agricultural Development, *Women and rural development*, (15 March, 2011). Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/documents/d/new-ifad.org/women-and-rural-development-pdf> (Last visited on February 2, 2025).

means to reduce poverty and food insecurity. Women play important roles in supporting their family in particular and the community in general by ensuring food and nutritional security. The current article aims at reviewing the issue of women empowerment and its status in food security in the rural areas.

In the 1975, the United Nations approved the celebration of International Women's Year. As part of the celebrations, the First World Conference on Women was held in 1975 in Mexico City. At the meeting, it was proposed that the following decade be proclaimed as the UN Decade for Women and follow-up meetings to assess progress be held in 1980 and 1985. The General Assembly adopted a World Plan of Action with recommended targets for governments to integrate women's equality, development and participation in peace initiatives.

In 1985, at the International Women's Conference at Nairobi, women empowerment was initially introduced as a concept and concluded in the conference that empowerment is a rearrangement of power and control of resources in support of woman through positive intervention. The women empowerment was initially introduced as a concept and concluded in the conference that empowerment is a rearrangement of power and control of resources in support of woman through positive intervention.²

The earlier associates in this field indicated to the empowerment of women, the function of economic development, dispensation of democracy and the removal of social injustices that increase gender inequalities. They strongly believe that there is positive relationship between economic development and an equitable distribution of educational, occupational and agricultural resources.

The Need of Women Empowerment

Women are flag bearers in ensuring household well being in the rural areas of most developing countries including India. Women in rural areas are leading figure in ensuring household livelihood outcomes.³ They play key roles as food producers and agricultural entrepreneurs who dedicate their own time, income and decision making to maintain food and nutritional security of their households and communities; and ensuring the stability and food supplies in times of economic hardship.⁴ Rural women need more access and control of resources which together constitute the empowerment capabilities leading to improvement in their livelihoods.

In order to move in that line, the year 2001 was observed as 'Women Empowerment Year' by the Government of India. The status and development of women of any nation determined and influenced the growth of that nation. The Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "Women should be uplifted for the betterment of the nation, if a woman is uplifted, society and nation is uplifted."

The Fifth Five Year Plan onwards has a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In present times, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the decisive point in determining the status of women. The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for

²Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy", *American Political Science Review* 69-105 (1959). Available at: <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/LipsetarticleAPSR.pdf> (Last visited on February 3, 2025).

³D. Prakash, "Rural women, food security and agricultural cooperatives", *Rural Development and Management Centre* 1-15 (2003). Available at: <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/34954298/rural-women-food-security-and-agricultural-cooperatives> (Last visited on February 5, 2025).

⁴Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Women key to food security* (2010-2011). Available at: <https://www.fao.org/4/am719e/am719e00.pdf> (Last visited on February 6, 2025).

their participation in decision making at the local levels. For the protection of the interests of women and to end the discrimination they face in various aspects, the National Policy on empowerment of women was drafted in the year 2001.

Meaning of Women Empowerment

Though, there is no single definition of women empowerment in the literature, it describe as a process or outcome, an end state or a means to an end, a matter of gaining power and resources in order to achieve self-reliance. Empowerment is the process of getting over the factors which cause lack of self confidence⁵.

Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) take an instrumentalist view on the empowerment of women and focus more on the importance of process and the assumption that participation will lead to empowerment⁶.

The process of empowerment is more relevant for women since it is made more complicated by the fact that they play a major role in household and intra-familial relationships as well as in the agricultural sector⁷. Women empowerment is also considered as a means to achieve other important livelihood outcomes such as more income, increased well-being, reduced vulnerability, improved food security and a more sustainable use of natural resources, improvements in child nutritional status and self-reliance. To achieve their desired livelihood outcomes, is the main aim of women empowerment.

In developing nations, agriculture still holds the key to improving rural people's livelihoods⁸. The process of empowerment in agriculture is, therefore, more relevant for rural women since they have previously been denied access and control of the assets and capabilities crucial for making strategic choices in agriculture⁹. The measurement of different aspects of Women Empowerment with respect to agriculture and allied sectors is inevitable for framing of policies which would be helpful for framing of policies which would be helpful for directing the benefits towards development of rural women.

Women empowerment is not only crucial for achieving gender equality but is also a catalyst for India's progress and development as it unlocks the full potential of women and fosters a more inclusive and prosperous society. Grassroots organizations play a significant role in empowering women, providing them with the necessary support, resources, and opportunities to thrive. Through their initiatives, they actively promote women's empowerment, advocate for their rights, and work towards creating a more equitable society for all.

⁵Naila Kabeer, *The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (August 1999). Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/28994/dp108.pdf> (Last visited on February 6, 2025).

⁶Claire Scrutton, Cecilia Luttrell, "The definition and operationalization of empowerment in different development agencies", *Empowerment Note 2* (August 2007). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265733229_The_definition_and (Last visited on February 6, 2025).

⁷Anju Malholtra, Sidney Ruth Schuler, "Measuring Women's empowerment as a variable in international development" *Measuring Empowerment: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives* (January 1st, 2005). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237812392_Measuring_Women's (Last visited on February 7, 2025).

⁸Kathleen Collet, Chris Gale, "Training for Rural Development: Agricultural and Enterprise Skills for Women Smallholders" *City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development* (December 2009). Available at: <https://www.videa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Agricultural-and-enterprise-skills.pdf> (Last visited on February 8, 2025)

⁹*Supra* note 7.

Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)

The measurement and quantification of empowerment has been done by various researcher in numerous ways because it is not easy to calculate and proxy indicators are used for measurement. The using of proxy is sometimes challenging because they do not provide much information on the decision making dynamics. These measures are therefore better defined as correlates or indirect measures of empowerment rather than determinants¹⁰.

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) is an aggregate index, reported at the country or regional level, based on individual level data collected by interviewing men and women within the same households. The WEAI comprises two sub-indexes. The first assesses the degree to which respondents are empowered in five domains of empowerment (5DE) in agriculture. It reflects the percentage of women and men who are empowered and among those men are not, the percentage of domains in which they enjoy adequate achievements. These domains are:

- Decisions about agricultural production
- Access to and decision-making power about productive resources
- Control of use of income
- Leadership in the community
- Time allocation

The second sub-index, the Gender Parity Index (GPI), measures gender parity. The GPI reflects the percentage of women who are empowered or whose achievements are at least as high as the men in their households. For those households that have not achieved gender parity, the GPI shows the empowerment gap that needs to be closed for women to reach the same level of empowerment as men in their households.

Based on both sub-indexes, the WEAI is thus as aggregate index that shows the degree to which women are empowered in their households and communities and the degree of inequality between women and men within the household. Therefore, progress towards empowering women in agriculture will be achieved by empowering them in the five domains and achieving gender parity within the household.

Measuring the 5DE results in a number ranging from zero to one, where higher values indicate greater empowerment. The score has two components. First, it reflects the percentage of women who are empowered (H_e). Second, it reflects the percentage of domains in which those women who are not yet empowered (H_n) already have adequate achievements. In the 5DE formula, A_a is the percentage of dimensions in which dis-empowered women have adequate achievements: $5DE = H_e + H_n (A_a)$, where $H_e + H_n = 100\%$ and $0 < A_a < 100\%$.

Because of this structure, the 5DE offers clear incentives for change. First, the 5DE score can be increased by increasing the percentage of empowered women. Second, the 5DE can be increased by ensuring that dis-empowered women are empowered in a greater percentage of domains.

The innovative GPI also range from zero to one, with higher values indicating greater gender parity. This sub-index is similar to the 5DE. First, it reflects the percentage of women who have gender parity. Specifically, it shows the percentage of women who are living in households with an adult primary male where the women's empowerment scores are at least equal to the men's in their household (H_{GPI}).

¹⁰*Ibid.*

When respondents have been identified as “empowered”, they are given a uniform achievement. Now, define H_{WGP} as the percentage of women without gender parity. Second, for women who do not have gender parity, the GPI shows the percentage shortfall she experiences relative to the male in her household (I_{GPI}). The total WEAI score is computed as weighted sum of the country country-or regional-level 5DE and the GPI. Thus, improvements in either the 5DE and the GPI. Thus, improvements in either the 5DE or GPI will increase the WEAI.

Empowerment of Women and Food Security

In most rural areas where subsistence agriculture is a predominant source of livelihood, women play multiple roles throughout the processes of the production, handling and preparation of food.¹¹ Thus, women’s empowerment has become frequently cited goal of rural development aimed at minimizing household vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity. It is considered an essential way to provide the most vulnerable households with the means to their livelihood strategies and food security. Nevertheless, empowerment of rural women aims to ensure self-reliance and reduce vulnerability to shocks in the future.¹²

In recent times, there has been increasing awareness that the analysis of food insecurity should not just consider its current incidence, but should also identify the individuals, households or the communities who are more at risk of suffering in the future.¹³ As because vulnerability to food insecurity is influenced by both farm and off-farm incomes, it can be postulate that vulnerability to food insecurity is influence by both dimensions of women’s economic and agricultural empowerment.

Women who are not empowered are most likely to have lower mental health, less control over household resources, lower self-esteem, and less access to information about health services. Studies have shown an association between experience or acceptance of physical domestic violence and child under nutrition. The relationship between women empowerment and nutrition is further supported by the evidence that men and women within a household often, have, different preferences for allocation of resources and distribute these differently based on their bargaining power within the household. The gender of the person who has access to and control over resources can hence influence the extent to which resources are allocated to benefit health and nutrition outcomes.

International Food Policy Research Institute And Oxford Poverty And Human Development Initiative

International Food Policy Research Institute

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) seeks sustainable solutions to reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition. IFPRI’s mission is to provide policy solutions that ensure that all people in developing countries, particularly the poorest and other marginalized groups, have access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food at all times. The Institute is one of the 15 centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

¹¹A Galie, “Empowering women farmers. The case of participatory plant breeding in ten Syrian households” 34 *Frontiers-A Journal of Women Studi* 58-92 (2013). Available at : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/fronjwomestud.34.1.0058> (Last visited on February 10, 2025).

¹²Christian Romer Lovendal and Marco Knowles, “Tomorrow’s hunger: A framework for analaying vulnerability to food insecurity” (2005) FAO- EAS Working Paper no. 05-07. Available at : <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199236558.003.0004> (Last visited on February 10, 2025).

¹³Pasquale Scaramozzino, “Measuring Vulnerability to Food Insecurity” (2006) FAO- EAS Working Paper no.06-12. Available at : https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5021774_Measuring (Last visited on February 12, 2025).

IFPRI is a leader in gender and household decision making research in developing countries. Its gender and intra-household research program (1994-2001) provided empirical evidence that the bargaining power of men and women within households affects the allocation of household resources and that increasing resources controlled by women improves agricultural productivity, household food security and investments in the next generation.

IFPRI's research aims to achieve progress in CGIAR's five impact areas: nutrition, health, and food security; poverty reduction, livelihoods and jobs; environmental health and biodiversity; gender equality, youth, and social inclusion; and climate adaptation and mitigation. To address challenges in these areas, IFPRI's experts work with partners around the world to identify, assess, improve and adapt policy, institutional and governance responses that can drive transformative change.

Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative

The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) is an economic research centre within the Oxford Department of International Development at the University of Oxford. OPHI aims to build a more systematic framework for reducing multidimensional poverty, grounded in people's experiences and values. Creating real tools that inform policies to reduce poverty, OPHI has two main research themes: multidimensional poverty measurement and missing dimensions of poverty data.

OPHI developed the Alkire Foster method for multidimensional measurement, which underpins the WEAI. It is being implemented at national and international levels and is currently being used and adapted by the UN Development Programme in their flagship Human Development Report along with the Multidimensional Poverty Index, as well as the Governments of Bhutan, Colombia, and Mexico.

OPHI has develop survey modules to measure five missing dimensions of poverty data that poor people value but which have been largely overlooked in international studies of poverty to date. These dimensions cover: quality of work, empowerment, physical safety, the ability to go about without shame and psychological well-being.

Suggestions

1. Access to Land and Resources- Policy makers should ensure that women have equal access to land and agricultural resources. Policies should recognize women's land rights and provide women with access to credit and agricultural inputs.
2. Education and Training Programs- Provide women access to education and training programs that enhance their agricultural skills and knowledge. This should include training on sustainable farming practices, nutrition, and financial literacy. These will enable them to make informed decisions about food production and household management.
3. Promote Women's Cooperatives- The formation of women's cooperatives should be encourage.. These can help women gain access to markets, resources, and support networks. And provide women with collective bargaining power, thus enable them to negotiate better prices for their products, and better access to credit.
4. Address Women's Health and Nutrition- The improvement of health and nutrition will enhance women's productivity and well-being. Targeted health programs that reduce malnutrition and provide access to healthcare services must be implemented.
5. Involve women in Decision-Making- Women must be involved in decision-making at all levels, from household decisions to policy making. This will ensure that their voices are heard, and policies are designed to meet their specific needs and to overcome challenges specific to them.

Conclusion

The growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Policies should be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process. Amplifying women's economic opportunities means: more and better jobs for women; a business climate that supports women in starting and growing businesses, and building their management and entrepreneurial skills; a financial sector in which commercial banks and microfinance institutions provide women with effective access to a range of financial services and products customized for their needs, and greater livelihood security for women, especially in rural areas and vulnerable environments as women's empowerment is consider crucial for improving nutritional outcomes of the household.