

LEFT BEHIND WOMEN FIND EMPOWERMENT

A helping hand is being extended to millions of smallholder farms—many increasingly headed by women—in the eastern Gangetic Plain

KEY POINTS

- An A\$11 million project has been launched to improve the sustainability and resilience of farming systems in a region with the greatest concentration of rural poverty in the world—the eastern Gangetic Plain.
- Women-headed households especially stand to benefit, with the project adopting gender-sensitive designs and extension tools.

Out-migration has given rise to a new caste—the so-called 'left behind' women.



BY DR GIO BRAIDOTTI

The households that farm the flood and drought-prone lands of the eastern Gangetic Plain of Bangladesh, India and Nepal rely on tiny parcels of land to sustain the food security and livelihoods of more than 300 million people. These lands are home to the highest concentration of people living in rural poverty in the world.

An emerging trend has seen women rise as heads of these households, left to run the farm as men leave in search of work. This out-migration has given rise to a new caste—the so-called ‘left behind’ women.

Women-headed households face formidable challenges, as farming in the eastern Gangetic Plain is fraught with difficulties.

There are extreme weather events—floods, droughts and cold snaps—which are intensifying in their effects on farming. The region lacks crop management technology and water management policies, in part, due to weak institutions. Most farmers have limited access to credit, quality seeds, fertilisers, irrigation or formal extension services, and face water and labour shortages.

Dr Kuhu Chatterjee, ACIAR’s regional manager for South Asia, says that rice and wheat productivity is low and diversification limited. According to ACIAR, that makes new crop management systems and institutional innovations critical to the welfare of the region.

“At the moment markets are poorly developed and volatile, while agricultural knowledge and service networks are sparse,” she says. “However, there is great potential to introduce and scale out more sustainable production practices that have the potential to improve productivity, reduce rural poverty and boost water use efficiency.”

Helping smallholder farmers tap this potential is the goal of the Sustainable and Resilient Farming Systems Intensification (SRFSI) project, which was launched in July 2014.

SRFSI is a collaborative undertaking drawing on 20 partners based in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Australia and funded by ACIAR and the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP). Assistance available through the project extends from more water-efficient production methods, such as conservation agriculture, through to policy innovations and linking farmers to markets. Lead activities include field research and the design of scale-out extension to enable at least 130,000 farmers to adopt technologies that improve crop yields and reduce rural poverty within the next 10 years.

However, Dr Chatterjee notes that for these developmental efforts to be effective, it was critical to include gender equity as a key component of the design of SRFSI.

THE GENDER FACTOR

Despite the rise of women-headed households, gender equity is severely lacking throughout the eastern Gangetic Plain region and is particularly acute in the agriculture sector.

Dr Chatterjee cites the example of women being paid at 60–70% of male rates. “In patriarchal societies such as those in South Asian countries, women rarely hold land titles, making them ineligible for formal credit,” she says. “These exclusionary practices are exacerbated by historical low levels of education of women.”

The cumulative effect can be illustrated by Nepal where only 3% of women-headed households use mechanical equipment compared to 8% for households headed by men.

“It has been estimated that women could boost agricultural yields by as much as 20–30% just through access to the same resources as men and also result in higher rates of uptake of introduced technologies,” Dr Chatterjee says.

“Despite these implications, many development projects have, in general, failed to recognise the specific requirements of women.”

GENDER EQUITY

The SRFSI project focuses on empowering women through farming improvements, policy innovation and access to training. The idea is not just to include women, but to actively target them through project activities.

“Traditional linear approaches to technology transfer—from researchers through extension services to farmers—have not been sufficient to reach female farmers,” Dr Chatterjee explains. “Alternative approaches are being trialled that are gender sensitive by involving women in all aspects of the research and scaling out.”

These approaches can take the form of women-only focus group discussions and the collection of gender disaggregated data. Women are included during testing of technology and disseminating viable innovations, even as interactions with the women help researchers build up understanding of their perspectives, assets, needs and opportunities.

This consideration extends to gender roles across a community and even looks at long-term effects of change. Dr Chatterjee cites the example of machinery that can reduce the drudgery associated with transplanting and weeding, but also places downward pressure on daily labour rates offered to women.

“Women already are paid at a fraction of men’s wage, so the introduction of mechanisation needs to be complemented by other employment opportunities for women labourers,” she says.

FARMERS GIVEN A VOICE

As of December 2014 the project had established 40 nodes of research across the targeted areas. Nodes

include field sites managed using the principles of conservation agriculture, a comprehensive program of long-term kharif (summer) and rabi (winter) crop research, and dissemination initiated through training and demonstration events.

A comprehensive program of surveys and discussions are helping to inform project activities, with insight gathered from both female and male farmers, service providers, input dealers, self-help groups and community leaders in each of the 40 nodes.

The program builds a comprehensive picture of cropping systems, natural and economic resources, people’s livelihood strategies, their attitudes to risk and innovation, and an understanding of the status and requirements of women farmers.

The means to mainstream gender equity within SRFSI project activities have also been devised and presented during the project-planning meeting held in Nepal in November 2014. Following the meeting, Dr Fay Rola-Rubzen and Dr Roy Murray-Prior conducted training on ‘engendering’ project activities and objectives, which was attended by Australian and developing country partners.

A resulting draft gender strategy paper included principles such as:

- recognition of diversity and understanding of gender roles, needs and motivations
- gender inclusion in all activities—technology dissemination, training, capacity building and extension
- gender sensitivity in designing and disseminating technologies in training and extension
- gender-responsive policy suggestions.

A data-rich baseline picture of farming communities has emerged. It includes the incidence of women-headed households in various socioeconomic groups, the scope to introduce crops to the cropping season, the potential for a mechanical hub to overcome the lack of access to machinery, the preferred means of receiving information and women’s roles in decision-making.

“Empowering women, a major aspect of the agricultural workforce, will only benefit the goals of the SRFSI project,” Dr Chatterjee says. “This should be done through regular updates to the gender strategy and addressing the needs of all stakeholders—men and women. It is through the effective implementation of such strategy and actions that real and enduring change can be realised in the eastern Gangetic Plains.” ■

ACIAR PROJECT: CSE/2011/077 ‘Sustainable and resilient farming systems intensification in the eastern Gangetic Plains (SRFSI)’

MORE INFORMATION: Dr Kuhu Chatterjee, kuhu.chatterjee@aciar.gov.au