

Participatory Approaches to Agricultural Technology Promotion with Women in the Hills of Nepal

Introduction

It is now a well-known and publicised fact that women play key roles in the farming systems of the hills and mountains of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. Yet, despite their activities in crop production, animal husbandry, forestry, water management, and post-harvest food production, women have been overlooked by those responsible for the formulation and dissemination of technologies, services, and policies aimed to assist rural dwellers in the mountains. Consequently, the development of technologies specifically tailored to women-specific tasks and the involvement of rural women in the development and transfer of such technologies have received inadequate attention from research, training, and extension departments of governments.

Women, as caretakers of livestock, crops, and forest lands, are in a key position to contribute to the building and maintenance of the sustainability of these lands and farm resources. Continual neglect of their important role in the mountain agro-ecosystem means missing out on a great source of under-utilised potential in the struggle to rehabilitate and enhance the environmental conditions of rural villages.

Farm women are affected by shortages of water, fuelwood, and fodder; by crop production increases leading to environmental degradation; by mono-cropping ventures; and by displacement from traditional activities due to technology introductions. Many traditional methods of performing farm tasks involve drudgery, consuming women's time and energies needlessly, while alternative methods exist of which they are unaware or that they are unable to access. With inadequate access to training and education opportunities, women are held back from opportunities to generate additional income during lean periods; without labour-saving alternatives, they are unable to find time to devote to such activities, anyway. The reduction of their work load is a first step in providing women with the 'breathing space' required before taking on additional tasks for income generation, health care, or other activities.

Efforts to bring improved technologies to farm women are not unknown in the region, but they have been hampered by numerous factors constraining

women's access to knowledge and adoption of new practices. As, in many fields, there exists a wide gap between researchers and users, resulting in little feedback from the field to technology developers and advocates on ways to make their products more useful to women. In addition, gender biases cause researchers to overlook the needs of women or what makes a technology appropriate to them. Male extensionists usually deliver their messages to other males; a dearth of female researchers and extension agents compounds the problem.

Women's reproductive role and responsibility for childcare naturally limit their mobility and therefore access to information. The extremely low literacy rate of women in the HKH region coupled with the non-availability of written information in remote hill areas make it difficult to extend knowledge through printed materials. Traditional beliefs about women's roles, social and cultural restrictions, and sometimes limited involvement in decision-making largely confine women's activities to the home and farm, often compelling them to forego opportunities for training, for instance, on topics of interest to them.

In many areas, the introduction of technologies has brought about labour displacement, pushing women into less skilled jobs with less access to improved technologies and the 'world of men'. Already overburdened with work, and without access to improved tools and credit, and the knowledge to use them, women slip further behind their menfolk and are less able to contribute fully to the efficient management of the family farm. It has also been noted that, whenever women-focussed economically beneficial interventions are made, these are taken up by males, leaving women to their traditional chores. Serious attention to these problems in the mountain region has been lacking in the past; practical efforts focussed in this area could result in some meaningful changes.