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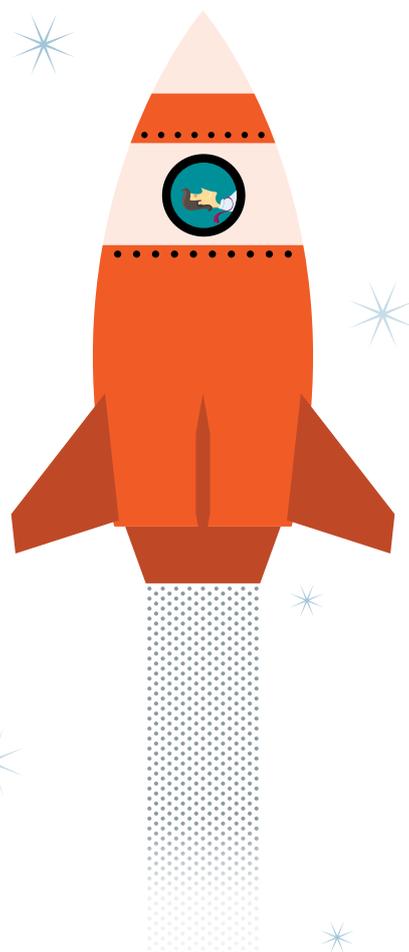
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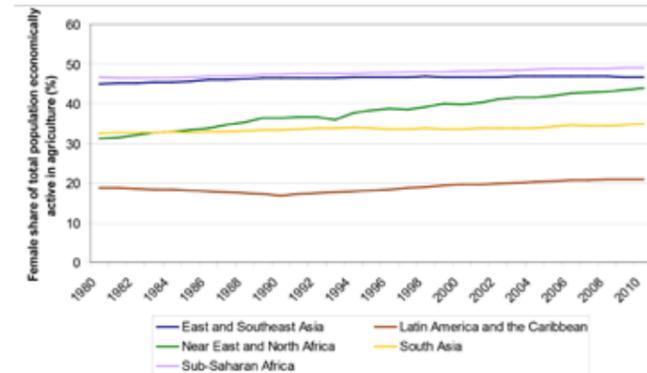
By Joanna Kane-Potaka, ICRISAT



As International Women's Day just passed, it seemed apt to review the role of women in farming. Agriculture is certainly not a male dominated occupation in many parts of the world, including in developing countries. Developing countries are hugely important for the pulse industry given that they produce 70% of the global pulses (excluding dry peas), and India alone produces about a quarter of the world production.ⁱ

It may surprise many people to know that women comprise over 40% of those engaged in agricultural in developing countries - see Figure A. This is closer to 50% in East and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, which has also been an increasing trend over the last couple of decades. Even these figures are hotly disputed as under representative due, for example, the high representation of women as unpaid labour in agriculture.ⁱⁱ

Figure A: Female share of the agricultural labour force
(FAO: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf>)



Yet studies have shown that women farmers in developing countries are 20-30% less productive on their farms than men. The core reasons to this is that the women generally have less access to resources.

This can include less access to the most arable land, credit, capacity building opportunities, technologies and seed. For example, women own 1% of the land they harvest due largely to biased inheritance and policies.

Women also are double loaded with the home and family duties. Without even developing new technologies, but instead just by giving equal access of resources to women in developing countries, yields could increase 20-30% on women's farms, agricultural production could increase 2.5 to 4% which could feed an extra 100-150 million people.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Dr Kanayo Nwanze, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) - "Investing in rural women is investing in the community. When women are

economically empowered, they make sure their children are fed, get proper nutrition, and stay in school, which in effect can reverse the migration trend from rural to urban areas among the youth."^{iv}

So if you are concerned with humanity and equal opportunities or if you even care only about production and trade - there is great value in investing in rural women.



Sarda Bai sowing her chickpea crop with her husband, lives in a village on the forest edge that receives abundant rain and yet faces water scarcity. Here's the journey of a woman who started off as a laborer and is now a businesswoman and proud farmer. A fine example of how the model watershed project in Siyalwada, Madhya Pradesh, India, has transformed lives. (<http://www.icrisat.org/womenleaders-sardabai.htm>) (Photo: V Nagasrinivas)

There are success stories out there of women being empowered and often through the most unlikely ways. Even amid current uproar on inequality and prejudice faced by many women in India, it is heartening that positive changes are happening for some women in the rural sector - one of the toughest groups to reach due to the gender and social dynamics, poverty and low education levels in the villages.

This unlikely socially and economically empowering initiative is based on years of research and sustained effort in the area of Integrated Watershed Management. The initiatives are based on creating a collaborative spirit and changing the lives of rural women in India.

The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) released some videos and stories on this work, for International Women's Day this year. Pulses were part of the farming solutions - integrated and with diversification on farm being critical. One woman farmer interviewed, Hari Bai, had training on soil nutrient management and water use efficiency. After the watershed management was in place, she could increase yields and diversify on her farm to grow chickpea, red lentils, pigeonpea, wheat and even rice.

The initiative didn't just involve scientific advancements from soil nutrient testing, water recharging, integrated pest management, improve crops varieties adopted etc. Possibly more important was the unique approach the project team undertook to engage women.

This started with socio-economic surveys to identify the poor women farmers who needed the most help. After this, it was made mandatory for the first time for watershed committees to have 50% women.

Wages for work undertaken on the watershed were also made equal for women and men, for the first time, when the same work was done. This infiltrated through the community leading to equal wages in other areas.

A key for success was to invest in social networks, in particular setting up women's organizations. This was also highlighted in reviews of a variety of ICRISAT on-the-ground projects to help with sustainable intensification of agriculture. See <http://oar.icrisat.org/149/1/new2.pdf>

Self-Help Groups were formed for the women and they were given training on how to operate a Self-Help Group.

The groups are typically 10-20 women members from the village who decide to regularly contribute savings into a common fund that is managed through collective wisdom and peer pressure.

The funds are then lent to individual members as a microcredit which opens new opportunities for the women to invest in agriculture or new business ventures.

The groups also act as a central contact point to work with the village women to share knowledge and opportunities.

Further capacity building was given to this group ranging from rainwater harvesting to making vermicomposting and developing village seed banks.

See the stories of these women farmers who through these initiatives increased cropping intensity from 115-160%, with increased yields for chickpea, soybean and wheat, and grew paddy for the first time.

<http://www.icrisat.org/womenleaders-jankibai.htm>
<http://www.icrisat.org/womenleaders-haribai.htm>
<http://www.icrisat.org/womenleaders-sardabai.htm>

ICRISAT is currently working on 23 watershed projects in nine states of India - including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Partnerships have been critical to make this happen, involving government, NGOs and international scientific research organizations.

And now even private companies are taking this on in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects. Companies like SAB Miller, Coca Cola, JSW Foundation, Asian Paints, Power Grid Corporation of India, and Rural Electrification Corporation of India, have taken up watershed projects as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, in partnership with ICRISAT.

Investing in women farmers is paying off and helping commodity value chains develop. But it is not all roses yet as we need to reach more women for the industry to reach its potential. I challenge all industry players to contribute to this movement.

ⁱGlobal Pulse Confederation, 2015: <http://www.cicilsiptic.org/pulses.php?id=24>

ⁱⁱFAO, 2011, The Role of Women in Agriculture: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱFAO, 2011, 2010-11 The State of Food and Agriculture Women in Agriculture Closing the Gender gap for Development: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

^{iv}ICRISAT, 2014: <http://www.icrisat.org/newsroom/news-releases/icrisat-pr-2014-media23.htm>



Janki Bai, seen here in her green pea field, in Dungaria, a remote village in Madhya Pradesh state, India, turned her barren 10-acre field and neighboring drylands into cultivable land by giving up an acre for a water harvesting pond. The watershed project helped farmers conserve rain water; grow new crops and better crops; and above all transformed their thinking. (<http://www.icrisat.org/womenleaders-jankibai.htm>) (Photo: V Nagasrinivas)