

Reaching Rural Women; Understanding the Term Gender Sensitivity in Agricultural Extension

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Abstract

Considering the high percentage of female farmers involved in Indian agriculture as key agri-food stakeholders, the extension system has traditionally overlooked their specific farming needs. In India, the transformation of agricultural extension has been strongly influenced by the changing international and national economic, political and social climates. The Indian government has initiated moves toward mainstreaming gender concerns into agricultural extension delivery, but this will be hard to achieve unless there is an improved understanding of how gender issues can be identified and effectively incorporated into agricultural extension programmes and projects. This study draws on data from a range of public, private and non-government organisations involved in extension delivery as well as private sector companies and the NGO sector. It examines the perceptions of terms such as gender within the institutional framework surrounding agricultural extension delivery and also seeks to identify factors which contribute to barriers which constrain the implementation of gender equitable extension. There was a considerable variability in understanding of how terms such as gender is interpreted and used in extension delivery and this could be considered as a key problem in implementing gender-based programmes and projects. Social customs imposed the greatest barriers to achieving gender equity and education and training from women's empowerment was identified as the main suggestion to removing this barrier. Unless the types of problems related to these underlying inconsistencies are tackled then changes at policy level will meet with little success. As a consequence the overarching goal of empowering women as key agri-food stakeholders in the future and to enable them to adapt their practices in line with current changing climates remains futile.

Key words: Gender, agricultural extension, policy

Introduction

Despite the high percentage of female farmers involved in Indian agriculture as key agri-food stakeholders, the extension system has traditionally overlooked their specific farming needs. However, in India, there has been a transformation of agricultural extension which has mainly been influenced by the changing international and national economic, political and social climates e.g. the World Bank and International Monetary Fund instituted Structural Adjustment Programs. As part of this transformation, the Indian government has initiated moves toward mainstreaming gender concerns into agricultural extension delivery using a number of different approaches. For instance, over the past decade there has been a huge growth in Self-Help/Micro-Finance Group programmes across India. Implemented by government and donor agencies as well as local NGOs and private microfinance companies, some consider this has become the 'primary mechanism to empower women' (Jakimow & Kilby, 2006, p.375). Although, the use of women's SHGs as a tool in development has become progressively more popular there is criticism of these approaches. The main one being that they have shifted the financial burden of responsibility away from the state and onto individual women (Raju, 2006). In addition to this shift in responsibility there are also concerns about how terms such as 'gender' are interpreted under these new mainstreaming approaches?

Although gender is extensively used, it is a frequently misunderstood term (Momsen, 2004) and there is mounting evidence that there is a lack of clarity surrounding what terms such as gender, gender equity and gender sensitivity mean in the very contexts where they are being used to promote changes in gender relations. Subrahmanian (2006) points to a lack of analytical clarity about what gender means which in turn hampers efforts to mainstream gender into policy and practice. Scott (1986) points out that there has been no unambiguous or consistent usage of the term gender, underlining that it has been used in a number of theoretical positions in addition to referring to the relationship between men and women. Cornwall *et al.* (2004) refer to how the meaning of gender continues to be disputed, particularly when it is brought into play within bureaucratic structures where it may be subject to multiple interpretations which result from the level of education or social position of personnel. Acker (1992) indicates that despite the term gender experiencing such widespread usage, there is no universal understanding of its meaning, and refers to the manner in which the conceptualisation of gender is rife with difficulties, largely dependent on political or social influences. Esplen & Jolly (2006) highlight the fact that there are numerous individual and institutional interpretations of terms such as gender and the difficulties in finding a consensus. Smyth (2007, p. 585) observes that gender is perhaps one of the most confusing terms in the development discourse, but is one which, if it is used and understood with 'clarity and consistency' can provide a shared platform for those working both inside and outside development organisations. Ultimately, mainstreaming gender will be hard to achieve unless there is an improved understanding of how gender issues can be identified and effectively incorporated into agricultural extension programmes and projects.

Gender and extension in India

Chant & Gutmann (2002) consider that gender is such a key influencing factor in all areas of development that it should not be considered as a separate issue. However, as extension is such a male dominated profession, from field staff through to university and government personnel, that despite the numbers of women involved in farming, as much as 85 percent in some countries, their concerns continue to be largely ignored as the face of farming continues to be perceived as that of a man. Buchy & Basaznew (2005) consider that agricultural extension will never successfully deliver what is needed by women farmers unless the extension organisations themselves change. Ogawa (2004) infers that it is necessary to reconsider what is meant by gender equality in terms of agricultural extension, as women farmers will never reap the same gains as men farmers unless serious questions are raised over existing gender relations.

This study draws on data from a range of public, private and non-government organisations; this includes such organisations as government departments and rural development agencies involved in extension delivery as well as private sector companies and the NGO sector. It examines the how terms such as gender are understood and perceived by those who work within the institutional framework surrounding agricultural extension delivery. It also seeks to identify factors which contribute to barriers which constrain the implementation of gender equitable extension. In so doing this study provides recommendations on how these barriers can be overcome in order to empower key agri-food stakeholders in particular with reference to current global challenges in climate change and food security.

Materials and Methods

This research comprised of a study which was carried out in Pudukkottai district in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Pudukkottai district, as illustrated in Figure 5.1, is a geographically central district of Tamil Nadu, and was created in 1974 from areas of both the Tiruchirapalli and Thanjavur districts. The district covers an area of 4663 sq.km, and has 39 kms of coastline. The town of Pudukkottai is home to both the Joint Directorate of Agriculture, and the Assistant Directorate of Agriculture for the local agricultural division.

The study was based on 18 qualitative semi structured interviews carried out with various stakeholders from within the organisations which make up the institutional framework which surrounds women farmers (public sector, private sector and NGO sector). This study investigated how the terms gender and gender equity were understood by stakeholders from within these organisations and also examined what these organisations understood by gender sensitive extension service.

Key stakeholders from within the institutional framework were selected using purposive/ quota sample, based upon the criteria of having specific knowledge of the research area and therefore having relevance to the research questions.

Semi-structured interview (SSI) techniques were used to gather data, as this allowed respondents to be guided by the researcher, yet develop their own ideas and not be restricted by an overly prescriptive agenda. The interviews were carried out on a one-to-one basis where possible, as this permitted the respondent to fully express their opinions, whilst allowing the researcher far greater control over the direction taken by the interview. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents across organisation types and also the levels at which the respondents worked in the organisations. The majority of the respondents came from the middle management level of their organisations.

		Remit of organisation					Total
		Rural development		Agriculture			
Number of respondents	Total	Public	NGO	Public	Private	NGO	
			3	2	10	2	1
	Total	5		13			
		Level of respondent within organisation					Total
	Top	2	2	2			6
	Middle	1		5	2	1	9
	Community			3			3

Table 1 Respondent group disaggregated by organisation type, organisation remit and level of respondent within organisation (n=18)

The qualitative data collected in the first phase of research was analysed according to the groupings implied by the data itself, in order to display the findings as a distillation of the information. This was an iterative process which aimed to refine and interpret the patterns and relationships identified in the data. Once these groupings were coded, the entire dataset was recorded as a database using Microsoft Access and then exported to Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for manipulation and analysis through pivot tables and graphs.

The interviews were structured around 3 main themes;

- The perceptions of terms such as gender
- Gender sensitive extension services
- Addressing the perceived barriers to achieving gender equity in extension

Results and Discussion

The categories which are displayed in the text boxes in Figures 1, 2 and 3 are those which arose from the data analysis and were suggested by the responses given. The thickness of the connectors from the different sectors to each of the text boxes denotes the numbers of responses which correspond to each of the boxes; the thicker the line, the higher the number of responses. The explanations which correspond to the categories in each of the text boxes are explained within the large text boxes to the right of the Figure.

The Perception of Terms such as Gender

Figures 1 and 2 outline the respondents’ perceptions of the term ‘gender’ in the contexts of their work and their personal lives. Questions around this topic centred upon how respondents understood the term gender in relation to the work which their organisation carried out and also in relation to their everyday lives outside of the context of work.

A significant section of public sector respondents equated gender solely as a women’s concern, six in the professional context and five in the personal context. This is consistent with the observation by Raju (2006), who argues that gender projects often fail to make the distinction between women and gender, to the degree that gender equality remains women’s issue and not one of wider society. Further interpretations such as gender being concerned with sex differences, equal opportunities or simply being human, serve to illustrate how there is confusion over terms such as gender both in the contexts of personal perceptions and in relation to work. In addition, when responding to questions in other sections of the interviews, five of the public sector respondents referred to women as ‘the genders’ or ‘the other gender’, which underlines the confusion over these terms.

The private sector respondents interviewed for this study had not come across the term gender in relation to their work. The commercial interests of private companies more generally may be one reason why they exhibit little interest in addressing the needs of more marginal producers, such as the landless or women farmers.

The NGO respondents were enthusiastic about the use of WIA approaches which focus on women, but were aware of the limitations of these types of approaches. Respondents such as a top level worker in a national NGO warned that there is too much focus on technical aspects in public sector programmes, at the expense of a more holistic approach: ‘There’s no support afterwards. They run courses for women, but they never ask questions about land, decision-making, choice or gender. They argue that it is to “improve nutrition” but what are the women going to do with it if there’s no market or transport?’

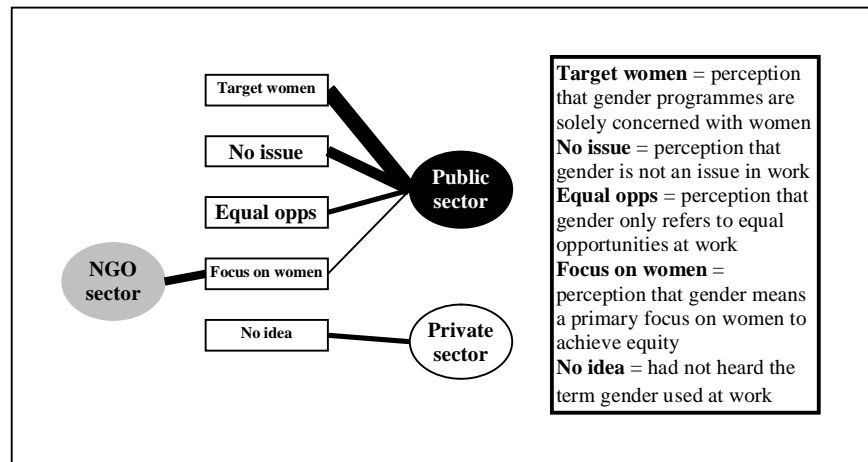


Figure 1: Respondents' perceptions of meaning of the term 'gender' in the context of their work

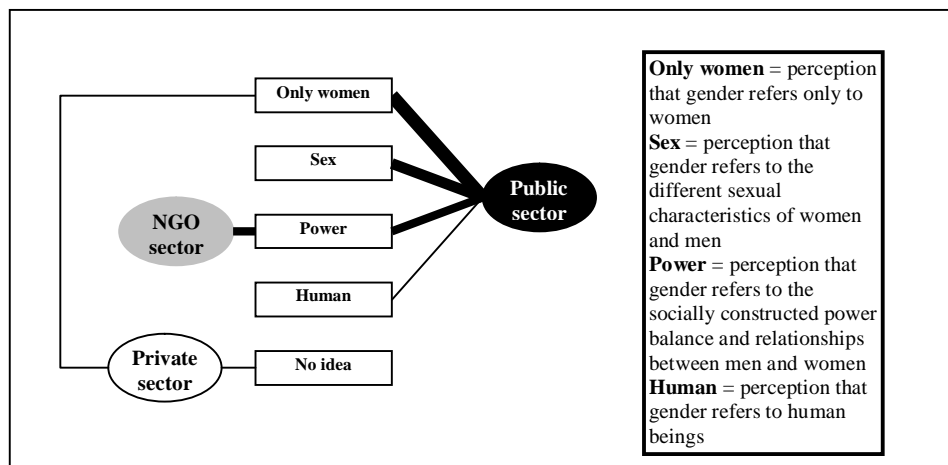


Figure 2: Respondents' perceptions of meaning of gender in the context of their personal lives

Gender sensitive Extension Services

Figure 3 outlines the respondents’ understanding of the term gender sensitive in relation to extension delivery. This was to ascertain what stakeholders understood gender sensitive extension services to comprise of. Questions were also asked around whether stakeholders perceived that gender approaches are useful for addressing inequity in extension services. The responses fell into five categories, which are displayed in the text boxes in Figure 3. As can be observed there was very little consistent opinion on what is understood by gender sensitive extension services.

In the case of the public sector, nine of the thirteen respondents interpreted gender sensitive extension as that which worked solely with women, which seems a natural consequence of the pervasive interpretation of gender as a women’s issue.

The private sector showed little or no understanding of the gender dimensions of extension services, with one of the respondents wondering why gender sensitive extension was important because he considered that all farmers were men, commenting that: ‘Farms are run by men, women cook and take food to the field for farmers.’ The NGO respondents all considered that the starting point for gender sensitisation is with programmes aimed at women, a consideration which is backed up by the evidence of a failure to address the needs of women farmers despite the focus on women in agriculture over the past 25 years.

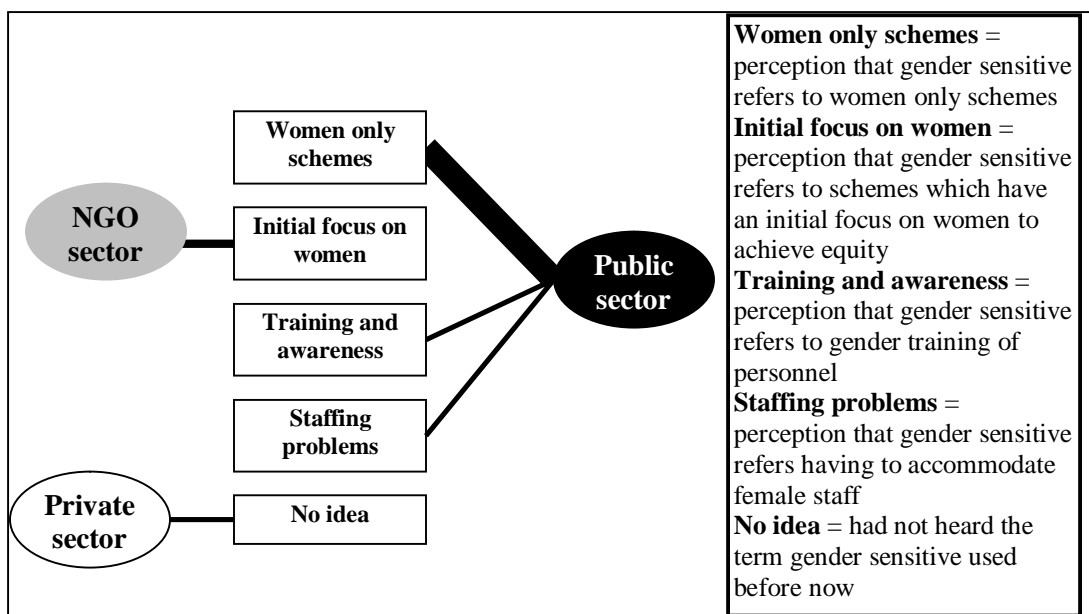


Figure 3: Respondents’ perceptions of what gender sensitive extension means (n=18)

Addressing the perceived barriers to achieving gender equity in extension

Tables 2 and 3 outline the principal perceived barriers to achieving gender equity, and the suggested improvements for addressing gender inequity in agricultural extension delivery. Stakeholders were asked what they considered to be the biggest barriers to overcome in order to achieve gender equitable extension, and also whether they feel there is a better way to address this inequity in extension delivery. The categories which are displayed in both Tables 1 and 2 correspond to the responses given and the frequency of these responses.

The largest perceived barrier (Table 2), outlined by one third of the total respondents, was that social customs imposed the greatest barriers. Four of the public sector respondents in this study referred to the problems created by the working hours and the types of duties carried out by female personnel, which prevented extension services being able to work more effectively with women. Four of the total respondents were concerned with family/community restrictions, and this has been discussed as one of the principal factors which prevent women from taking part in activities outside the home

Changing the attitudes of female personnel was proffered by three male personnel (Table 3) as a solution to addressing inequity, due to their perception that female staff do not want to work longer hours or in situations where they may have to ‘get their hands dirty’. Other comments from respondents indicated observations of a general failure to see women as farmers coupled with a better analysis of problems and needs of women farmers. In addition, respondents referred to lack of education or land as barriers to women participating in extension activities with one district community level worker commenting that: ‘Women’s current situation is their biggest barrier as they have no skills or abilities.’ This is backed up by the fact that past extension programmes, such as T&V, required participating farmers to have basic literacy and possession of land titles, which effectively excluded women from the outset (Jiggins *et al.* 1997). Although improved education and training were felt by some to be a key component in improving success of programmes, women’s literacy levels, particularly in rural areas, continues to be extremely low (UN, 2007).

Perceived barrier to achieving equity	Number of times barrier identified			
	Public	Private	NGO	Total
Social problems/customs	5	0	1	6
Family/community restrictions	2	0	2	4
Female personnel unwilling to carry out duties	4	0	0	4
Beneficiaries lack adequate education/training	3	0	0	3
Insufficient budgets	3	0	0	3
Gap between policy design and implementation	1	0	1	2
Attitudes/resistance of extension personnel	1	0	1	2
Lack of land titles for women	1	0	0	1
Beneficiaries expectations are too high	1	0	0	1
Failure to see women as farmers	0	0	1	1
Total number of barriers identified	21	0	6	27

Table 2: Perceived barriers to gender equity in extension¹ (n=18)

Suggestions to address inequity	Number of times suggested			
	Public	Private	NGO	Total
Better education/training for women farmers	2	0	1	3
Improvement of women's economic power	2	0	1	3
Gender sensitisation at all levels of society	1	0	2	3
Change attitudes of female extension personnel	3	0	0	3
Better analysis of problems and needs	1	0	1	2
Existing practice is sufficient	1	0	0	1
Approach men first	1	0	0	1
Specifically target only women	1	0	0	1
Use more disaggregated data	1	0	0	1
Total number of suggestions	13	0	5	18

Table 3: Suggested improvements to addressing inequity in extension² (n=18)

Conclusion

This study has found that there was little consistency in understanding terms such as gender and gender sensitive as one of the key problems in implementing gender-based programmes and projects. This study also concludes that that social customs imposed the greatest barriers to achieving gender equity and that education and training from women's empowerment as the main suggestion to removing this barrier. The findings of this research echo the analysis of literature and point to the fact that the public sector is currently the dominant player in agricultural extension in India, and that this is expected to be the case for the immediate future. This has led to new questions, such as why it is that there is such variation in the interpretations of gender within this one sector, particularly as gender sensitisation is one of the key areas highlighted by the Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension (India), and an integral component of the extension reform process. These questions require further research and investigation in order to clarify the situation.

¹ Totals do not correspond to total of respondents as some gave multiple answers whilst others did not provide any response

² Totals do not correspond to total of respondents as some gave multiple answers whilst others did not provide any response.

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