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# Self -Help Groups- A Catalyst For Empowering Women In Agriculture!

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## Abstract

In India the Self Help Groups (SHGs) are playing an important role in mainstreaming women in agriculture at the grassroot level. Be it social, economic, political or self-reliance, the Self-help group model operational at village level has created a powerful platform where women come together, share their common pains, vision and strives towards lading a life of dignity. In the country where agriculture is the backbone of nation's economy, self-help group have progressively helped in creating a level playing field for women in agriculture and its value chain. The group association of women coming from heterogenous background, caste, creed, and economy helps them to negotiate and increases their bargaining power. Through the group affiliations women working in the field of agriculture gets an identity and opportunity to access improved knowledge related to agriculture practices and become part of financial inclusion programmes by government and agencies. Largely women who are "invisible" in agriculture gets increasing opportunity to be a part of level playing field in agriculture through the risk-taking capacity they share in their groups. SHGs is an innovative platform and is increasingly playing constructive role for mainstreaming and empowering women in agriculture.

**Keywords** Women Farmers, SHGs, Inclusion, Empowerment, Agriculture

## Introduction

Self-help groups are playing a pivotal role in empowering women at the grassroot levels in India. Self-help groups are a community-based group formed of 10 -25 women coming together. In recent years it has acted as a vehicle of change for women in empowering them financially and socially. SHGs have empowered the rural women becoming the vehicle of change for poor and marginalized people to be released from the clutches of poverty (Sahu and Singh, 2012).

In agriculture, Self-help group is an important and a result-oriented platform to empower women in agriculture. As a voluntary association of poor and marginalized rural women, it acts as a powerful agency for empowering women in rural India. The platform also provides opportunities for collective bargaining power, thereby creating

an opportunity for better access to credits and agriculture extension system to their members. Through the SHG access to microcredits and opportunities for farm income generation is availed by the women members of the groups. It is important to understand that the members of the group act together as a unified force with better negotiating power, risk taking capacity and many a time resolving conflicts both socio-economic through better exposure, knowledge, and awareness generation.

It has played a crucial role in establishing the identity of women at the grassroots level particularly agriculture. It has improved the status of women as participants, decision-makers, and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social, and cultural spheres of life (Kondal, 2014). In many cases it has been found that self-help groups are playing the role of a catalyst for solving the social, economic, and developmental issues (Ganguly et al., 2016b).

Increasingly it has also played a pivotal role in empowering women in agriculture. It has played an important role in empowering women working at farm. Women who are affiliated to Self-help groups are comparatively more empowered to those who have no affiliation to such groups. (Shinogi et al. 2021)

The Self-Help Group platform helps women to get out of their household and come together to form an affinity. Belonging to a group gives each member a group affiliation and a space where they can feel free to share their thoughts. The safe space where the members listen to each other and discuss the issues which is common to all and many a time the group members also resolve the issues related to individual members. The platform provides them a cohesive environment where they can take decisions based on knowledge gained through the training and capacity building program.

### **Group Affiliation conducive for self-confidence and increases opportunities for improved knowledge**

The group affiliation also empowers the women to come out of their individual shell, learn and unlearn new things. It is important to understand that the affiliation and belongingness to a group support women members emotionally where together the members can share their own struggle and explore opportunities. The self-help group which is also taken as a platform for empowering the knowledge bank of women at the grassroot levels from different arena like, health, agriculture, domestic violence, education, financial literacy etc by different government and non-government, private players create a conducive environment for them to be empowered with knowledge. It is important to understand that the belongingness to one's group give them an identity of their own. Along with the increasing opportunity for women to learn the SHGs due to its social networking play's significant role in enunciating farmer's need to knowledge dissemination agencies (Glendenning et.al. 2010)

In case of cereals cropping system like rice and wheat, there is an increasing role of women from sowing to harvesting to marketing. Among various key factors migration is

one of the prompt reasons where women in the villages have increasing role to play in farm practices. The increasing migration of men of the household to nearby city, district and other states leads to women active role in agriculture as compared to earlier time.

### **Increasing role of women in agriculture and challenges**

Recent large-scale men outmigration has forced many of these women to work in their own fields (FAO, 2004). This has not only challenged many pre-existing social notions but has also added to their responsibilities. The role of women in agriculture has increased. They have a significant contribution to make in the value chain. Socio-cultural customs subjective to regions defines the expected roles from men and women. Division of labours in various contexts are influenced by the norms in value chains, local markets and with in the household. (FAO 2018).Hence while the women perform different roles in agriculture many a times the

existing norms defines their periphery of operations. In every country, socio-cultural norms shape expectations about women's and men's appropriate roles and responsibilities. These norms influence the division of labour within the household, in value chains, and in the labour market in general. Gender relations determine access to assets and resources, participation, and decision-making power, all of which have a direct impact on the performance and governance of the chain. Many a time it is found that women farmers are left behind while accessing the recourses due to the existing cultural and social norms. They must struggle to get the minimum due. For instance, the land rights for women in India remain a challenge which is majorly influenced by the patriarchal norms existing in the society. There is a string denial of women rights to inheritance of land which has a long lasting social and economic implications (Agarwal).A woman ownership of agricultural land is not a normal affair. Largely her affiliation to the farm household remains that of farmer's wives rather a farmer. In spite of the outmigration at a large scale it remains a challenge for women to be accepted as a farmer. In spite of women doing hard labour on their own farm and agricultural land they are often considered as a labour rather a farmer. For example, in rice farming women plays a crucial role in the value chain, right from transplanting, raising paddy nursery to post harvest activities but still she is not recognised as a farmer.

Assessing the broader context from a gender perspective before engaging in the analysis of a specific value chain is helpful to understand what are the 'playing field' is for both women and men within the economy and society. It serves to identify the areas in which gender discrimination is more pronounced (e.g., in relation to education, financial inclusion, or ownership of agricultural assets) and anticipate the challenges and the opportunities that women are likely to face in agri-food value chains. (FAO 2018).Retrieving and analysing sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive information can therefore be a first key step for practitioners embarking in a gender-sensitive analysis of the value chain.

### **Self Help Group is an important upcoming mechanism for extension delivery.**

The increasing migration has also acted as an important reason behind women increasing roles at farm level. For example, in the last 30 years the flow of men migrating out of villages to cities and to different states have increased consistently. It has shown a growth from 15.7 % in 1998-99 to 25.5 % in 2009 -10 (Source,2012). Women farmers are backbone of India Agriculture, yet they are often invisible. The Self-help group in recent years have made a significant contribution in helping women farmers at the grassroot to come out of their shells and start participating more active in the field of agriculture. When we delve deeper, we find 61.1 million women agricultural labourers and 36 million women cultivators comprises of the women from rural areas. (GOI 2011). In context of the increasing role of women in agriculture, it become crucial to empower them with skills and knowledge for improving their farm practices. Empowering them with the knowledge bank of farming practices become the needs of the hour. In this context self-help group act as an importance platform for transferring the knowledge through trainings and capacity building program in rural India. The extension system in India has started recognizing Self-help group as an important platform of delivery of the extension system in agriculture (Glendenning et al., 2010).

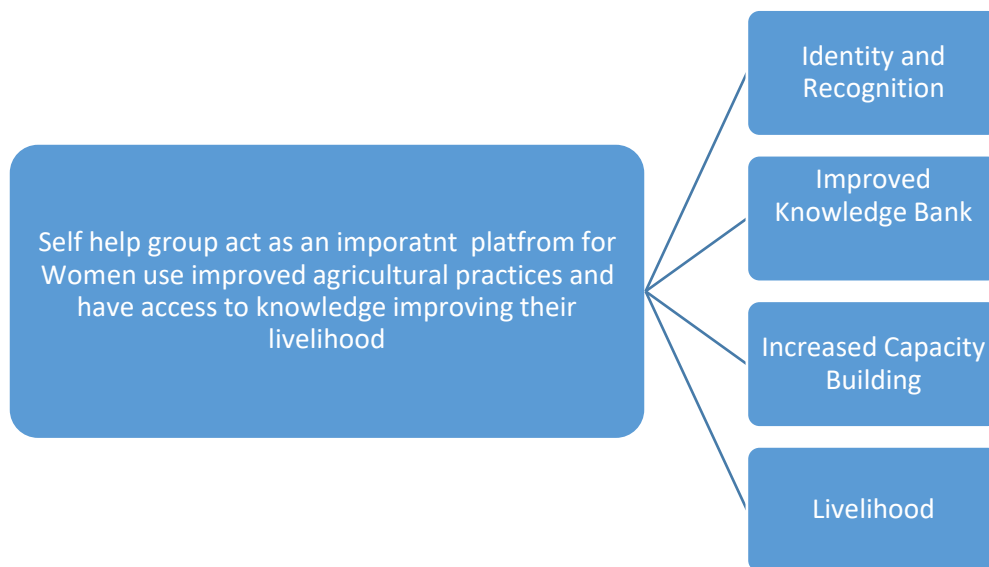
At the village level self-help groups act as a catalyst for bringing women working at farm together. It creates a conducive environment for group members to work together, brainstorm and share the problems with a non-biased approach. It is a heterogenous group where women farmers come together share their risks and have power of negotiation. It is indeed interesting to observe and understand about 60 percent of agricultural operations like sowing, transplanting, winnowing, storage of grain etc. are female dominated, while other activities tend to be shared between men and women. Apart from cultivation, women participate in various forms of processing and marketing of agricultural produce (Aggarwal 2003). As a result of which it is crucial to provide an equal level playing field to the women farmers for accessing the opportunity to learn and practice improved farming practices through better bet agronomy practices.

Had the women enjoyed the same access to productive resources as men, women could boost yield by 20-30 percent; raising the overall agricultural output in developing countries by two and a half to four percent. This gain in production could lessen the number of hungry people in the world by 12-17 percent, besides increasing women's income (FAO, 2011).

Self-help group act as an important channel of extension services reaching out to women farmers. It acts as an important set up to make extension services based on demand (Glendenning et.al.2010). Self-help group also helps in the smooth

implementation of trainings and capacity building programs where the small and marginal farmers especially women farmers can be reached out directly. Imparting of the training on better bet agronomy practices is comparatively easy. Through the self - help group women farmers come together, do their need identification and access various capacity building programs enhancing their knowledge on improved farming practices. Receiving feedback on the required knowledge need also become simpler (Swanson 2008).

Self-help group creates a conducive environment where the opportunity increases for women to collaborate on their need identification for agriculture reform.



**Women establishing an identity of being a “progressive farmer” crossing gender barrier through SHGs**

Through the SHG women farmers get a conducive environment to redefine their roles in agriculture. Along with the unified structured pan of action through the group affiliation they can increasingly establish their identity as a farmer. With increased opportunity for enhancing their skills through capacity building program they can actively engage themselves in better bet agronomy practices adoption. At an individual level women farmers faces issues for availing opportunities of capacity building on better bet agronomy practices but being a member of group help them to avail the opportunity and make om farm decisions (Munshi 2016). There is a positive shift in the social perception toward these women farmers. They are establishing an identity of being a “progressive farmer” crossing gender barrier. Through self-help group affiliations women are directly participating in the trainings and capacity building program related to agriculture in Bihar and Odisha (Ganguly.et.al.2016). As a result of which their

capacity building and resource allocation is crucial. It is with the group affinity and the credits provision under the SHGs, women are increasingly negotiating and comparatively there are wider opportunity for them to have access to training, knowledge and skills building program. Through group affiliations in agriculture:

- a. Women are increasingly establishing their identity increasing the scope of inclusion and equity.
- b. Practising and adoption of technologies are increasing their confidence, in turn their decision making at household and community.
- c. Saved time are being used for other fruitful activities like education, other income activities like selling vegetables, livestock etc.
- d. Increasing scope for developing women as the change agent improving food security and livelihood

Also, the affiliation to SHGs help women farmers to come out of the restricting environment (Ganguly et al.). The group affiliation empowers women to take calculative shared risk. The group affiliations of women from different socio- economic strata help them to come together and have cohesive thought process. Though they belong to the heterogenous background their struggles and quest for learning are homogeneous. The members coming from different background defines a common identity among themselves which is of "sisterhood". The decisions taken after the continuous discussions, need analysis with practical lens of experience they have help them to take decisions in agriculture which prompts a sustainable change.

### **Breaking the barriers becoming women service providers in Rice Farming**

There are also evidences where due to the group affiliation the women of self-help groups have taken decisions which if often considered to be men affairs. For the women farmers of Muzaffarpur district in Bihar of Jyoti Mahila Samkhya Federation's Sharda Samooh became one of the pioneers of Women Service Provider of Machine Transplanter of Rice in the area.(Akter 2015). Increasingly women farmers also get involved in decision making through trainings and capacity building programs through self-help groups. They have considerable amount of decision making while adopting improved farming practices and technologies In order to expand the improved farming technology among women village level self-help groups become an important medium. The involvement of self-help groups helps in the channelization of resources and increases the chances of sustainability in farming. The different medium of intervention for disseminating the knowledge on improved farming through demonstrations, trainings, capacity building programs and extension activities is conducive when self-help groups are involved at the grassroot level.(A Performance Assessment of Technology in Odisha and Bihar CSISA 2016).

## **The financial inclusion providing level playing field to SHGs in Agriculture**

To empower women, it is foremost imperative for her to have access to economic independence. Economic self-reliance is the strongest key to open the door of women empowerment and make it sustainable. It is important to understand in rural context self help groups act as a catalyst in creating the level playing field for women in rural ecosystem as far as economic arena is concerned. It is helpful in creating economic self-reliance for women who are often considered to have least role in economy realm. The biggest role it has played is related to the credit delivery through the saving model and self -help groups becoming a credit group at the basic social structure which is also increasingly an alternative to the current system of bank doing the credit disbursement. (Shetty.et.al.2015). The group lending model which has emerged with the Self Help groups have played crucial role in getting the poor out of the vicious circle of debt. It has equally played a crucial role in taking ahead women at the forefront of economic activity.

Self-help groups have acted as a vehicle for change in agriculture for linking the informal workforce in agriculture “the invisible women farmers”, to the formal banking system. The Self-help group through their collective resources to disburse loans to their members through the intervention of the banks. The progressive development in this aspect is echoed in 44.51 lakh credit-linked SHGs and 73.18 lakh savings-linked SHGs which covered 9.5 crores households of India in 2014.(Jose 2017)

## **Conclusion**

Women farmers in India are making relentless effort in agriculture and contributing to the improved production and agronomy practices. Despite the existing social and economic barriers, they are steadily moving ahead for re-defining their roles and identity in agriculture as a farmer. In their effort Self -help group act as a catalyst and the conducive environment of their sisterhood result in increasing self -esteem and decision making. It is often seen as a vehicle for change for empowering women. Though there are various aspect of financial inclusion which needs to be studied more as farm taking the access to credits, its use and finally transferring those into actual women empowerment where she has complete decision making is concerned. But it is a proven reality that the Self Help Group model has played a progressive role and acted as a catalyst as farm as mainstreaming. and empowering women in agriculture is concerned. Through improved access to knowledge bank and financial inclusion opportunity created by the SHGs platform, women in rural India are increasingly actively participating the agriculture value chain and doing innovations resulting into increased farm productivity and establishing their identity as a progressive farmer.

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