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Note on Feminization of Agriculture and DAE / MoA
V1: 7 November 2016
Kitty Bentvelsen – Gender Expert Blue Gold Programme

Introduction

Feminization of agriculture is the phenomenon that the importance of women's role in agriculture is increasing, whether measured as the ratio between men and women working in this sector or whether reflected in the higher proportion of women whose main employment is agriculture. Though a global phenomenon, it is most pronounced in Africa and Asia, including in Bangladesh, but it shows important regional variations¹. Common reasons for feminization of agriculture are men taking up non-farm employment locally, male out-migration from rural areas to urban areas or abroad, poverty, and/or women's empowerment (e.g. through skill training by NGOs), see the paper of Jaim and Hossain².

The attached appendix 1 summarizes some (anecdotal) evidence of feminization of agriculture encountered in the Blue Gold polders as well as the main findings from the paper of Jaim and Hossain. The latter paper predicts that the demand for the participation of more women in agricultural operations will increase and concludes that more attention needs to be given to the development of women-friendly crop production and processing technologies.

Apart from the trend of feminization of agriculture, the phenomenon of underestimating and/or unrecognized women's work in agriculture still continues to exist. This is partially due to women's work as unpaid family labour, which is often considered as "helping the husband" or as an extension of women's domestic tasks (especially post-harvest work) rather than being considered as genuine farming.

Consequences of feminization of agriculture

It can be concluded that the trend of increased participation of women in agricultural production in Bangladesh, including in the Blue Gold polders, is a fact. A further increase in women's participation in agriculture is highly likely, both because of the expected increased demand for women's participation in agricultural work and because women's participation in agriculture contributes to increased household incomes. It is important that this trend is recognized as well as its consequences for agricultural extension and research. Areas of attention might include:

- Women should be better recognized as farmers instead of (only) as family labour and/or being responsible for activities that traditionally fall under their domain such as poultry and homestead vegetable cultivation.
- For extension services this means that a model that targets male farmers for crop production and provides a parallel program for women on homestead production needs to be revisited. There is a need to critically evaluate current extension approaches, including the tendency to tailor extension for women along traditional gender labour division lines.

¹ See: Schutter, Olivier de. The agrarian transition and the feminization of agriculture. Conference paper #37, Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue. International Conference Yale University, September 14-15, 2013. Published in the Journal of Peasant Studies, July 2013.
² See: Jaim, W.M.H and Mahabub Hossain. Women's Participation in Agriculture in Bangladesh 1988-2008: Changes and Determinants. Paper presented at the 7th Asian Society of Agricultural Economists (ASEA) International Conference Hanoi, Vietnam, October 12, 2011.

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There is an apparent need for improved women friendly production technologies, also for crop protection, both in terms of research and in extension, i.e. disseminating and demonstrating already existing women friendly technologies.

In particular the (potential) role of women as farm manager (or for part or partly with a husband) should be better recognized and strengthened, which also includes strengthening their reputation as decision maker on agricultural production and supporting their market linkage (both as for buying inputs and selling products).

This is in line with the National Agricultural Policy of 2011, which promotes women's empowerment, including women's participation in decision making in agricultural management.

A strategy would document or promote women's empowerment within the Ministry of Agriculture also stresses that women's participation in agricultural activities is increasing, including in the context of increasing productivity of food grains. This document refers to recommended extension of extension work, also referring to the progress, see appendix 2.

This document also presents strategies to increase the "gender gap" (see also the appendix). Interestingly, apart from making such a strategy more to check and to training for women involved in agricultural activities, also address to ensure a "gendered assessment" and encourage to ensure that men and women more equally share responsibility in household affairs.

Conclusion


It appears that there is enough evidence of feminization of agriculture in Bangladesh. The government, including MoA, recognizes such trends and the need for implementing strategies to support women in better and more effectively understanding their role in agricultural production, including encouraging better sharing of domestic responsibilities between husbands and wife to improve the enabling environment for a stronger role of women in agricultural production. There is also evidence to indicate that a more substantial involvement of women in agricultural production leads to increased household and per capita income.

Considering that policies and strategies for supporting women's involvement and productivity in agriculture are still well in place, the next challenge will be to implement a more comprehensive transition of such policies and strategies into concrete actions at field level, i.e. implementation of these policies are strategies into practical activities at field level. Currently a number of actions are already being implemented, e.g. supporting women in homestead production and providing input only to women farmers. However, it seems desirable that more efforts are being integrated and implemented. These might range from creating more gender awareness among field staff to integrating and supporting women in decision making. However, and from promoting more women friendly technologies to improving the enabling environment (e.g. by reducing women's domestic workload).

Feminization of agriculture refers to the measurable increase of women's participation in the agricultural sector. This can be due to men taking up non-farm employment locally, male out-migration from rural areas to urban areas or abroad, poverty (need for women to raise income), and/or women's empowerment (women taking own initiatives to engage in agricultural production). The increase in agricultural productivity requiring more labour input (be it family or wage labour) can also contribute to a larger role of women in agriculture.

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Blue Gold Program Wiki

The wiki version of the Lessons Learnt Report of the Blue Gold program, documents the experiences of a technical assistance (TA) team working in a development project implemented by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) over an eight+ year period from March 2013 to December 2021. The wiki lessons learnt report (LLR) is intended to complement the BWDB and DAE project completion reports (PCRs), with the aim of recording lessons learnt for use in the design and implementation of future interventions in the coastal zone.

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