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Illuminating Voices

India's women farmers become a force for change

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Women farmers have become a dominant force throughout India, as more and more men migrate to earn money. Yet the pace of land and property rights reform hasn't kept up.

It is 7.30am in the village of Narsenahalli, near Doddballapur, about 45 kilometres outside the Indian city of Bangalore. A group of around 30 women aged between 25 and 80 have assembled on the front verandah of the brightly-coloured school that doubles up as a community meeting point.

Someone has placed a red and blue striped mat on the floor and some of the village men are perched on the fence of the school courtyard, curious to know what the women are going to discuss.

The women of Narsenahalli are here to talk about land. They have been working on the land for the last 30 years, and readily admit they've been farming on gomal land, low quality land set aside by the government as wasteland.

The women grow dryland crops such as groundnut, red gram and the local cereal ragi - most of it for home consumption. But they also earn a small amount of money by making plates from sal leaves collected from the nearby forests and selling them at the local market. While the women work, the men travel to look for work.

The village is part of a nationwide trend in agriculture, which over the last few years has seen huge changes. While more and more men are migrating to urban areas and large industrialised farms looking for paid work, women stay in the village and are increasingly taking over cultivating the land.

According to estimates by Bina Agarwal, an academic researching and writing about women and land rights, almost half of the land in India is now farmed by women. The changes mean that in the rural areas the vast majority of women - around 85 per cent - are now farmers. Agarwal points out that although what she calls the 'feminisation of agriculture' is taking place at a rapid pace, there has been less of a shift in cultural attitudes towards women.

According to her research, India's inherently patriarchal mindset has not adjusted rapidly enough or questioned whether the women have rights to own the title deeds to the lands they farm.

Although the women of Narsenahalli may be typical of this pattern, what is extraordinary is that they are also one of the first groups of women to challenge the status quo and demand the right to own the title deeds to the land they cultivate.

Today the women are organized and form an all-women village unit to deal with land issues as part of a larger organisation, the Karnataka People's Forum for Land Rights (KPFLR), which was formed in 2001 to campaign for land reform.

'We want our pattas. It is our right,' say the majority of women on the school veranda, as though rehearsed, referring to the title deeds to their plots of land.

'We need our land,' says 40-year-old Chondamma. 'Tell her about our struggle', she asks Chitravathy, a convenor working with KPFLR who explains that they've been working with the women to raise their awareness about land rights and to push Karnataka to speed up the process of reform.

Karnataka, along with West Bengal, has been at the forefront of land reform in India. In the 1970s, the Indian government initiated a progressive land reform process, known as regularisation, which aimed to allocate gomal lands to socio-economically weaker, landless communities.

Progress over 30 years has been extremely slow, but recently the government has established Land Grant Committees to reinvigorate the reform process. Although the committees have been criticised for failing to consult with local communities, Chitravarthy feels that they still offer the best chance of change.

'NGO or donors cannot make a big impact on obtaining land for the landless. This is a very political issue and working through the government is the only way out,' he says.

So far, land for the landless, regardless of gender, has been a greater priority than land rights for women. However, given that the majority of KPFLR's members are now women, the gender dimension to land rights is becoming a higher priority.

In the village of Narsenahalli, women's attitudes to their land rights are changing slowly. Eighty-year-old Thangamma is the oldest member in the schoolyard. Though fragile and stooped, she wants to have the title deeds to the gomal lands that she has helped cultivate ever since she married her husband over 50 years ago. Apart from the gomal lands, two other acres continue to be registered in her dead father-in-law's name.

'I want joint ownership of these lands now,' she says, 'because my son may pawn the land. I want security.'

Thangamma is worried that her son will use the land as security to access credit, and that because the family will never be able to pay the debt back, they will lose the land altogether. Almost all of Narsenahalli's women cited security as the main reason for wanting the land to be registered in their name, or at least jointly with their husband.

If they have access to land, they can provide food for the family instead of needing money to buy it. With enough food coming in, they have time to look for other ways of earning money, by making and selling leaf plates, for example. This means they are able to buy clothes, school books or medicine.

A few yards from the school stands 40-year-old Kadramma's house. Outside on a mud-built patio two cows and a goat are tethered to wooden posts. The cool, dark interior is divided into a kitchen and two rooms, all without doors. A black-and-white, second-hand TV set sits connected to an electric socket at one end. Kadramma's husband, 48-year-old Muniyappa, built the house with money from a government grant and family savings.

The couple have four children. The eldest two have not completed school and are helping to support the family. 'I need my daughter to help with household work and my son works in a hotel in Bangalore,' explains Kadramma.

The family's income pays for the two younger children's education. Kadramma and Muniyappa's 18-year-old son is in his first year of pre-university and their youngest daughter is at secondary school.

The family also supports itself by organically cultivating three rain-dependent acres - one of which was handed down to Muniyappa by his father, and the other two are gomal lands that the family encroached on, about 3 km away.

From these fields, each year the family harvests around 2,000 kg of ragi, 1,500 kg of red gram and 336 kg of groundnuts, half of which is used at home and half is sold for cash. But in rainless years, the harvest halves, sending Muniyappa to the village moneylender for loans which must be repaid at an exorbitant 60 per cent rate of interest.

In 1991, Muniyappa applied, under the land regularisation scheme, for a patta or right to the gomal lands the family was farming. But over a decade later, nothing has materialised. Now he and Kadramma hope that with KPFLR's support, he will at last get the title deed he wants. The question of whose names the land should be registered under draws an embarrassed response from him. His wife stands beside him, equally embarrassed.

'It doesn't matter who owns the land. It is not a big issue,' says Muniyappa. Kadramma concludes 'We all work very hard.'

The priority for the rural poor may still be land rights for the family as a whole - whoever owns the title deeds. Single ownership in the woman's name - or joint ownership in both names - is still a sensitive

topic, despite central and state government laws which allow equality of ownership. Women themselves, in spite of a collective feeling of unity at the meetings in the school hall, are hesitant when asked in their homes and in the presence of their families what they feel about owning their lands.

But as more men move away, land insecurity for women is growing not diminishing. This pushes the need for an urgent focus on their rights - and a clearer understanding of the benefits equal rights will bring - further up the agenda.

Bina Agarwal's research demonstrates the link between women's ownership of land and wealth creation, partly because they can manage the crops, fodder and trees themselves, and partly because they can also access credit and mortgages for themselves. Where land is owned and managed by women, there are signs that they use it as collateral to borrow money to start up micro-businesses which generate a steady income. The women also grow in confidence and demand services from the government for themselves and their children.

These research findings come mostly from other countries and evidence of the link between women's land rights and wealth creation in India is rare. The lack of evidence may be one reason why the government has given the issue so little attention.

Progress on land rights for women has also slipped down the agenda of development organisations working with women. A 2002 survey of women and land issues in Karnataka, conducted by the US-based Rural Development Institute, says interventions by non-governmental organisations have succeeded in empowering women in areas such as literacy, access to credit, job skills and health, but have not significantly increased claims for land ownership rights.

But the survey also showed that 64 per cent of women polled thought government lands should be granted jointly to them and their husbands, indicating a growing awareness.

In India, the debate about women's land rights and the impact they can have on rural wealth creation and security is minimal. Even in places where policy has been changing, such as in Karnataka and West Bengal, implementation is slow, and patriarchal attitudes are proving more powerful than the law.

A few radical women's collectives have obtained land, such as in northern Karnataka where tribal women are working collectively. But these cases are few and far between and are mostly isolated projects supported by aid organisations.

Back in the small village of Narsenahalli, there is a growing sense amongst the women about the benefits of owning the title deeds to the land they cultivate. There may be a long way to go until equal rights to own land becomes a reality throughout India, but what is happening in Karnataka may be the start of something big.

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