

## Gender issues in agriculture An idea refusing to take roots



Ms Mina Swaminathan... fighting to gender-sensitise the agricultural bureaucracy. S. R. Raghunathan

### Rasheeda Bhagat

"I HOLD the most prestigious name in agriculture in this country, and still I can't get an appointment with the DG, ICAR (Director-General of Indian Council for Agricultural Research)! They'll be very polite and say, 'Yes, madam, very good madam.' I don't want to waste my time going to his room to have tea and exchange pleasantries. *Fayda kya.*" The frustration of Mrs Mina Swaminathan, wife of Dr M. S. Swaminathan, perhaps the country's No 1 agriculture scientist, is palpable.

For a year now she has been knocking on various doors to make at least one of the 120 agricultural universities in India introduce in its curriculum a short 18-hour module pertaining to gender issues in agriculture and rural livelihood.

An advisor to the Chennai-based M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), on education, communication and gender, she had conceived the idea and worked on developing such a curriculum since 1999. It was needed because "people in various areas of agriculture the extension departments, the Ministry, the agricultural universities, the ICAR or the research system, the Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK)... the entire agricultural bureaucracy... is gender insensitive. They're supposed to be serving the farming community but they see only one half of this community the men. The entire agricultural establishment does little for women because they're not aware of women and their problems," she says.

One of the reasons for this is that historically the academic, research and other streams of agriculture have been headed by men "and the traditional perception of the kisan is male."

Ms Mina Swaminathan says that her husband is now preparing a National Policy for Farmers (NPF) and a group has been formed to ensure that gender sensitivities, problems and concerns feature in this document. "I'm struggling to find a gender-neutral word, because both 'farmer' in English and 'kisan' in Hindi, denote the male gender in people's perception. If you say farmer or kisan, for most people it denotes a man though it can well be a woman. I'm searching for a gender-neutral word such as *mazdoor*, but in vain."

She thinks a gender curriculum for agricultural students is necessary because "if you want to sensitise the agricultural bureaucracy where do you start? If you start with the extension personnel how many courses can you make and how do you reach them? Again the KVK is such a vast network." Even though everybody, "beginning with the Director of Agriculture," needs short courses, a good starting point would be youngsters entering agricultural universities.

In 1999, as a maiden initiative, a seminar for representatives from 15 agricultural universities was held at the MSSRF, following which a sensitisation course for the faculty was formulated. The only university that responded was the Kerala Agricultural University, and a course was conducted for its faculty. This was followed by five workshops and then with the help of Sara Ahmed, a scholar working in water, irrigation, etc, the curriculum was devised as a two-credit course that can be taught in one semester.

"An introduction to gender issues in agriculture and rural livelihoods, this just requires three hours a week for six weeks. But no university, including the Kerala university which was initially so responsive, is able to find time for 18 hours in a four-and-half-year course! They say we can't give 18 hours, we're full," says Ms Mina Swaminathan.

She is keen that this course is introduced in the first seminar; "if they get the idea of gender at the entry level, there is chance of a greater impact. The strange thing is that there are now more girls than boys entering agricultural universities in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka, and yet no university wants this course."

### Women in agriculture

According to the 2001 Census, 28 per cent of all working women are farmers even though not all have land titles and 46 per cent are labourers, the remaining being in non-agricultural areas. In agricultural labour, 56 per cent are men and 44 per cent women.

"In the previous Census it was 62 per cent men and 38 per cent women, which means that more women are becoming labourers as men either migrate or do something else. In Tamil Nadu, it is already 51 per cent women and 49 per cent

men, with men migrating to other jobs," says Ms Mina Swaminathan, adding that farming too is getting more feminised thanks to men's migration, leaving women to take care of the land.

On the gender curriculum, she says that "hundreds of letters" sent to vice-chancellors of agricultural universities, the ICAR, the Agriculture Ministry, etc., have had no impact. Recently, AFPRO (Action for Food Production), a Non-Governmental Organisation providing socio-technical support to village-level NGOs, asked for a course for 15 of its officers. And she is still waiting "for at least one agricultural university to introduce this course; we're willing to do a demo, train the teachers, etc, but so far there is absolutely no interest. And it is frustrating to see so many years of work go waste."

Another concern is that though more girls are entering the agricultural stream of education, "after they finish, they don't want to go to the field; they want lab or teaching jobs." But this is more because of the lack of transport and accommodation facilities in the field and issues related to safety and security. "Also, when women with children prefer to return home during field trips, this is considered a privilege; people don't understand that women need to be given support services if they are to do a good job," she says.

She adds that the recent murder of a woman in the ITES industry had raised such a hue and cry, "but in the rural areas the security of women is always an issue. Where are the transport or hostel facilities for women? The BPOs get so much publicity, but the women working there do not face any more a problem than faced for years by women who work as nurses or telephone operators on night shifts."

Another drawback on the gender front in agriculture is the other extreme, "when people say 'Ayyo pavam' (poor women), we must do something for them and immediately talk about starting SHGs (self-help groups). Women in agriculture need technical help, credit, title to land... everybody can't join an SHG. And why should a woman with land join an SHG? She is an agriculturist in her own right." The other response, Ms Mina Swaminathan says, is to say, "let's teach her tailoring or to make sauce and jam'. Now how much sauce can a woman make, and where is she going to sell it?"

Another concern on women in agriculture and related areas is that in horticulture or dairy, where labour is provided usually by women, they do not get the profits. "Similarly women take care of the cattle, milk the cows, etc., but in the milk co-operatives, the members are mostly men. Right from the early days the women do all the work in the milk co-operatives, but the profits come in the name of men."

Ms Mina Swaminathan is now waiting for a response from Gandhigram University for doing a gender sensitisation course for the KVKs, which are the education centres for farmers at the district level, and the Dhan Foundation, to explore the possibility of such a course for NGOs.

Response may be sent to [rasheeda@thehindu.co.in](mailto:rasheeda@thehindu.co.in)

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