An Indian women's self help group - planning a future. Photo: AME

Women can move the earth

Experiences in working with Indian women farmers

Edith van Walsum

The Deccan Plateau is a drought prone region in South India covering substantial parts of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. 81% of this region is under rain fed farming. The Green Revolution has largely bypassed this area and there is a serious over-exploitation of the natural resource base. With the opening up of markets due to globalisation policies, the price of agricultural produce has crashed, poverty is increasing and male migration is on the rise. The number of *de facto* female-headed households is increasing, leaving women with the responsibility for managing their farms and ensuring food security - although they do not have the authority to make decisions.

Responding to a need

Realising the important role women play in the development process, NGOs started organising women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the mid eighties. It quickly became clear that women's SHGs often functioned better than the men's groups. The focus of these groups has been on credit and savings, and today women's SHGs are receiving increasing recognition from governmental development agencies and the formal banking system. These developments have lead to a tremendous growth in women's individual and collective self-respect and their visibility in the community. This has had a positive impact on development in general, but the role of women as agricultural producers still remains largely unrecognised and has not been addressed.

Engendering organisations

Over the past eight years AME has engaged in comprehensive capacity building processes with NGO networks and farmers in South India. The focus has been on training NGOs and farmers to implement Participatory Technology Development (PTD) processes and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Farmer Field Schools (FFS). Both approaches aim at experiential learning, through agro-ecosystem analysis followed by field level experiments and evaluation of the experiments. The aim of this capacity building process is that farmers are enabled to experiment with LEISA technologies so that they can develop and continuously adjust their own "package of practices".

AME has encouraged its partner organisations to look seriously at gender in agriculture. We have promoted a *household approach*, whereby a conscious effort is made to involve both women and men in the PTD/FFS processes. This is what we refer to as *gender mainstreaming.* The immediate objective of gender mainstreaming is that the PTD/FFS process itself will be more effective and its results more sustainable. The long-term objective is that gender mainstreaming should contribute to women's empowerment, by providing access to knowledge and institutions and giving an added impetus to ongoing processes of social organisation and empowerment.

Through this process, we have learnt that when there is involvement of both women and men, the quality of learning is greatly enhanced and so is the overall outcome of the PTD/FFS process. And once women are involved, they have a great energy to take the process further.

Why involve both women and men?

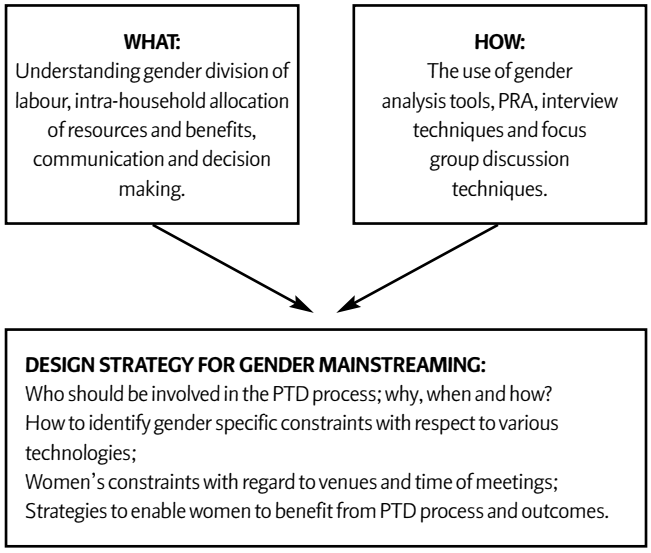
Women participated in a season-long training on Integrated Pest Management in cotton. In the course of the training process, they became confident that they could manage growing cotton without having to use pesticides. But at a critical stage their husbands, who had not participated in the training because they had gone to a nearby town for work, decided to intervene. They instructed their wives to apply pesticides, which - because it was done at the wrong time - lead to a reduction rather than an increase in the yield.

Methods used

There are no "unique" methods to ensure that gender is taken care of in a PTD process. In principle, all participatory methods can be used to address gender issues but they have to be used purposefully and systematically, with a clear gender focus in

mind. The gender analysis framework forms the basic reference for asking questions. This framework addresses three basic issues:
1) the gender division of labour;
2) the gender- differentiated access to and control over resources, and
3) benefits derived by men and women from the intervention/technology developed.

Training field staff in gender mainstreaming



We use a combination of individual in-depth interviews, group discussions and observation to articulate the gender perspective in the PTD process. Discussions are held not only with the members of the groups, but also with their spouses and household members. Repeated interaction with both women and men in different contexts (individually, together, as single gender groups and as mixed groups) helps to strengthen the perspective. Most group discussions take place with women and men separately. On some occasions a few men take part in a women's discussion or vice versa. We use group discussions for problem analysis, to discuss learning points from the experiments, group organisational matters and group dynamics, and for the evaluation of the PTD process. Whenever relevant we use visualisation tools.

Women as well as men sometimes hesitate to talk about intra-household affairs in front of one another, especially regarding *decision-making and loans*. Therefore discussions on these issues are always held separately with men and women.

The use of PRA tools in a PTD process

- In the problem analysis stage, we use flow diagrams and seasonal labour calendars. The first reveals the resource flows as well as access to and control over the resources, and the second shows the gender division of labour and seasonal labour peaks.
- When identifying technological options (e.g. seeds or soil fertility improvement methods) we use pair wise and matrix ranking as tools to learn about women's and men's preferences and priorities, and the underlying rationale. Interesting differences can occur, which then can be taken up for further discussion.
- In the course of the experiments and during evaluation we ask men and women to draw maps of their farms. These show physical features of the farms and men's and women's perceptions of the same, which again can show interesting differences.

Stumbling blocks ...

In our efforts to mainstream gender we have come across a number of stumbling blocks in the form of biased perceptions about women and men:

1) "Women do not have a say in agricultural decision making":
In spite of changing realities in agriculture many people, NGO workers, researchers and others, find it difficult to acknowledge the reality and to plan the PTD process accordingly.

2) "Participatory approaches are 'naturally' gender sensitive":
PTD, like any other participatory approach, provides no guarantee that women are also participants in the process initiated. Women's participation will not happen automatically, it needs to be facilitated.

3) "Trickle across: from men to women, from women to men":
Many extension programmes have been based on the incorrect assumption that information that reaches men automatically trickles across to women. We also see cases of "reversed" trickle across assumptions. Organisations have started to interact directly with women, but here the same problem on non-trickling or partial trickling across of information can be seen. There is also an additional problem: men are still the final decision-makers. This has lead to frustrating experiences for many women.

4) "Gender specialists take care of "the gender aspect":
It is often taken for granted that within development organisations, women will take care of 'the gender aspect' (whatever it is). The only way to overcome this obstacle is real teamwork and intensive gender sensitisation within organisations.

... and stepping stones

We have also experienced that PTD/FFS processes offer good opportunities for gender mainstreaming:

1) Understanding intra-household dynamics:
When interacting with farmers (men or women) we keep in mind that they are members of *households* and that 'our' farm experiment with them is only one of the many activities they are involved in. Other family members are likely to influence and be influenced by the PTD process. Once we succeed in developing an understanding of intra-household dynamics, it becomes easy to build up rapport with various members of the household and seek their active involvement.

We have seen that communication gaps within households can hamper the process of experimentation as well as the process of learning from it. We have also observed a clear tendency for women to get more deeply involved in the PTD process than men. Clarity about men's and women's stakes in the PTD process will help to guide the process in a meaningful direction, and to find an effective balance between women's and men's participation.

2) Learning with groups:
Groups provide the forum for learning, sharing, and disagreeing or agreeing on the merits and demerits of technologies and on the constraints and opportunities faced. Especially for women, the fact that they are members of a group has encouraged them to venture into trying out new things in agriculture.

Most women who got involved in the PTD process had already been functioning as a group for some time. This contributed to a rapid take-off. Adding PTD as a new function to an existing group gave it a new impetus. The fact that these groups had been involved in thrift and credit was very helpful, as they could take up the responsibilities of procurement and distribution of inputs

among their members and manage a revolving fund to support these activities.

3) Learning from different NGO strategies:
There are so many NGOs, so many ideologies and so many approaches towards women and gender issues. Working together on PTD with a 'mixed' group of NGOs therefore poses its own challenges, **and** tremendous opportunities for learning. At different stages in the farming season, meetings are organised, wherein NGO staff and men and women farmers from different areas participate. These occasions provide opportunities to learn about how PTD processes work in different organisational contexts, and about conditions for successful gender mainstreaming.

4) Mobilising women's knowledge = empowerment:
Especially for women, more knowledge leads to greater self-respect and respect from others. Their mobility has increased; they decided to attend farmer's meetings and PTD review workshops that were 3 to 4 hours by bus away from their villages. It was primarily the group that gave them the confidence to do these things. Nowadays they visit agricultural knowledge and training centres and regional farmer meetings. In several cases, women have resisted pressure from their husbands to go back to chemical farming.

This process of mobilising knowledge also enables both women and men to improve the *quality of decision making*: 'best bets' regarding choices of technologies, how to allocate labour and money etc. become more focused and based on systematic comparisons. Last but not least, mobilising knowledge and putting it to new use is a joint learning process, which reinforces existing groups and helps to build new ones. This is what we believe *empowerment* is about, and this is perhaps the most important thing we saw happening in two years of 'PTD with a gender perspective'.

Women learning about insects for IPM. Photo: AME

Kadiri Women's Federation fuels PTD in groundnut

Kadiri is situated in drought-prone Anantapur District (Andhra Pradesh), the largest groundnut-producing district in India. Since the late 1960s, groundnut has gradually monopolised the farming system. Now, 85% of the drylands (about 850,000 ha) are under groundnut. Myrada, a large NGO, started working in Kadiri in 1982 with a focus on wasteland development, resettlement of the landless poor and participatory watershed development. Women's SHGs were established.

In 1997 the women's SHGs formed a Federation (Pragati Mahila Samakya) with the support of UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and Myrada. Total membership was 2250 women. In the same year, erratic rainfall led to a shortage of seed. Mahila Samakya contacted the District Collector, who promised to help them but asked: "What will you contribute?" Within five days, the women remitted 7 lakh rupees into their collective account as assurance for seed repayment. This showed the emerging power of the Federation. District Authorities arranged for release of 3600 bags of groundnuts from the Andhra Pradesh State Seed Development Corporation (APSSDC). UNDP supported the effort by providing 8,5 lakh rupees worth of seed capital for Mahila Samakya. At the end of the season, the Federation repaid the groundnut seed to the APSSDC.

In the same year (1997) AME initiated PTD with one women's SHG, Venkateshwara Raita Sangha. The members tried out technologies for improving groundnut production. They identified three effective technologies: gypsum application, rhizobium and application of farmyard manure (FYM). Being convinced about the usefulness of these technologies, they decided to share them with other members of the Federation. Thus, Mahila Samakya became a platform for sharing information and knowledge on LEISA. On request, AME conducted training on LEISA technologies for groundnut for the functionaries of the Federation. They had formed their own training team that trained, in turn, the members of 45 SHGs and their families in PTD and LEISA technologies.

In 2001 and in 2002 two more women's federations were formed in Anantapur District. For the 2002 cropping season these three federations together placed an order for 1000 tonnes of gypsum. The first women's group started applying gypsum on an experimental basis in 1997 - with two tonnes of gypsum. Thus, the three federations ensured a scaling up of this technology by 500% in five years!

Women can move the earth, if given the space!

Lessons learned

LEISA technologies and Women's workload: Some technologies are labour intensive especially for women, e.g. bio-fertiliser and *mussoorie* phosphate application. Other technologies are big labour savers, e.g. in cotton IPM women are spared the work of fetching water for pesticide application, which can amount to 800 km walking with water per acre per cropping season.
We therefore cannot draw any generalised conclusion about whether LEISA technologies are "good" or "bad" for women. Women themselves are in the best position to decide. They take labour increase positively, as long as it is offset by benefits in terms of improved status and/or more say in decisions about the farm and money. Moreover, if they have a problem with a certain technology but also see its advantages, they will be inclined to find ways of making the technology more convenient. This is what happened when women experimented with the use of mussoorie phosphate. They found it dusty and slippery and therefore difficult to apply. They then started mixing it with farmyard manure and the problem was solved.

Health and nutrition have improved: The reduction in pesticide use leads to less health problems (notably reproductive health problems of women) and less medical expenses. Food tastes better and can be kept overnight because the storage capacity has improved. Skin rashes, loss of appetite, respiratory tract problems and reproductive health problems are frequently mentioned in connection with pesticides. These are other reasons why women are interested to learn more about LEISA technologies.

From cash crops to food security: Women have a direct interest in shifting from cash crops to food crops. Women farmers in Hosur shifted from groundnut to ragi (finger millet). They applied the experience gained in the groundnut PTD process on ragi. This interesting process was documented in a video film "Two fistfuls of small grains"(available from AME). Likewise, the farmers in Kadiri shifted from groundnut to bajra (pearl millet).

Increased involvement of women is part of a larger change process: In 1997, 30% out of 270 farmers involved in PTD/FFS processes were women, whereas in 2001, 65% out of more than 12000 PTD/FFS farmers were women. How do we look at these figures? They show that women are quite interested in learning new things about farming. They may also indicate an increased awareness on the side of institutions (NGOs and Departments of Agriculture) about gender issues. But, perhaps the most important reason for this increasing involvement of women is the fact that women are becoming the farm managers, as male migration increases. This is a tough situation for the women. In spite of increased responsibilities and an added work burden, they still have little control over resources and face several institutional gender biases. But there is also a silver lining. Women have found new and powerful ways of organising themselves into Self-Help Groups. And again these SHGs have organised themselves into Federations.

When implementing a PTD process, these factors have to be clearly kept in mind. Forgetting to do so may lead to ineffectiveness of the PTD efforts, and worse, it may lead to more problems for the women.

Gender in our own organisation

To be able to mainstream gender in our programs and projects, we needed to have a *gender sensitive organisation*. Although gender issues were given ample attention, inside the organisation we faced a number of dilemmas and problems.

Women in the organisation: Concerted efforts were made to identify suitable women for positions in AME. However, in reality there are comparatively few well-qualified women in AME's main professional areas who are willing to travel extensively and prepared to relocate to district towns. Also, retaining female staff proved more difficult than retaining male staff. Reasons for the higher turnover of female staff were primarily related to the personal situation (*gender specific*) of those concerned. Secondly, working in a male-dominated professional environment can sometimes be seen as a positive challenge, but it also leads to stressful and difficult situations.

Building a gendered organisational value base: Importance was given to gender sensitisation of the team. Though most team members responded positively, some found it hard to drop some strong and deeply rooted personal values, which were not well aligned with the principle of gender equity. This inconsistency between *strong personal values and organisational values regarding gender* sometimes manifested itself openly in conflicts between staff, but also in omission (intentional or unintentional), and a tendency to separate gender activities from other work (both by technical and social/gender persons).

Team-based structures and gender: AME's organisation structure has been designed in such a way that integration between technical and gender aspects is supposed to be taken care of by interdisciplinary teams in all programmes and activities. Even though these structural conditions for gender integration (and more broadly, for socio-technical integration) were created, in practice integration did not happen smoothly all the time. Time and again, there was the tendency to separate gender activities from other activities in AME.

Working together. Photo: AME

There is a long way to go, but...

Even though women play an increasingly important role in agriculture, this fact is yet to be reflected in more gender sensitive approaches in the majority of agricultural institutions - including our own. Many organisations *work with women*, but they are *not gender sensitive* and hence they contribute, knowingly or unknowingly, to increased physical and mental burdens for women. Still we are optimistic about the future - mainly because we have seen the tremendous energies of women. Once they have organised themselves, they cannot be stopped. They will demand that agricultural institutions become more gender sensitive.
It is up to all of us to respond!

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