



Woman Animal Health Worker vaccinating cattle. Photo: Anthra

Women and livestock

Creating space and opportunities

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In India almost 70% of the farming community are involved in livestock rearing, especially those living in the more ecologically and economically fragile areas of the country. In most communities, women are responsible for the day to day care and management of animals. The poorer the community, the greater their role; responsibilities naturally also increase in communities where women head households. While the activities performed by women may appear to involve very low skill levels, such as the cleaning of sheds, they are however most critical to the survival, health and production of the livestock. For instance, animals are more susceptible to diseases when housed in unhygienic, dirty sheds.

Despite this reality, livestock care is somehow considered a “male occupation”. The work of women is seldom recognised and they are kept out of all important decision making processes, although the responsibilities ultimately impinge on them. To begin to truly understand the problems of rearing livestock in rural India, it is critical to begin to work with women.

Why gender matters

In a society as diverse and complex as India, the subject of women in livestock rearing could form the basis of many sociological studies. Traditional Indian society, with its complicated web of class, castes and communities, diverse livestock rearing and agricultural patterns, dynamics of access to resources and ownership of assets, all make for very complex interrelationships. At the same time, the rapidly changing environment impacts on local production systems and hence directly on communities, including both women and men. For example, the shift in agriculture from subsistence production to commercial production has meant that the role of women in agriculture has changed and many of the traditional jobs that women were once

involved in, such as the post harvest processing of grains, are today being done by machines. Urban industrialisation has meant that men migrate to cities in search of jobs, leaving women to manage homes and farms in the villages. This has resulted in increased work pressures and work responsibilities for women. The rapid emergence of a disease like AIDS has also left many households bereft of the main earning member and forced women into a labour work force for which they are often not adequately prepared.

Development practitioners and policy makers often have fixed ideas on the role of women in livestock production. Policy makers tend to create uniform policies for the entire country, which prove ineffective given the diversity of situations. Policies are made for the more developed and accessible areas of the country, while the poor and remote areas, where women tend to have greater responsibility, remain marginalised. This can result in inappropriate schemes being thrust on women. One example is the Government of India goat distribution scheme for women below the poverty line in Maharashtra. This scheme largely failed because the beneficiaries were neither consulted nor trained before the goats were distributed to them. Most of the women beneficiaries had never raised goats before and within six months most of the animals had died.

Any work that aims at addressing the true needs of all the members of the community, must therefore begin by understanding the role of women in the production system of the community.

Action research in livestock production

Anthra is an NGO working with rural communities in India, trying to strengthen livelihoods by improving livestock health and productivity. To understand gender concerns in livestock management and in particular within indigenous knowledge

systems, Anthra undertook a detailed study of the role of men, women and children in different livestock production systems. In most of the communities we worked with, women were responsible for 60% to 90% of the work related to livestock production, however there were distinct differences depending on the geographical area, caste, community and type of livestock reared. In some areas, such as the semi-arid regions of Latur, Medak and Ratnagiri, men and women equally shared responsibilities like cleaning sheds and milking. In the tribal communities in the Eastern Ghats, the work burden on women was considerably higher. Grazing responsibilities also differed from region to region. The one activity in which women always played a prominent role was in backyard poultry rearing.

With respect to indigenous knowledge, we found that women from Dalit communities, traditionally employed by wealthy farmers to weed their fields, are extremely knowledgeable about grasses and weeds for fodder and about the management of small ruminants. Conversely, women from prosperous traditional landed agriculture castes, who have been involved in dairying, are very knowledgeable on practices related to pre-partum, post-partum care and calf management. Women from other castes, who have never had dairying as a traditional occupation, do not have this knowledge. We also found that though women were knowledgeable about simple household remedies, cures and medicines for treating small ruminants, they have almost always been kept out of professional healing. Traditional healers were predominantly male, as knowledge was normally passed from fathers to sons and not to daughters.

Village women expressed a keen desire to have access to this specialised form of knowledge, which had been denied to them over the years. They also wanted to learn to recognise conditions that can not be treated with local remedies but need other kinds of treatment and care.

Women as Animal Health Workers

At Anthra, we took a conscious decision to ensure that at least 75% of all new animal health workers should be women, and that the women Animal Health Workers (AHWs) participate in all the healers meetings. The training did not merely focus on animal health issues, but also looked at women's health issues and gender questions in the larger context of sustainable development and natural resource use. The women AHWs were encouraged to work closely with other women in the village and share their knowledge in the village women's groups. These women have gained considerable recognition and respect from the rest of the community. They are now recognised as persons who possess specific skills and, very importantly, they are accessible to the villagers. Other women in the women's groups, who were previously entirely dependent on their husbands when the animals fell sick, have expressed that now they are able to get assistance and advice immediately from the women AHWs, who are always available in the village.

The women AHWs personally feel that they have become tremendously confident and can talk to others. Apart from their role as 'healers', they have also begun to take on leadership roles within the village women's groups and the community. They have become key persons who help resolve conflicts within families and mobilise others in the village to address gender issues that affect women: cases of violence against women, illicit brewing of liquor, and education of children, as well as other issues within the larger arena of natural resource management. They feel that by acquiring specific skills through this training, they have gained status in the family as well as in society. Interestingly, while we had anticipated resistance from the healers once the women AHWs began working, on the

contrary they have been very supportive as they see this as an opportunity to sustain their knowledge. In many villages the women AHWs and the local healer work closely together.

Training programmes have also meant visiting other places, something most women say they had never even dreamed of. The training programme has meant forging new friendships with women from other regions -exchanging ideas, problems, and solutions and having fun together as well as singing, dancing and in other ways expressing their creativity. It has meant the breaking of traditional barriers of caste, class and gender, which are otherwise so predominant in rural India. Many have also acquired new skills such as literacy.

At the same time, the men must now recognise that women can successfully take on roles traditionally perceived as "male".

The way forward

It is not sufficient merely to work with or for women; it is also extremely important that gender concerns cut across all the activities of an organisation. To enable this process, we at Anthra have conducted several Gender Training workshops. Training is carried out by a team of resource persons, both men and women, drawn from Anthra and other collaborating organisations. Gender training is carried out in local languages and in English. So far, workshops have been conducted for the staff of Anthra and other NGO's, as well as for Animal Health Workers collaborating with Anthra and Veterinary Doctors and Livestock Assistants of the Animal Husbandry Department, Orissa.

Change on a larger scale, however, requires changes within the traditional agricultural institutions. One issue in this context is that the curriculum in agricultural universities does not consider gender issues important, and this omission is then reflected in the policies developed and implemented for agriculture. Engendering the curriculum is a necessary and important step forward for more gender sensitive policies and programmes in the livestock and agriculture sector. Anthra is participating in the effort to mainstream gender concerns into the agriculture curriculum of Indian Universities, initiated by the Gender Department of MS Swaminathan Research Foundation.

Concerns of rural women are not sufficiently addressed merely by resolving economic and livelihood issues. They also need to be addressed by enabling women to gain important social and political space, as well as being able to define and create new spaces within both the private and public domains. A considerable amount of work still needs to be done to achieve this, but our experience has shown us that little efforts do contribute significantly in raising gender questions, which had not been fully recognised or acknowledged earlier.

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