



This Highlight discusses the legal framework of the Tamil Nadu Irrigation Act and the implications it holds for gender equity. Membership to WUAs comes by virtue of ownership to land. However the study shows that neither ownership nor membership is sufficient for effective participation which is largely determined by social structures. Diversity of agrarian roles of women determines to a large extent the nature and extent of participation in irrigation governance. Women land owners who are also members but who are confined to the domestic sphere remain outside the ambit of participation while landless women agricultural laborers participate more effectively in irrigation governance. The author uses the term fencing of women to denote the caging of women in a legal framework that neither understands the varied roles and categories of women in agriculture nor does it support them to enhance their participation. The Highlight concludes with an appeal for an intensive survey which understands the diversities in women's agricultural work and informs policy frameworks.

Water Policy Research

HIGHLIGHT

Fencing Women in Water User Associations

An Appraisal of Gender Strategy for Participatory Irrigation Management in Tamil Nadu

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AN APPRAISAL OF GENDER STRATEGY FOR PARTICIPATORY IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT IN TAMIL NADU¹

Research Highlight based on paper with the same title³

INTRODUCTION

A pre-eminent feature of the twenty first century governance of major and medium irrigation systems in India is the consolidation and legitimization of institutional reforms for enhancing the involvement as well as expanding the role of users in the governance of bureaucratic irrigation systems. This calls for efforts to include women in user organizations for water resources management and conservation. Concomitantly, the National Water Policy 2002, states that women should be assigned a suitable role in participatory management of water resources; while the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012) stated that women are expected to play a key role in water management.

Nonetheless, the New Water Policy that enunciated participation of women-farmers in Water Users' Associations (WUAs) as a pre-condition for the efficacy and sustainability of irrigation systems has not really redefined rights which would make it more gender inclusive. This is largely because irrigation is a gendered institution in which the hegemony of patriarchy prevails in user participation. In this scenario - premised on the proposition that 'women do not constitute a homogeneous category' - this Highlight inquires into the inclusion *versus* exclusion of rural women in membership, participation and representation in WUAs under the legislative framework of Tamil Nadu Farmer's Management of Irrigation Systems (TNFMIS) Act.

METHODOLOGY

The Government of Tamil Nadu enacted the TNFMIS legislation in 2000 where WUAs are given a role in the management and maintenance of canal irrigation systems for effective and reliable supply and distribution of water. According to this Act, every registered land owner, who is over 18 years of age, is a member of a WUA.

Consequently, women farmers as registered land owners in Tamil Nadu are automatically enrolled as members of WUAs as per the 'records of rights'.

We attempt to analyze women's participation in the management of Sathanur Irrigation System - one of the nine major irrigation systems in Tamil Nadu. We analyze the impact of legislation on membership of women in WUAs and examine the impact of heterogeneity among women members of WUAs on their participation in Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) based on primary and secondary sources of data.

Secondary data is drawn from the Water Resources Organization (WRO) election reports and WUA records. Primary data is gathered through a sample survey of 412 women WUA members adopting a stratified sampling design. The primary data collected is analyzed by applying Chi-Square test, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Duncan Multiple Range Test (DMRT).

DATA ANALYSIS

Gender analysis of membership in WUAs

The most significant factor affecting women's access to membership, participation and representation in WUAs is ownership of agricultural land. Land ownership as the criterion for membership in WUAs poses a problem with regard to women's participation and representation in WUAs.

Analysis of secondary data of members of 24 WUAs shows the existence of gender gap in membership of WUAs in Sathanur irrigation system. Out of 21058 members in 24 WUAs, there are 18535 (88.02 percent) male members as against 2523 (11.98 percent) female members. This suggests that ownership of land is very limited among women.

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¹This paper is available on request from p.reghu@cgiar.org

Categories of women in agrarian social structure

Gender concerns call for not only the analysis of the differences between men and women but also distinctions among women as they do not constitute a homogeneous category. In this regard, primary data from our sample survey in 68 villages of Villupuram district shows the existence of heterogeneity among women in agrarian social structure as per the following categories:

- **Women Owner Cultivators:** A large proportion (49.3 percent) of women members of WUAs not only own agricultural land but also manage cultivation of their lands. Therefore, we classify them as “Women Owner Cultivators”.
- **Land Owning Women Agricultural Laborers:** We find a small number (6.3 percent) of women members who despite ownership of land work as agricultural wage laborers on other people's land. This is mainly due to the uncertainties in canal rotations often leading to their land lying fallow. This indicates that land ownership alone cannot guarantee water security. Factors like location of land in the command do play a role in assuring water security.
- **Non-cultivating Women Land owners:** About 42 percent of the women surveyed were such that they owned land but worked only in the domestic sphere. Traditional roles and expectations do not allow these women to work beyond the domestic sphere thus indicating that ownership of land alone cannot liberate them.
- **Land Owning Women Employees:** A very small number of women who are engaged in a full time vocation in the private or the public sector are not able to work on their lands and they often hand it over to the male relatives for cultivation.
- **Landless Women Cultivators:** This is a category of women who come from land holding households but do not own land themselves. They participate in irrigated agricultural activities along with their husbands or by themselves, but are not members of WUAs since they are landless. This is of course the largest category if one were to look at the overall profile of WUA membership.

Women's participation in irrigation management

The differences among the categories of women in relation to participation in irrigation are brought to light by DMRT. Women members of WUAs are grouped into three categories with regard to participation in irrigation. It is clear from our analysis that housewives and owner cultivators significantly differ from women employees

and landed laborers with regard to their participation in irrigation management.

The analysis reveals that in comparison to housewives, landed laborers and employed women, women owner cultivators, participate to a greater extent in irrigation management. Statistically, the p value of less than 0.01 establishes that women members significantly differ with regard to their participation in irrigation management compared to their participation in actual cultivation. The mean value was found to be higher for women cultivators (3.04).

Thus we can infer that greater the participation of women land owners in cultivation of their lands, higher is their participation in the management of irrigation system.

Women's participation in WUAs in Sathanur irrigation system

Our primary data shows that women are functioning more as proxy members. It is the men of the household who tend to take the lead in management related activities. As members of the WUA, women are expected to participate in voting the management body to power. However, often it is seen that their participation ends there. The most crucial aspects of irrigation management are related to participation in training and decision making and women are seen to be excluded from both. Absence of communication and customary restrictions contribute to their non participation thereby indicating that ownership of land and membership of WUAs does not ensure effective participation.

Notional membership of women in WUAs

The survey has brought to light the prevalence of non participation among women members of WUAs. It is apparent that a vast majority (72.3 percent) of women members of WUAs do not participate in the activities of WUAs. The data explicates that a vast majority of housewives (80.5 percent), women employees (87.5 percent) and wage laborers (92.3 percent) do not participate in WUA activities.

Nominal participation of women members in WUAs

Our data suggests that the level of participation of women in WUAs is either nil or negligible across the different activities of WUAs. Indeed the statistically assumed high level of women participation never occurs in reality. It should be noted that the category of non participating women members are those who have never taken part in WUAs activities right from its inception.

A small proportion of women (27.7 percent) take part in WUAs. However this participation is of a limited nature

and often is confined to being present in one or two meetings in a year and on many an occasion with husbands or some male relative.

Active participation of women cultivators in WUAs

As mentioned earlier cultivator women members are found to be more active participants in WUAs than their counterparts. The Chi-Square analysis testing the relationship between categories of women members and their level of participation suggests the presence of a highly significant relationship with the p value 0.001. Therefore it is established that women land owner's participation in cultivation determines their participation in WUAs. The analysis draws the generalization that women cultivators are more likely to devote greater time and efforts towards the functioning of WUAs.

Women's representation in leadership of WUAs

The three tier structure of PIM is represented by a cadre of farmer representatives. Accordingly, each WUA is represented by territorial committee representatives and headed by presidents to be chosen through direct elections. As per the World Bank model of PIM in Tamil Nadu, major irrigation systems have Territorial Committee representatives, WUAs presidents, Distributary Committee presidents and Project Committee president. We found that there are women representatives at the level of Territorial Committee and WUAs. However, at the Distributary and Project Committee level, women representatives are absent. This suggests that higher level leadership positions are denied to women. Key decisions taken at the higher level are thus taken largely by all men's committees.

FACETS OF FENCING WOMEN IN WUAS

Despite the laudatory goals at the international and national level, ground level data on implementation of these policies and legislations reveals that women farmers are mostly excluded from the management of irrigation systems. This is largely because of the patriarchal social structure that engenders gender discrimination in property acquisition.

Our data shows that due to ideological, institutional and structural conditions, rural women are fenced in the process of governance of irrigation wherein:

- landless women cultivators remain invisible in the governance of irrigation systems due to lack of legitimization as 'farmers' in the absence of legal ownership of agricultural land;
- women members get relegated to a “numerical minority” in WUAs due to gender disparity in agricultural land ownership; and
- nominal membership is accorded to women farmers due to mandatory enlisting of women land owners as WUA members irrespective of differences in participation in cultivation and water use.

Thus, the legislative framework has reinvented gender discrimination in WUAs with the exclusion of landless women cultivators from governance of irrigation against the inclusion of non cultivating women land owners in the membership of WUAs. The following factors can be seen to be responsible:

- the criterion of land ownership for membership;
- gender discrimination in land ownership numerically limiting membership of women farmers in WUAs;
- inclusion of non cultivating women land owners in WUAs leading to nominal participation of women; and
- male domination alienating women's participation in activities of WUAs.

Thus, as 'fenced objects', women are visible but cannot move. Rural women have been accorded rights in PIM but cannot participate in the governance of irrigation systems due to absence of gender mainstreaming in legislation and lack of institutionalization in the social fabric of Indian rural society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This Highlight delved into the social reality of 'gender in agrarian social structure'. It demonstrates the impact of gender discrimination in rural property ownership engendering gender disparity in agricultural land ownership culminating in the prevalence of gender gap in membership and representation in WUAs.

The gender analysis of membership in WUAs has brought to light the persistence of gender disparity in the enrollment of farmers in WUAs within the institutional framework of TNFMIS Act. The involuntary membership on the criterion of land ownership resulted in the reiteration of gender disparity in property ownership into the membership of WUAs. Consequently the research demonstrates that women's membership is conspicuously low and limited due to patriarchal rural institutions.

We also argue that women water users do not constitute a homogeneous category, even though the legislation

recognizes all women holding title to land as women farmers and as such enlists them as members in WUAs.

Our data suggests that the existing institutional strategy facilitates inclusion of women owner cultivators, land owning women agricultural laborers and women non water users; as against the exclusion of the landless women water users in PIM who thus remain invisible in the process. We tried to portray the social reality of rural women's participation in WUAs based on their ownership of agricultural land circumscribed by patriarchal structures. Our analysis shows that gender participation is construed by predominance of male proxy representation. Thus, we conclude that a gender insensitive legal framework has reproduced gender discrimination and reinforced women's exclusion in PIM.

A systematic gender oriented strategy should be developed as part of PIM in order to promote active involvement of women. Such a strategy should create an

environment more responsive to women's needs, ensuring equal access to participation and decision making for women. The following strategies are recommended for promoting and advancing the participation of women farmers in WUAs:

- census survey of women farmers to identify actual water users;
- gender mainstreaming including gender quota in participation and representation;
- inclusion of landless women cultivators in PIM;
- inclusion of women in PIM training programs; and
- gender sensitization for irrigation bureaucrats.

These steps would enable women empowerment, and help usher-in a new era of sustainable user participation with gender equality.



About the IWMI-Tata Program and Water Policy Highlights

The IWMI-Tata Water Policy Program (ITP) was launched in 2000 as a co-equal partnership between the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), Colombo and Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT), Mumbai. The program presents new perspectives and practical solutions derived from the wealth of research done in India on water resource management. Its objective is to help policy makers at the central, state and local levels address their water challenges – in areas such as sustainable groundwater management, water scarcity, and rural poverty – by translating research findings into practical policy recommendations. Through this program, IWMI collaborates with a range of partners across India to identify, analyze and document relevant water-management approaches and current practices. These practices are assessed and synthesized for maximum policy impact in the series on Water Policy Highlights and IWMI-Tata Comments.

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