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GENDER AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT : THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Gender is a critical factor in rural development as it plays a crucial role in shaping the social, economic, and cultural aspects of rural communities. This research paper provides a critical review of the literature on gender and rural development, examining the different dimensions of gender that affect rural development, and the challenges and opportunities that arise from addressing gender inequalities in rural development. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research and policy action.

Keywords: Gender, Rural Development, agriculture, Women's participation, Women's Empowerment

Introduction:

At least 70% of the world's very poor people live in rural areas in developing countries (IFAD 2011). Their livelihoods usually depend either directly or indirectly on agriculture, with women providing, on average, more than 40% of the agricultural labour force. According to traditional patterns of work distribution within households, in most developing countries women are primarily responsible to meet the basic needs of their families. Women mainly produce food for household consumption and local markets, whereas men more often work in agricultural wage labour and cash crop production. Generally, women are responsible for food selection and preparation, and for the care and feeding of the children, and therefore play a key role in defining the coping strategies of poor households to ensure food security and to reduce risk. Women normally spend a higher share of their income than men on providing food, health and education to the family. Additionally, they expend a lot of time and hard work in procuring water and domestic fuel.

Alongside the above described responsibility for reproductive tasks, women are also engaged in productive tasks such as agricultural work, raising cattle, seed management, planting, as well as the processing and marketing of agricultural products. In livestock farming, women feed the animals, clean the stalls and compost manure. When raising poultry, sheep, goats or rabbits, they are responsible for breeding and tending to the animal health. It is women who cultivate the kitchen gardens, and who sustain the family when harvests are poor. The activities performed by women are often unpaid. War, disease, HIV/AIDS and the migration of male family members to urban areas or foreign countries are forcing more and more women to take on additional roles that were originally performed by men, with many assuming sole responsibility for agricultural production. Given the importance and variety of their tasks, women are important bearers of knowledge related to the sustainable use of natural resources, including strategies for adapting to climate change and conserving agrobiodiversity. However, in spite of their important and diverse contributions, women in agriculture and rural areas have less access than men to productive resources. Gender inequality is present in many assets, inputs and services: e.g. access to or control over land, financial services, productive resources, and extension or marketing services. Several studies have shown that gender inequality related to food security is exacerbated during crises: Women tend to become the "shock absorbers" of household food security, e.g. skipping meals, to make more food available for other household members. Moreover, women are often underrepresented in rural organisations and institutions, and are generally poorly informed regarding their rights. This prevents them from having an equal say in decision-making processes, and reduces their ability to participate in collective activities, e.g. as members of agricultural cooperatives or water user associations.