

Economic Dimension of Empowerment:

Effects of Commercialization and Feminization of Vegetable Farming on
Social Status of women in an Urban Fringe of Western Nepal

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Abstract

With the changing context and time, women are no more viewed as passive bearers of pain only. Now they are perceived as active and powerful actors in the society. Their honest and tireless efforts have been the main ways for empowering them and hence uplifting their social status. In this scenario, this article presents the ways women in Hemja, Kaski have been empowering themselves, fulfilling their daily family needs and making some saving through successful commercial vegetable farming.

[Key words : empowerment, commercialization, social status of women, gender role, income generation]

Introduction

Agriculture has been the main source of livelihood for human beings from ancient period of time. As in other developing countries, a major source of Nepalese Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is agriculture and majority of people depend on it for their livelihood. However, the productivity of the food crops has remained stagnant and is even declining in some cases despite greater emphasis and efforts placed on the agriculture sector in almost all development plans (NPC and APROSC 1995). The growth and development of the agriculture sector is, therefore, crucial in increasing the living standards of farming households in rural areas, especially vulnerable groups, such as women farmers and reducing poverty as a whole. "In developing countries worldwide, but particularly in the poorer ones, national development strategies consistently include policies and programs whose objectives are to promote the cultivation of cash crops among subsistence-oriented small farm households. The principal driving forces behind efforts to introduce commercial crops into subsistence-oriented farming systems are many. Frequently cited reasons include: increased

national dependence for agricultural products due to rapid urbanization; growth of a rural non-agricultural sector which represents increased demand for crops as well as a supply of labour; technological changes in crops and farming practices" (Von Braun and Kennedy 1986; cited in Paolisso et.al. 1992:1); rapid population growth in already densely settled agricultural areas (Von Braun et al 1991; cited in Paolisso and Regmi 1992:1); and increasing needs of the rural poor for cash income to, for example, pay for education and health services (Paolisso et.al. 1992:1).

Women's work in rural areas is strenuous and time consuming. Besides farm activities, they are also responsible for household chores. Women farmers are responsible for more than 50 per cent of global food production. In developing countries, women produce between 60 and 80 per cent of the food. In Asia, between 50 and 90 percent of the work in the rice fields are done by women. After the harvest, rural women in developing countries are almost entirely responsible for storage, handling, stocking, marketing and processing. An overwhelming majority of economically active women in Nepal, more than 80 percent, work in agriculture (Upadhyaya 2004). But 'they have only limited access to resources and only limited control over those they can access. Of the total landholdings, women own only 8.1% and the average size of their land is just two thirds that of an average men holding. Only 4% of the households have women ownership of both house and land. Marital status determines women's access to land and other property' (UNDP 2004: 55). While in the case of agriculture land, the women ownership is hardly 4.4% and 81% women own less than 1 hector of land (NPC 2002). Although women have little access to resources, they start working at an early age and in return they get little property, i.e. dowry in their marriage time. After marriage, they devote their whole life to their husband's family.

Market integration of agricultural-based subsistence economies has resulted in positive economic improvement for poor farm households. Cash cropping provides poor rural farms with new economic opportunities, reduces poverty by raising incomes from on-farm production, increases local employment,

and, in the case of export crops, generates foreign exchange earnings and fiscal revenues. In countries where there is an effective agricultural policy, an increase in cash crop production can positively affect staple food supply, which in turn can increase nutritional levels (Von Braun and Kennedy 1986; cited in Paolisso and Regmi 1992); and living standard as a whole. In sum, it improves their (especially women farmer's) social and economic status in the society through their social and economic empowerment. "Given traditional gender divisions of labour, women concentrate more on their ascribed reproduction role and responsibilities while men focus on productive, income-earning roles. As in most households worldwide in both developed and developing countries reproduction is not regarded, as work and households work is not considered productive. However, the work burden of women in Nepal (16 hours) is much higher than the global average" (UNDP 2004: 51). Although, they work 16 hours, their status is far behind men in all respects.

Women continue to play a major productive role outside their work in the home, as peasant cultivators or as agricultural labourers (Kelkar 1987). Women farmers of Hemja V.D.C., Kaski, have produced vegetables for sale and earned cash income. But it is difficult to say that they freely enjoy with this income and it upraises their status in patriarchal Hindu dominated Nepalese society. There is a history of institutionalized women subordination in Nepal as well as Asian countries. The ideal tradition family/ kinship system was patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal and organized around men authority. Women occupied an extremely low status. A vast majority of them lacked economic independence. In our patriarchal Hindu dominated society, Manu mandates, for instance, women were required to function within the framework of three obedience: 'Before marriage, obey your father. After marriage, obey your husband. After your husband death, obey your son.' Women are becoming the main cultivators, food producers and on farm income earners but they also continue to play their traditional roles in household activities. Yet research has revealed that women are underrepresented in administrative and other roles, their importance is not recognized, and their specific needs, interests and expertise are largely

neglected in agricultural and rural development (Song et. al 2006: 134). Due to the lack of gender sensitive data collection women's contributions and concerns remain invisible. Given the fact that, women are playing crucial roles but still have an inferior status in many areas, this study is focused on gender aspects, women empowerment, and access of women in income. In the rural areas of Nepal, the significance of women's participation in commercial vegetable farming needs to be viewed through the eyes of rural women vegetable farmers.

The Issue

Nepalese economy is largely characterized by disguised unemployment and subsistence farming with limited prospects for modernization and commercialization of agriculture. Nowadays awareness and motive towards cash crop cultivation and economic activities among the farmers have remarkably increased. Many farmers have also commercialized their farming like vegetable production. It helps rural women in utilizing their local resources and spare time to earn cash income. Thus, it is necessary to investigate whether it empower them socially and economically. Farmers in the urban fringe are responding by shifting their crops to vegetables that have a higher market value. For example, in the past in study area, potato and cucumber were cultivated for home consumption only. Now, the potato and cucumber fields are expanding so that some of the crop can be sold. Productions of tomato, cauliflower, cabbage, radish, leafs (Sag) etc. are also increasing. In the same vein, the workload of women also has been increasing day by day. In this regard, this study investigates women's problems in commercial vegetable farming.

Gender role in farming is one of the important factors. Unless the women farmers are empowered, they cannot have decision making power on the activities of vegetable production and marketing; their social and economic status may not be improved. Although the women farmer of different countries can play and are playing the vital role to improve the living condition of the families but they are not considered as 'peasant'. The majority of the agricultural inputs and agricultural skill development training and extension

activities are being provided to the men farmers ignoring women as agricultural producers. Therefore, an analytical study on women vegetable farmer in different vegetable production activities and marketing may help in the process of empowering women. Although vegetable farming or gardening is not a new topic but commercialization of vegetable farming, gender role and its impact on women is really important and measurable. It is obvious that it increases the workload of women but it is not clear whether they are benefited or not. In the urban fringe where agriculture is the occupation for the livelihood and source of cash income, vegetable gardening appears as one of the productive enterprises for cash generation and is considered as cash crops. Vegetable growers get higher profit margin from vegetable farming as compared to that of cereals crops and other economic activities. A study by Kunwar concluded that more women than men are active in vegetable production and selling purpose (Kunwar 2001). But it is difficult to say, whether women and men are equally benefited? Are women equally and freely enjoying such benefit? In general, the study investigated or searched whether women enjoy this benefit or not. This study also investigated, analyzed and answered some fundamental questions: Who does what in commercial vegetable farming? Who control the income from vegetable farming? What are the changes in women's social status brought up by commercial vegetable farming? How is women's role in household decision-making regarding use and investment of income? To what extent, women are empowered after the commercialization of vegetable farming? In this connection, this study tries to analyze women's participation in commercial vegetable farming, women's access to income and the role of commercial vegetable farming in women's empowerment.

Data Sources and Methodology

Fieldwork of this study was carried out from June 21 to 5th August 2006 at ward 4 of Hemja V.D.C. in Kaski district, locally known as Tallo Hemja. This is the largest area of production than other areas of Kaski district for vegetable and potato cultivation. Hemja is a main vegetable producer and supplier among Pokhara fringes. The study covered a sample of 113 households of the ward 4 of this V.D.C. Among the nine wards of this

V.D.C., ward 4 is selected purposively because it is the main vegetable production area of the VDC. The total households of women commercial vegetable farmers in the sampled ward were 160. Out of 160 households, 113 (i.e.70.6%) households were sampled as informants. The percentage of sample is based on Krejcie and Morgan's frame of sample selection for small population at the level of 5 percent confidence interval (Krejcie and Morgan 1970; cited in Bernard 1991:105). Stratified random sampling method was used for sampling. Firstly, the households were listed in ascending order according to the land size used in vegetable farming and then stratified into three strata. In the second stage, each stratum was arranged in alphabetical order according to the farmers' name. Finally, using computer program SPSS.11, 113 elements were selected randomly. Each stratum had approximately 70 percent households; they were selected as the elements of sample. Household was taken as the unit of analysis. The study adopted multiple data collection techniques to fulfill its objectives. Therefore, several tools and methods such as a semi-structured interview with sampled women farmers, three focus group discussions with non-sampled women farmers, interview with key informants, and case studies were conducted to collect the essential information and cross checked to come up to the conclusion. For this, unstructured interview schedule and a few checklists were prepared as tools. Several consultation meetings were also held with various stakeholders. Active women farmer of the household were interviewed individually by administering pre-tested semi-structured interview schedule for the required data. The data were managed and analyzed using SPSS.11. Qualitative data were managed manually and analyzed descriptively.

Outline of the Research Site (A Potato Village)

The research site Hemja, a city oriented V.D.C., is situated on the northwest of Pokhara Sub-metropolis of Gandaki Zone at Kaski district in Western Region of Nepal which is one of the 43 V.D.Cs. of the Kaski District. The research site is plain which is known as Hemja Bensi and it has fertile land on the bank of Yamdi River. The study area has experienced rapid development of vegetables farming since 1993 after construction of the

Pokhara-Baglung high-way. The highway passes through the center of this V.D.C. and connects the village with the rest part of the country. Production of vegetable has been increased with the construction of Pokhara Baglung Highway, Hemja Irrigation Project and Pokhara Agricultural Product Market. High demand of vegetable in Pokhara city, improvement in the traditional method of vegetable farming such as tomato cultivation in plastic tunnel and establishment of Governmental Organizations (GOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and their involvement in the area, have also contributed to its rapid development. Due to the facility of well irrigation system, both women and men farmers in the study area have benefited a lot from the vegetables and paddy production. Good irrigation system has made farmers easy to grow vegetables in all seasons. Due to the irrigation facility, most of the Bari land has been changed into Khet land. According to ex-vice chairperson of Hemja, every farmer produce potato and therefore, Nepal Agricultural Research Council (NARC) has renamed this V.D.C. as '*Potato village*'.

The majority of the respondents were Brahmins followed by Chhetris and Dalits respectively. Dalits women were found to be the most deprived group in the area. All the enumerated caste groups speak Nepali language and all the respondents reported them as Hindu. Majority of the respondents were found literate. The main source of livelihood in study area is agriculture. Vast majority of the women reported them as full time farmers. Land size used in vegetable farming in study area ranged from a minimum of 0.5 and a maximum of above 16 Ropani and land holding ranged from a minimum of 0.5 and a maximum of 40 Ropani. Of the total 113, 33.6 percent of the respondents were found to be cultivating in others land. Most of them used others' land only for potato farming. More than 50 percent of the respondents cultivated off-seasonal vegetables. Most of the Dalit women did not cultivate off-seasonal vegetable because of landlessness. Farmers in the study area can be broadly categorized as either privileged or underprivileged. Privileged households are relatively better off socio-economically. Generally, they belong to higher caste categories such as Brahmins and Chhetris. Underprivileged are certain minority groups such

as Dalit, especially Dalit women, who have been traditionally left behind by development interventions. Social hierarchy of study area is determined by caste, which is highly influenced by Hindu religion and Hindu Varnaashram.

Analysis and Discussion

The study is particularly concerned with the role of women farmers, which investigates with social, economic and gender context of women's live. This section basically deals with women's participation in vegetable farming and marketing, their access to income generation and their empowerment.

Women's Participation in Commercial Vegetable Farming

Unquestionably, women play a significant and crucial role in all realm of life throughout the Third World. In addition to farm work, in which they are actively involved with men, the burden of almost all the household chores falls on them. But despite the global consensus as to their vital role both on the farm and in the household, their importance in and contribution to agriculture are not adequately reflected in the available statistics which perhaps obscure more than they reveal (Das 1995). In Hemja V.D.C., vegetable cultivation appears as one of the productive enterprises. The main vegetable crops grown in the study site were potato, tomato, cucumber, cauliflower, cabbage, radish, leafs, bottle gourd, beans, etc. Majority of the farmers reported that they commercialize their vegetable farming between 6 to 10 years ago. Vast majority of the women farmers were satisfied with this farming which clearly indicates that this occupation is very sound for rural women, especially in urban fringe. Majority of the farmers cultivated off-seasonal vegetables and earn more than the seasonal vegetable farming. Most of the Dalit women did not cultivate off-seasonal vegetable because of landlessness. But they can get a little income from selling this production as vendors. Majority of the women reported them as full-time farmers and key person who was involved in this farming and some of them also added that their husbands assist them. Most of the women farmers spend 8 to 11 hours per day for vegetable farming during the vegetable farming seasons. The study revealed that households with no men (due to emigration or

death) were forced to buy poultry manure in high rate from their neighbors' men because being as women it is not suitable task for them to bring poultry manure far from the houses, which was imported from Narayanghat, Chitwan District. In the study site, there is still gender inequality in wage labor between men and women. Men work as a Bause (hoer) and get Rs.200 with one time meal and breakfast in a day. But, women work as a Khetali (weeding, planting work) and being women, they get only Rs.80 with breakfast in a day. These data shows that gender inequality, unequal gender division of labour and practices still exist in Nepal.

The extent of women's involvement in agriculture depends on their social and economic status with factors such as landlessness, size of landholding, farming system, land management practices, labor market forces, and the age and marital status of women influencing the extent of women's participation in agriculture (El-Fattal 1996). Women in study site, who used to stay at home during the off-season of farming, have effectively utilized income-generating activity such as vegetable production. The participation of woman in vegetable farming and marketing is greater than that of men. They play a predominant role in almost all activities. Majority of them play a vital role in marketing and market related decision-making. Women have played a major role in manure carrying and dispersing, chemical fertilizer application, seeding, planting, weeding, and marketing. Men, however, often assist in land preparation, harvesting and irrigation. Irrigation is less time-consuming task in study site due to well irrigation facility. Only they need to open the irrigation cannel. This is a direct result of our patriarchal nature of the society. Men co-operations were increased in domestic chores after adopting this farming. Overwork is recognized as a social disease that affects women in Nepal because of traditional norms (Daniggelis 2003:95). In this study, quantitative data suggest that women workload has been increased because of commercial vegetable farming. In other hand qualitative and quantitative data suggest that their workload has been decreased slightly in household chores. The social and cultural values of

the Nepali society do not encourage women to work outside the home. Traditionally, households' chores were women business. But in study site, their role has been diverted from domestic work to productive and communal work to some extent.

Women's Access to Income Generation

Economic status is an important and determining component of social change and development. Positive changes in economy, health, education and women's position/status are often regarded as the hallmarks of social development of a country. Therefore, the study aimed to explore the women's access to income generated by commercial vegetable farming. Less income and less access to income meant that they had very little choices in what they wanted such as meals, clothes, decisions etc. Lack of adequate income means less access to health, education, and the perpetual domination of women in the society. Unpaid women labourers have become commercial vegetable producers in study area. Before adopting this farming, they had no productive work and used to assist in household agriculture as unpaid labourers. Women farmers feel that this farming and earning has been of tremendous help in making their lives easier. Brahmin women earned more income from vegetable farming than Chhetri and Dalit women. In comparing to so-called high caste women, majority of so-called low caste women earned less. In general, commercial vegetable farming has helped raise women's status in the society through their social and economic empowerment components. It was revealed that before adoption of this farming, the majority of women in the study site did not have any income source and used to work as unpaid family labour. Only some farmers used to sell some cereal crops to local people if it was surplus.

But, now, women farmers have access to financial resources. More importantly, access to financial resources can have substantial positive impact on food security and household nutrition, especially for women and children nutrition. The trend of vegetable consumption increased among

the farmers after adopting this occupation. This farming has also brought improvement in their cereal crops production because of maximum use of poultry manure in their land. With the help of vegetable production, not only these women have become financially strong but also are able to secure their own and family's nutritional intakes. Majority of the women mentioned that they have ownership in saved money. The awareness among farmers about saving was found increased in the study site. They further said proudly that previously they had to take loans to celebrate ceremonies (such as marriage), festivals, and households need. Now they have some money at any time and have got rid of taking loans to fulfill their family needs

Case Study 1 : At Least She Saved Her Land

Mithu Timilshina is 50 years and has one son and four daughters. Her husband is jobless and works with her as a farmer. This household has not other sources of income except vegetable farming. They have only 5 Ropanies of land. They have obtained other's 6 Ropanies of land and cultivated vegetable in 11 Ropanies of land. The Timilshin couple has faced many difficulties in rearing their five children. But, they earned Rs.150 thousand last year from vegetables. With the help of that money, the couple managed three wedding ceremonies of their daughters where high dowry system still exists. She reported that ' If we did not adopt this farming in time, now we would not be here (Hemja ma basai rahane theyana).' Because they had to sell their land for their daughters' marriage ceremonies and maintain other ceremonies. Besides this, they now have the money to manage for clothing, medicine and schooling for their remaining children. She has received two trainings. She also has become a member of Mother Group and saving-credit group. Therefore, she has not only saved her land but also raised social prestige from vegetable farming and marketing.

Source: Field Survey 2006

According to key informants, focus group participants and local people, most of the women got first hand money by selling vegetables. Most of them keep money themselves and some of them give it to their male counterparts or household heads. Key informants further said that women firstly spend their money earned from vegetable selling whether they like

as need base, especially households essential things and if remain they give it to households heads. In the case of control over income earned from vegetables, some of the women controlled their income and most of them jointly controlled over it with their men. Majority of the women mentioned that the earned money has been spent on different household activities by mutual understanding of household members. Majority of the women were fully independent to spend money earned from vegetable selling and some of them are independent to some extent. Extra skills in farming and marketing have been developed due to this occupation and women farmers' external exposure has been also increased. Women farmers visited other several areas outside their home and village, sometimes as a visitor and sometimes as a seller. Women farmers have become cash earners and due to this earning they also have become independent. This income has reduced women's dependency to their men counterparts, which ultimately has improved their conjugal relationships. Their family members and relatives were positive towards their engagement in this farming and marketing. They did not only consume vegetable themselves, but also they were able to give gift to their relatives and neighbors, which have improved their social relationship.

Since, women marketed the product, they were able to hold the purse and some utilized the savings for their own shake. Despite improvement in their nutritional intake, marginalized and women-headed households were able to ensure their food security. Some women farmers have successfully demonstrated how the landless can be involved in commercial vegetable farming. Some landless or small landowner families were able to purchases land with the income generated from vegetable selling. Some women were able to build new houses (Case Study 2). Many others are also starting to intensify their crops, replacing traditional cropping systems with the more productive technique (such as plastic tunnel) of incorporation cash generating crops in the system. From the income of vegetable, some women farmers were able to manage their daughters and sons' marriage ceremonies (Case Study 1) and send their men counterparts for foreign employment, especially in gulf countries. Because of earning from vegetable selling, their household struggle and conflict was totally reduced and it has

created peaceful environment in their home. Commercial vegetable farming has increased women's social contacts and their groups' activities. In sum, women farmers have gained social prestige from vegetable production.

Case Study 2 : Houseless to House Owner Sarada Nepali

A Dalit landless farmer is 40 years and has been married for 18 years as a second wife. When she got married, her father did not give her a piece of land. She has only one son aged fifteen and now studying in class 9. After two years of her marriage, her husband left her and lived with his first wife. But when he left her, he did not give her a piece of land to work on and live on. Wage labour and selling other vegetable were the only means of livelihood for her before adopting this farming. As she did not have her own land, she had not cultivated vegetable before. Somehow, she obtained 3 Ropanis of land from her neighbour for potato cultivation. Landowner provided land for potato cultivation without any sharing of crops or money because they would get more profit from cereal crops that grow after potato cultivation. Now she also cultivates cauliflower, cabbage, radish, etc in leased land. Besides her own production, she also collects and sells vegetables and fruits grown by other farmers as a vender. She has earned a little more from working others land during peak agricultural season as a wage labourer. She earns average 30 to 50 thousand rupees annually. Last year, she earned about 50 thousand rupees from potato cultivation. She also made profit of about 8 thousand rupees from marketing the cauliflower and potato produced by other families. With the saving of income from the sale of vegetables, she has built a small-cemented tin's house with three rooms and toilet and bathroom. She got rid herself of houselessness. Her father-in-law gave this land to her, which also belongs to him. She spent about Rs. 150 thousand for building this house. She also spent a lot for her son's treatment, who has been suffering from heart disease for 7 years. Besides these, she now has the money to spend for clothing, medicine and schooling for her son. Being as a disadvantaged caste, she has not got any training from any organizations and she did not get a chance to any exposure visits organized by V.D.C. and farmers groups. But due to this farming, now she has become a member of Janakallyan Mother Group.

Source: Field Survey 2006

Women Empowerment

The centrality of the notion of empowerment is located in the dynamics of the legitimate sharing, distribution and redistribution of power. In the

sociological sense of Max Weber, power is one's capacity to have control over others; and as such, when this capacity to control is legitimized it becomes authority (Roy 2001). In Nepal, decision-making has traditionally been regarded as men's domain. A wrong perception about the lack of decision-making power of women is deep rooted in tradition, in the community as well as the state where men government officials maintain control over decision-making (FWLD and TAF 2003). This has been happening not only in national level but also in local level and households' level. Earlier literatures show that regarding agricultural and households' decisions, mainly men control over it. Therefore, the participation of women in power and decision-making is very low. Increasing women's participation in all sectors is still a challenge.

In Nepal, although labour and land allocation are grounded in cultural construction of rights and responsibilities, income distribution is largely governed by patriarchal ideologies favoring men prerogatives. But this occupation provides an opportunity to generate income for rural women. This eventually helps them in terms of capacity building and decision-making at both household and community levels. Of the total 113 respondents, one third of women reported that they had received different kinds of training from various agencies. This data indicates that training opportunity was not satisfactory in the study site. "The community members have strongly realized the fact that they need to organize them and work in a group. They have a strong feeling that the group approach increases capacity, food security, income generation and entrepreneurship development" (Sapkota et. al 2005:14). Majority of the respondents were engaged in farmers' organizations/groups. But, Dalit women were found deprived in these facilities. Women were also able to establish self-help saving-credit groups (Kamadhenu Women Agricultural Group, Janajagriti Agricultural Group, etc.) and mothers group. This farming has improved their bargaining power, decision-making roles in households as well as community and ultimately builds their capabilities and skills (Case Study 3)

Case Study 3 : Improved Bargaining Power Mina Timilshina

Chairperson of Janakallyan Mother Group, told me that these group activities have increased women's bargaining power. She reported that in her first phase of commercial vegetable farming, she went to local market i.e. Tibetan Camp to sell her vegetable products. In the mean time, one of the local women threaten her not to sell vegetable in that place because it was her own place to sell. After that, she came back home with vegetable. Now she laughs recalling her past and said proudly ' I am able to talk with you openly and learn many things from this occupation.' The women are now more open up with others people. They engage in argument easily and without any shyness.

Source: Field Survey 2006

Solving problems through collective actions become a kind of activity that the women favor most in study site. Particularly in terms of curbing gambling and alcoholism, regulating domestic violence, undertaking the improvement of trails, roads and drinking water facilities, temple and public cold sitting place (Pratichhalaya) building and marijuana (Gaga) destroying programme. Marijuana destroying programme have become popular initiatives recognized by local as well as national level. This has raised their status in family, community and village life. Men have started to consult their women counterparts before making a decision in household as well as in community level. This suggests that economic independence can not only bring change in gender division of labour but also trigger shift in power relations. Although women farmer of the study site faced many problems viz. lack of technical know how, lack of men co-operation in farm, and lack of improved seeds and fertilizer but they were satisfied with their occupation. They are regarded as model commercial vegetable farmers by other farmers, who are looking forward to replicate the model in their communities. This farming has increased women's access to, and control over resources. Women's confidence and self-reliance has increased through the earning from this farming. It has also increased social prestige, decision-making power, organizational activities, and exposure. Women took part in every kind of

village level meetings and raised their voices. These, in aggregate, have empowered them significantly. Women were found empowered socially, technically and economically through the commercial vegetable farming activities (**Case Study 4**).

Case Study 4 : A Model Woman Farmer Muga Devi Timilshina

A hardworking woman, is 40 years and has three children. They also act as her regular assistants in the farm while they are free from their schools. Her husband is a school teacher and he also shares work in farm with his family while he has leisure time after teaching. She left her school while studying in class 5. Previously, she hardly had enough food for her children; needless to talk about other expenditures as she relied on her husband's salary. Before adopting commercial vegetable farming, she only cooked meal for her family and used to stay at home during agricultural off-season time. But now, she not only cooks meal but also cultivates seasonal and off-seasonal vegetable all year round. Although, Pokhara is the main market place for her and every farmers in Hemja, but sometimes she sells her vegetable products far from the home i.e. Muglin in Chitwan District and Kusma, Dimua in Parbat District with her neighbours, women farmers. She reported that 'Now, my living condition has improved as I made about Rs. 300 thousand last year. I am no more relying on my husband salary.' With the earning, she bought two milking buffalos and also sells milk in Pokhara city. She earned about Rs.100 thousand from selling milk. She also sell cereal crops product. With the help of vegetable farming, her family built cemented two-storied house and also bought 4 Ropanis of land in Hemja V.D.C. She took part in many training, exposure visit programme, etc. She was rewarded as a model woman vegetable farmer, especially for cultivation of cauliflower, by DADO, Kaski. She received certificate with cash prize from DADO in 2063-4-9 B.S as a model farmer. She is the one of the member of Mother Group and a vice chairperson of Kamadhenu Women Agricultural Group. She feels proud of being vegetable farmer and says, 'I have gained social prestige from vegetable farming.

Source: Field Survey 2006

Conclusions

Women participation in commercial vegetable farming activities is very high than their male counterparts in almost all the activities. Women are

able to contribute to the betterment of their family both socially and economically. Due to the lack of proper land, Dalit women were expected regularly to seek paid work for the support of their families. There have been positive changes in the economic status, health condition, education situation and the position of women in the study site. This farming has helped to raise women's status in the society through their social and economic empowerment. This occupation provides an opportunity to generate income for rural women. This eventually helps them in terms of capacity building and decision-making at both household and community levels. Women in study site, now, can raise their voice and opinions clearly. Women ownership and control over saved money was very resonance. Their living conditions have been improved and they no more rely on their male counterparts. The increased income level of the women has changed the life style and thinking pattern. The self-help saving-credit groups and mother groups provide a platform for women for sharing experiences, making plans, increase social network, improve self esteem, raise confidence and ultimately empower them. This farming and marketing offered them a chance to acquire certain rights and knowledge, their integration into society and market, a sense of personal worth and self-confidence, and grater respect in the community as well as family too. Women have more frequent contacts with a wider range of sources of information, which ultimately increase their awareness. A greater participation of women in farming has increased food security, including improved access to, and control over resources. Since women are more involved in vegetable farming and marketing, they have access to the cash generated from the vegetable selling. This improves their bargaining power. Their participation in saving/ credit group and mother groups, meetings and interactions among various agencies and groups has helped them build their capabilities. It has also increased social prestige, decision making power, group and institutional activities, exposure visit and marketing activities and ultimately empowered

them. The women who used to be shy talking with outsiders are now found bargaining and selling their products in the market. This is obviously a positive situation. Therefore, we can conclude that women were empowered socially, technically and economically through the commercial vegetable farming activities.

Despite the fact that commercial vegetable farming fostered women's decision making power and empowerment, it is over generalization to forget the significant variation between high caste and Dalit women. Among the three caste women, the problems are more serious among Dalit women. Most of them have small or no land for cultivation of vegetable. Their choices are extremely limited, both by lack of assets and powerlessness to negotiate with both formal and informal institutions. They have a less access in training and organizations than Brahmin and Chhetri women. They did not get any chances to participate in exposure visit or tour so they were less satisfied with this farming than so called upper caste women. In sum, women in high caste i.e. Brahmin and Chhetri have been more empowered than the women in so-called low caste i.e. Dalit. It clearly indicates that various socio-economic variables are inextricably related to the process of women's participation in and empowerment through the commercial vegetable farming.

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