ABSTRACT

"Nature gave women too much power, the Law giving them too little"
- Will Henry

In the history of human development, women have been as important as men. According to Swaminathan, the famous agricultural scientist, “some historians believe that it was women who first domesticated crop plants and thereby initiated the art and science of farming. While men went out for hunting in search of food, women started gathering seeds from the native flora and began cultivating”. Women played a significant and crucial role in agriculture. The sowing of crops was largely the work of women, who were credited with the discovery of agriculture. It was only after the domestication of cattle and the invention of the plough, which came in a much later period that, women were liberated from the toil of cultivation. In most of the states of India, even now whereas ploughing is done by men, it is the women who follow the plough and drop the seeds in the furrows. The nature and extent of women’s involvement in agriculture varies greatly from region to region. Even within a region, their involvement varies widely among different farming systems, castes, classes and stages in the family cycle.
Women constitute half of the world’s population and contribute two-thirds of world’s working hours but they earn only one-third of the total income and own less than one-tenth of the resources. This showed that the economic status of women was in pathetic condition and this was more so in a country like India.

The present study on women agricultural workers in Uttar Pradesh showed that among all agricultural workers the plight of women was worst than men. Their contribution in the agricultural production was generally not acknowledged. In spite of women’s greater involvement in agriculture, they remained invisible and their contribution in agriculture remained unaccounted and their problems unattended. Almost everywhere women faced more severe constraints than men in accessing productive resources, markets and services. They were also restricted from performing those agricultural operations which were done chiefly by males.

A farmer was always seen as a male person who ploughed the agricultural fields. The male dominated society restricted women from using the plough, which was also the most auspicious agricultural tool. The greater participation of rural women in the agriculture sector did not make them primary producers. The fact was that woman’s primary function was to be a wife, mother and homemaker. Working outside on
fields for a woman strongly depended on the economic status of the family.

Chapter 1 gives a brief introduction about gender role in agriculture and the rational of carrying out this study. The chapter also gives the objectives, hypothesis, methodology and limitations of the study. It also includes a comprehensive review of available literature on women’s role in agriculture.

Chapter 2 gives the historical review of women’s participation in Uttar Pradesh from 1881 to 1951. It was found that women were largely employed in agricultural operations which were non-mechanized and which required more time and energy for example, weeding, sowing, transplanting, harvesting etc. In irrigation women were seldom employed either for drawing the bucket filled with water and emptying it at the well-head. Women’s social boundaries were also restricted, affecting their mobility. These social boundaries also varied, depending on where a woman is in her life cycle or the caste or community that she belonged. Women from the upper caste were burdened with social restrictions and could not move freely. But the women of the lower classes and those belonging to different sections of working class were always engaged in productive activities. But the continued employment of the lower class
women in the agricultural fields was due to the economic necessities for the subsistence of their families.

There were marked variations in the participation of women in agriculture sector among different regions of Uttar Pradesh. These variations depended upon certain socio-economic factors such as purdah system, migration, and lower wages. The Hill districts in U.P. witnessed a large participation of women workers in agriculture because there was no purdah and also due to mass male migration in search of better employment opportunities. The Western regions had the lowest proportion of women agricultural workers because of the dominance of caste system and purdah. The Hills and Plateau had the second highest proportion of women workers after the Eastern Plans. Women in these divisions worked more freely in the fields.

Chapter 3 deals with the problems that were faced by women agricultural workers. The work in agriculture sector was unorganized therefore workers received no benefits as those received by their counterparts in the organized sector. And among them the condition of women workers was worst. Women’s work in agriculture sector was highly discriminated. Primarily women were given those tasks which were non-mechanized, more time consuming and required very hard
labour. For example transplanting being non-mechanized and was traditionally done by women labourers.

There were also no medical health facilities for women who were more prone to injuries. Both men and women may have serious health problems while working in agricultural fields. But women are likely to be affected more than men due to biological factors such as their menstrual cycle, reproductive function and menopause. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 was not applicable in the agriculture sector. There were no government records which monitored the health of women in the unorganized sector. Women’s exposures to a variety of pesticides were associated with spontaneous abortion, premature births, low birth weights, and birth defects.

Women also faced the brunt of poverty and were double burdened. They worked more than men but earned less. Under distress situations like male migrations they were forced to take over the tedious tasks of farm management along with household responsibilities.

Chapter 4 gives the lacuna in the Tenancy Acts and Inheritance Laws for not providing equal rights to women in agricultural land. In the male dominated society, land was owned and controlled by men and the women were deprived of agricultural land rights. The Chapter discusses in detail the defects in the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari and Land Reform
Act, 1950. This Act does not consider women as the class one heir. Although, a large number of women worked on agricultural land but their land ownership was not more than 2 per cent in the country. In Uttar Pradesh only 6 per cent of women legally owned land while the joint ownership over land was only 3 per cent. Therefore a serious limitation for women farmers was the lack of access to security of tenure and ownership of land. The risk of poverty and the physical well-being of women significantly depended on their direct access to income and productive assets such as land.

Although, the Land Reforms were enacted with a view to give better and improved rights to those who were within the category of deprived and also to the holders of limited rights. All the Acts however, only provided protection to women who were particularly widows. As far as inheritance laws were concerned in Uttar Pradesh, agricultural land was a state subject where land was not distributed according to the inheritance laws. Therefore, the recently amended Hindu Succession Act 2005 which gave right to unmarried daughter to hold agricultural land was not applicable in U. P.

Chapter 5 discussed the problem of wage disparity among male and female agricultural labourers. It was found that the situation of women agricultural labourers was both grim and pathetic. These women
worked hard in the fields but received lower wages than those received by men. There was division of labour between sexes which was reflected in a striking difference in the work done by men and women.

Women labourers in the agriculture sector were mostly under paid and sometimes unremunerated. This was because women’s work was ranked low and given lesser values while men’s work was more superior to women. In Uttar Pradesh the male-centered development ideology, recognized males as unitary heads and decision-makers, this legitimized and reinforced lower wages for women. Against this background, the state’s assertion of imparting equal wages for both men and women agricultural labourers, appeared weak and unconvincing and was unlikely to be operational. Apart from the differentials in wage for the same jobs, discrimination against women was strengthened by having lower rates for the jobs traditionally done by women, viz. sowing, weeding, transplanting, winnowing, threshing and harvesting, as against ploughing, which was normally done by men only. The two most important wage Acts viz., the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 and the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 failed to provide equal and minimum wages to women agricultural labourers.
Chapter 6 briefly discusses the entire scenario of women’s position in agriculture. It also gives various recommendations to improve the status of women agricultural workers.