ABSTRACT

Presently agricultural sector is facing immense pressure due to acute shortage of water and diminishing area under irrigation. Increasing the irrigated area seems to be a distant possibility. The only feasible option at sight is to manage the water efficiently. So, of late, the researchers and irrigation agencies have resorted to more flexible approach to irrigation management and started paying greater attention towards farmers' participation.

Though growing emphasis on users participation in irrigation management transfer had necessitated the identification and involvement of all the stakeholders, most of the irrigation intervention programmes do not necessarily lead to greater participation and empowerment of all stakeholders. Eventually, certain group remains grossly neglected due to intra-community power differences and social forces. While there may be many ways for identifying groups that are frequently marginalized, gender differences in power is a recurring pattern. Correspondingly, the literature on irrigation management and on farmers participation in Water Users' Association with a few exceptions, has been essentially gender blind. And often farmers' participation is limited to male farmers despite the fact that women are involved to a large extent in irrigated agriculture. The most common gender stereotype that has guided and shaped many irrigation policies, planning and interventions is that women are primarily housewives and mothers while men are farmers and irrigators. For the success of any development process it is imperative to adopt gender awareness approach. Overlooking women, as farmers or irrigators or water users will lead to ambiguity in understanding the determinants of the performance of irrigation system.

In order to address the above problems the study was intended to identify the "Gender Issues in Irrigation Management" with specific reference to gender participation in Water Users' Association and the actual barriers women face and
factors that hinder women from participating in WUA. The study was confined to the Lower Bhavani Project command located in the Erode district, Tamil Nadu, India. Using a stratified sampling technique 300 samples consisting of both women and men pattaholders were selected. Keeping in view the importance of study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed for data collection. An interview schedule was administered as a tool for quantitative data collection while focus group discussion was conducted to obtain qualitative information. Besides this, secondary data were also collected for supportive and supplemental information. Further, using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) the data were tabulated and analysed.

The conclusions drawn highlight that predominance of male headship among women pattaholders households, is one of the determining factors of male dominance. The land use pattern in the study area disapproves the basic assumption that men landowners are primary cultivators and women are dependents. As a patriarchal society, in spite of women being landowners they have little access to take major agricultural decisions and prevalence of contract labour system as a local production arrangement acts as an important determinant of women’s participation in agricultural activities. The study also identified that in addition to the prevailing social, cultural pressure and geographical position of land adequacy of water supply is greatly affected by gender. A significant finding of the study is that there is a unique rule for membership i.e. stipulating one representative for hundred acres of command, directly or indirectly excludes women and marginal men farmers from Water Users’ Association. In addition to membership criteria and organising process, the socio cultural barriers like lower caste farmers can not participate in WUA, women should abide by men’s decisions and social stigma forms a formidable obstacle in integrating women in Farmers’ Council. The persistent ideological dichotomy that women’s place is in the field while men’s place is in public forums constitute a significant barrier in practice to incorporate women as members in WUA.