

CHANGING GENDER CONTOURS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE: REEXAMINING THE PATRIARCHAL CLICHE IN RURAL SRI LANKA

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Abstract

In the backdrop of the primacy accorded to gender mainstreaming in neo liberal institutions by tracing the changes in the gender roles in cultivation and irrigation management based on primary data as well as secondary sources of information, this article argue that the patriarchal character of traditional irrigation institutions that largely excluded women from the performance of certain on farm and off farm task has been significantly altered by the establishment of modern user organizations along with the institutionalization of technological advancement coupled with male migration that engender inclusion and greater participation of women in the management of irrigation agriculture in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Gender Contours, Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM), Farmers Organization (FOs), Patriarchy, Irrigated Agriculture.*

Introduction

In accordance with the recognition of the central role of women in water management by the Dublin Principles in 1992, gender concerns in water development projects were not only incorporated in the resolution declaring (2005-2015 the International Water for Life Decade) but also women's secure access to water and land is recognized to be integral to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals 2016-2030 (Dasthagir, 2016) and Participatory irrigation management is perceived as an opportunity that creates a context for mainstreaming women's participation and gender equity in irrigation management (Peter, 2004).

Correspondingly, the promulgation of action plans and recommendations to enhance women's capacity to implement and manage water projects as well as provide them with equal access to information and decision-making channels prioritized the need to involve women and men in PIM at all levels of governance. With the turn of the twentieth century, (Dasthagir, 2013).

In the backdrop of the fact that while gender dimension is although apparently suffixed as a component to PIM programmers, implementation of strategies to include women with a view to enhance their participation and representation (Sopikam&Kulkarn, 2009) local traditions and customs as well as existing legal and social constraints pose challenges in involving women in governance in irrigation (Rao &Shyamala, 2002, ADB, 2008) This article attempts to examine the changing gender roles in traditional irrigation institutions vs. modern farmer organizations in Sri Lanka.

Gender Contours in Irrigated Agriculture

In Sri Lanka, women play a vital role in farming activities as well as house hold course. Women's contribution to subsistence production (farm/income generating activities) is counted as unpaid family work. Nonetheless, Evidences from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and India, affirm that women's participation in WUAs is much lower than that of men (Van Kooppen and Mohammed, 2006).

Such women exclusion arises from the common sense perception of men as irrigators on the basis of their role in opening and closing farm gates or field gates which are universally considered a man's job (Dasthagir, 2009). Further, official records accord the formal status of farmers and irrigators to men on the criteria of holding title to land. Consequently, despite the evidences revealed by several studies about women's active participation in irrigation tasks, their participation and representation in the governance in irrigation to a greater extent is neither socially accepted nor officially approved (Zwarteveen 2006, Dasthagir, 2014). Accordingly, restrictions on the membership of WUAs, Women's hesitation to be part of organizations dominated by men, Lack of information available to women, Lack of gender awareness by the project staff involved in establishing WUAs, Most by-laws restricting WUAs membership to the registered landowners in a hydraulic unit who are engaged on a full time basis in farming culminate in the nonparticipation or absence of women in WUAs (Dasthagir 2009).

Thus, Gender discrimination can limit the women's and men's chances to access vital water resources, by placing restriction in their autonomy. Further, Attitudes such as, "Women should - or should not - do this and that" or "Men are supposed to do this - but not that", may prevent either women or men action regarding water use, access or management" (Cap Net etc., 2006). Under such conditions, masculine hegemony and male proxy representation are not uncommon in the activities of WUAs (Dasthagir, 2014). Who govern water, and addressing gender and water together acknowledges these imbalances and seeks to ensure that the contributions of both men and women are recognized.

Women Exclusion in Traditional Irrigation Institutions in Sri Lanka

Despite their prominent role in irrigated agriculture, the patriarchal perception of men as providers, Leaders and decision makers eclipse the roles and contributions of women in the agrarian community in Sri Lanka. Being a patriarchal rural social structure the traditional irrigation institution employed female labor force as unpaid and invisible domestic work in the cultivation activities as well as performance of irrigation tasks. Besides, the reproductive role of women and their primacy to domestic sphere undermine their contribution to agriculture.

Traditional role of women in the water management and agriculture sector was largely impeded by the patrilineal customs. At the same time, the traditional concepts of labor participation, with its strong connotation of agro rituals prevailed. Concomitantly, traditional irrigation leadership was preferred for men (Leach, E. R. 1971). Thus customary laws and traditional Social norms have been prejudiced in favor of men, which sometimes constitute a barrier to women's access to resources. Though contributing a major part of their lives to providing Services and support the opportunity to be placed in decision making roles or have control over assets were limited under traditional irrigation institutions (Weerakoon, S & Motebennur, M. 2017).

The situation of women in Sri Lanka has been influenced by patriarchal values embedded in traditional, colonial, and post-independence societies, by relatively liberal traditional laws and gender inequality reflected in the legal system, and by norms introduced during the British colonial administration. In the transition years following colonial rule, Sri Lankan policymakers introduced a social policy package of free health and education services which dramatically improved women's quality of life and gradually women's participation to several sectors has improved including agriculture and water management sector as well..

Neo liberal Gender Contours in Irrigation Management

The neo liberal institutional reforms in irrigation ushered in an era of user participation in the governance of irrigation systems in about 60 countries covering around 80 percent of the global irrigated area since the last decade of the 20th century. In response to the declining performance of large-scale irrigation systems, the post - bureaucracy created conditions for the involvement of

water users in the management and in operation and maintenance of irrigation schemes with a view to improve the performance of these schemes, as well as reduce the financial commitment of governments with the creation of Several Water User Associations (WUAs) across the world.

In 1980's when participatory irrigation management became established as a state policy in Sri Lanka, O&M of the tertiary systems were handed over in many schemes to newly formed Farmer Organizations (FOs). Nonetheless, IMT related studies frequently remark on poor participation of women in Farmers Organizations activities during the formative stages due to women exclusion traditional irrigation institutions (Athukorala&Zwartveen, 1994).

However, the traditional role of women has been considerably taken away by mechanization of agriculture and technological innovations. As a result of improvement in farm practices and technology adoption/mechanization mitigated traditional labor role of women as human power replaced by machine power. Accordingly, this transition ended the traditional gender division of labor in agriculture and largely liberated women from conventional laborious agricultural tasks (Yan der Molan, 2001).

Past two decades witnessed women's participation in certain tasks hitherto constrained due to the perception of ritual and pollution has been gradually changing in non-traditional areas as land preparation and threshing (Athukorala, K & Weerakoon. P, 2014)

Even present trend in the traditional villages (which are under the irrigation projects) Wijepala et al, 2017 have pointed out that, there is a perceptible increase in the extent of women participation in certain activities of irrigated agriculture. Moreover, women participation also has witness a significant progress in the general body meetings of Farmers Organizations. At the same time, breaking the taboo on entering the threshing field, involvement of women is noted as being extended beyond the traditional boundaries. In the Muruthawa village under the Bathalagoda irrigation scheme the number of Stakeholders outnumber the registered members of farmers Organization due to registered land fragmentation and male out migration that results in greater women proxy participation in the management of irrigation system. It is also recorded that Women in FOs are highest in villages with high rate of widows and Bin marriages (Van DeerMolan, 2001).

Correspondingly, Feminization of agriculture and end of traditional institutions on the one hand, neo liberal policy and improved irrigation and farming technology on the other facilitate greater women participation in the management of irrigated agriculture as well as membership, participation and representation in farmer organization of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

Neo-liberal policy has accentuated the need for greater Gender participation in irrigated management in terms of its relevance for agricultural production, improved irrigation management and governance of irrigation systems world over. Concomitantly, gender being a crucial factor in attaining sustainable development goals, this paper highlights the impact of neo liberal institutional reforms on gender participation in the post bureaucratic governance in irrigation of Sri Lanka. Based on ideas and evidences gathered from research studies, this article while articulating that the traditional irrigation institutions due to their patriarchal character engaged female labor force in agriculture prohibiting their participation in governance in irrigation, and argues that, the Neo liberal water institutions have been instrumental in creating space for women membership, participation and representation in farmer organization for the governance of irrigation systems in Sri Lanka.

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