

Final Report

Gender Review

of

MSSRF Project Titled

Empowering rural women for enhanced household food and nutritional security and income generation through participatory process in cultivation, processing and value addition of locally important under-utilised food grains.

By

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## Background

The project is located in four sites: Kolli Hills (Namakkal district, Tamil Nadu); Kundura (Koraput district, Orissa); Haveri and Dharwad districts (Northern Karnataka) and Chamoli and Rudraprayag districts (Uttarakhand). Its main objectives are to facilitate and ensure:

1. Effective application of farmer participatory technological interventions together with appropriate capacity building for increasing the productivity and production of locally important under-utilised small millets
2. Reduction of women's drudgery through simple technological solutions to crop management and post-harvest processing
3. Value addition and developing farm-to-market linkages
4. Nutrition education and improvement in nutritional status
5. Expansion of research activities

### Purpose of the Review:

Gender relations are socially constructed relations between men and women, women and women, and men and men, the specificities of which are mediated by particular social, economic and policy contexts. As each of the project locations constitute very different agro-ecological systems and policy contexts, reflected in diverse cropping patterns, lifestyles and social and cultural relations, the purpose of a gender review is to highlight some of the distinctive features of each of these systems, which can contribute to context-specific and tailor-made interventions to empower rural women as per the overall goals of the project.

Kolli Hills and Kundura both have a majority of tribal population, the Malaiyalis in the former and the Desiyas in the latter. While both men and women participate equally in cultivation and contribute to household livelihoods amongst these tribal communities, differences in larger economic environments give rise to substantive differences in gendered patterns of work. Migration to the estates of Kerala and other locations is high in Kolli Hills, leading to a shortage of labour in the locality, while such opportunities hardly exist in Kundura. The latter further has extremely poor infrastructure and services – roads, water, education and health all pose problems. This has implications for gendered divisions of work, control over income and assets.

North Karnataka has a caste society, with a majority of Vokkaligas, though a considerable Muslim population too exists. Both are highly patriarchal, with decision-making largely in the hands of men, even though women are active in household farms and other household industries. Uttarakhand too has a Hindu majority and while caste divisions remain strong, as a large proportion of men migrate to the plains, rural activities are mainly managed by women. The history of participation in the Chipko, anti-liquor and other resistance movements has also made women here confident, articulate and able to take decisions, irrespective of their levels of literacy. These differences in context have implications for local gender relations, and consequently the nature of interventions that seek to empower women.

A crucial element shaping gender relations is the gendered division of work. In most contexts, including those discussed here, women are fully responsible for all reproductive work, including cooking, cleaning, washing and care-work, which can often be both arduous and time-consuming in rural contexts where fuel, water and health facilities are not easily available. In Uttarakhand, for instance, some women still have to travel large distances to collect fuel and fodder, taking them 4-5 hours per day. In addition, households engage in a range of productive work including agriculture, but extending to other livelihood activities such as wage labour, migration, the collection and sale of non-timber forest produce and so on. With men often more mobile and able to leave home for longer periods of time, and also commanding higher wages in the market in relation to women (due to sex-segregation of tasks), women tend to get confined to agriculture and village-based activities, which involve hard labour but bring relatively lower returns. Moving towards gender equality then makes it imperative to address the imbalances between labour contributions and returns to labour. Despite the project having a specific focus, it is important therefore to keep in mind the larger livelihood context and the balance of work done by men and women in order to make a positive difference in a sustainable manner.

The following issues need to be kept in mind and analysed in each specific context:

- Gendered labour contributions to different crops, including nutri-cereals (under-utilised crops such as millets), at household level;
- Engagement with wage labour and income generating activities more broadly;
- Gendered access to key resources – land, labour, credit (including kisan credit cards), extension information, markets etc;
- Women's control over resources – cash, credit, farm/crop outputs, technology;
- Decision-making and influence over household allocations – how far are women's labour contributions to crop production recognised, and does this influence the allocation of incomes and household resources to needs prioritised by women.

### Methodology and Limitations

This preliminary gender review was undertaken over a very short period of time. Rather than depth of analysis, the attempt here is therefore to highlight a few issues in each location, based on interactions with men and women in project villages as well as the staff engaged with the project, that need further exploration. While the limitation of time has meant a level of superficiality and an inability to detail gender relations and roles as they exist in each location, what is clear is that context is important for understanding gender relations, and there are variations even within each site based on a range of factors including economic and social status, land-holding size and types of crop grown and household structure. A further limitation was the inability to organise separate meetings with men and women or conduct in-depth individual interviews to sharpen insights into particular problems or needs.

Visits were made to Kolli Hills and Dharwad in February and to Uttarakhand in March, while interaction with a group of women in Kundura was organised through video conferencing

facilities. I briefly review specific issues in each project site before making some overall conclusions and recommendations.

### Kolli Hills

Meetings were organised with men and women in four villages, with members of KHABCOFED (a federation of SHGs and Farmers Clubs established about two years ago) and project staff during the visit. MSSRF has had contact with these groups over the past several years, leading ultimately to the formation of the federation, the purpose of which is to support value addition and marketing of various products produced by SHGs and Farmers Clubs in the villages.

Discussions pointed to several changes that have taken place in the local economy over the last two decades. With improved road connectivity in the mid-1980s, commercial/industrial agriculture, especially tapioca production, has rapidly increased, at the cost of food crops such as millets. With cash advances for production and assured buyback, tapioca is not just risk-free, but offers almost three times higher cash returns compared to millets<sup>1</sup>. The availability of cheap rice through the PDS has further strengthened the process of commercialisation, as rice and wheat are cheaply and easily available. More recently, coffee and pepper plantations have been introduced on the hill-slopes, mainly by large farmers from outside the region who have bought land locally. While risky for the poor, the demonstration effect locally in terms of high returns has been irresistible, with many beginning to experiment with these crops<sup>2</sup>.

While mixed cropping (involving different combinations among finger millets (*ragi/varagu*), little millets (*samai*), foxtail millets (*thinai*), pulses, mustard) using the broadcast method is widely practised, inter-cropping in rows promoted by the project is not widely followed. Key reasons for this is the higher labour requirement for row planting, shortage of labour and lack of mechanical tools to save labour time and cost. Weeding is more laborious for mixed crops, particularly food crops (millets and legumes) – an activity performed almost exclusively by women. Most important perhaps is the absence of drudgery-free post-harvest processing facilities especially for foxtail millets and little millets (both have tight outer glumes) and the current practices of threshing, which add stones and mud to the grain, necessitating its manual cleaning prior to the tedious hand pounding by women. In the case of rice, hulling units are locally available, while locally accessible grain pulverisers help in processing wheat. An adaptation of this pulveriser is also available, through the intervention of project, for the post-harvest processing of ragi (finger millets). Children are now in school and not available to work on the farms or help at home. It is not surprising then that the cultivation of millets has declined sharply over this period, with households barely planting 5-20 cents of land with millets – the preference is to migrate to Erode for paddy harvesting, returning with a few bags

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<sup>1</sup> Rs 30-50,000 for tapioca versus Rs 10,000 for millets at current prices per acre of production.

<sup>2</sup> A combination of coffee and pepper can give an income of Rs 40,000 per acre, and can also be combined with other work.

of paddy, and to Kerala, for working in the plantations, returning with substantial cash wages, useful both for further investment and consumption expenses. Both men and women are engaged with such migration.

Most of the millet production is utilised for home consumption, older people in particular enjoy the taste of millets. Its nutritional value is also recognised. Yet this is consumed only occasionally, perhaps once or twice a month, due to the problems of processing and lesser production. The younger generation in fact has not developed a taste for millets. Without addressing the problems of processing, it is unlikely that consumption can be increased and local nutrition improved.

Several problems were identified with the production and consumption of millets:

- Lower profitability in cash terms per acre of land compared to alternatives available;
- More female labour required for weeding;
- No facilities for processing little and foxtail millets – the only option is hand-pounding by women and this is not preferred, as both cleaning and pounding are laborious tasks;
- Intercropping with tapioca is seen as difficult, for purposes of weeding, but is further perceived to reduce the output of tapioca; and
- Absence of cattle for ploughing the land.

Women's Self help groups (SHGs) exist, but are mainly engaging with thrift and credit activities. While several women have secured training at the University of Dharwar and other sites in value addition products, this has so far not been a viable proposition (in terms of both scale and returns). A case in point is the ragi malt unit in Padasolai. Following trainings in Dharwar and Bangalore, a group of four women first started producing ragi malt. They would take their production of 10-15 kg to Namakkal and sell it in a few shops themselves. They enjoyed the experience and it gave them confidence, though clearly the returns were not high and the enterprise not viable. In an effort to change this, the project tried to motivate the group members to increase production to at least 100 kg per month. A male entrepreneur, a member of the farmers club, offered to do so and took over the enterprise from the women. While he has raised the monthly production to the promised 100 kgs, he faces considerable difficulties in securing female labour for this enterprise. There are several reasons for this. The work is not regular (only 12 women days a month) due to inadequate market linkage, the wage is lower than the market rates (Rs 60 per day versus Rs 100 both in NREGA sites and in the local plantations), but most importantly perhaps, the women voiced a lack of control and identity. While earlier they were themselves the producers, travelling to Namakkal to market their produce, however small, now they feel that they have lost control over the production process, and have been converted into labourers. This shift has led to a loss of interest in the enterprise. Finally, in the absence of working capital, sourcing cheap raw materials remains a problem, especially in a context of low production, not just marketing, this too curtailing profitability.

While men here do control most of the marketing, women are well versed with the prices and do seek accountability from their men. But in terms of control over money, it is still men who dominate and control the money from crops; women however retain control over money earned directly through wage labour or other activities. This is an important point, as while household farming is a joint activity, equally involving men and women's labour time, the control over the output and the money earned from it, remains in male hands. Women therefore do seek both recognition for their contributions to household farming and opportunities for independently earning money which they can control. Women here however do retain some influence over final decisions, both in terms of shifts in cropping pattern as well as income allocations, given in particular the prevalent patterns of migration and often extended male absence from the village (leading to dependence on female labour) as well as constraints on their own labour time.

### Key Issues and Recommendations:

One sees here some significant trade-offs in terms of choices that people make: between food and cash crops; migration and value addition; and provision of labour versus control of activity, in particular by women's groups. A series of recommended interventions emerge from this analysis:

- Research into and provision of machinery/technology that can reduce drudgery (particularly weeding and post-harvest processing) and save women's time;
- When designing value addition activities, several issues need to be kept in mind. These include the availability of raw materials, regularity and surety of work, women's labour time availability, profitability/returns, access to working capital for enhancing returns and control over the enterprise/incomes therefrom. While recognising the pressures of a time bound project, value addition may then need to be taken up in a phased manner.
- The issue of market linkages needs to be carefully explored. Apart from the need for regular supplies, price and quality standards too need to be established. Given the need to enhance millet production in the first instance, it may be useful to explore linkages with bulk buyers such as bakeries rather than the final consumer.
- In terms of research, apart from the effects of interventions on incomes and productivity, the implications for gendered labour contributions, decision-making, and control over both resources and allocations, needs to be monitored. This would vary across different crops, different soil and gradient types (uplands, midlands, lowlands) and by type of intervention (cropping practices such as in terms of sowing, manuring, introduction of labour and time saving equipment etc). A focus on both the technical-material and social-symbolic dimensions are important to gauge the impacts of the project on the empowerment of rural women. The benchmark survey does not fully address these issues.

## Kundura, Koraput

A video conference was held with women from five villages associated with the project. The problems encountered were to some extent similar to those in Kolli Hills, but the context is different. Poverty is widespread, services hardly exist and there are no opportunities for migration outside the village. Employment under NREGA is however available. Most of the women are not educated, and whilst their children do go to school, few are able to get through secondary schooling. While poverty and the demands of farming are reasons for dropout, children not understanding Oriya, Hindi or English also contributes to this process. Ill-health and infectious diseases are widespread, including malaria, backaches, water-borne diseases etc, but they seek medical assistance only if they have money to go to the doctor and buy medicines.

Ragi (finger millet) continues to be cultivated (2-3 acres per household) and regularly consumed everyday, unlike in Kolli Hills, where it may now be cooked at most once or twice a month. The women felt that ragi gruel (*mandia pej*) gave them more energy for work and kept them healthy. The productivity of ragi has improved substantially with line sowing from 1.5 to 4-5 quintals per acre, over the past few years with project intervention. The problems with ragi cultivation relate here too to weeding and labour shortage (as this coincides with work in the rice fields), though post-harvest processing is undertaken in the rice mills. A few weeders have been introduced, which save substantial time (one day versus 10 days for manual weeding) and involve joint effort by men and women, in contrast to manual weeding, which is essentially women's task. Here too, men largely engage with the markets, but similar to Kolli Hills, women are aware of the prices, hence monitor cash incomes, especially since liquor consumption by men at the local markets is commonplace. Usually, surplus rice is sold a little at a time in the local markets to meet household expenses of health, education, labour costs etc.

Ragi malt production has been tried out by a women's group, making about 25 kg in three days, but there remain issues with marketing, working capital for purchase of raw materials, storage and time. If these are addressed, production and earnings too can be stepped up. Another group runs a mill (can be used for both rice and ragi), operated by a local boy for a few hours a day. He is paid a monthly wage of Rs 150 and the balance of milling charges collected goes to the group. Another group engages in fish farming, supported by their husbands. The groups engage in thrift and savings and provide loans to members as per need at an interest rate of 2 per cent per month. As they have always sold small quantities of ragi and rice in the local markets to meet health, education and consumption needs, the women's groups are considering undertaking trading activities (such as paddy) to enhance their resources, as this is both safer (less risky) and requires less time than value addition activities. The challenge for the project is to provide holistic support to the women in terms of skill upgradation, access to working capital and infrastructure such as storage facilities, alongside access to new markets that can help them engage with value addition activities. While attempting to substantially enhance their earnings, the purpose would also be to improve their

overall quality of life through improving access to information, services and labour-saving technologies.

### Key Issues and Recommendations

The area faces problems of water availability, road and market access, poor schooling and health services as well as absence of alternative employment opportunities. While the focus in this project is on millets, it is important to take a holistic approach to women's livelihoods especially in such deprived contexts, in order to make a difference. While some interventions may not directly be related to millets, in providing women support in other aspects of their work, whether productive or reproductive, they can also contribute to meeting the goals of this project, which includes the overall empowerment of women.

- As all households have land, focus to be on improvements in agronomic practices that can help increase productivity.
- Ensure that drudgery reduction and labour saving technologies such as weeders, mills etc. are controlled by women's groups.
- Working capital and storage facilities to enable trading activities by women's groups to be facilitated, in the first instance, while ideas and linkages for value addition are developed.
- Facilities for saving any cash surplus generated as a result of increased production and value addition activities to be provided.

### Dharwar/Haveri

Four village level meetings and a discussion with the staff were organised during the visit. The association of UAS with the villages here is more recent and is largely technical rather than organisational. Most villages however have SHGs, organised by other NGOs or the government, often federated, and with a lead organiser from the village. Most of them are involved in savings and credit activities, borrowing money from the group for agriculture, dairying, petty trade etc at interest rates of 2 per cent per month. Interestingly, unlike in the other sites, most men appear to be existing defaulters, hence don't have access to credit (this information however needs to be checked), but depend largely on their wife's membership of an SHG for this purpose. SHGs here seem to have definitely enhanced women's self confidence, decision-making ability and control over money. Women members reported gaining knowledge, the confidence to go to the bank, being able to renovate their homes and contribute to agriculture (which got them some recognition from their men).

A few SHGs have initiated group activities too, particularly related to milling, grinding chilli, making vermicelli and bread (*roti*) production. They take a daily wage of Rs 50 for days worked, and the profits are deposited in the group. These activities however are largely confined to a few hours in the evening, as during the day they can earn Rs 70 for agricultural wage work, if not working on their own farms. Apart from labour, there is also a problem of



irregular electricity supply (and lack of capital for investing in an oil engine), leading to an underutilisation of equipment and hence limited production and earnings.

Men and women are jointly engaged in agricultural activities, but the cropping pattern varies even within this region, especially in terms of the extent of crop diversification. While two villages had a mix of little millets (Savi/Same), cotton, sunflower, groundnut, jowar, cowpea and blackgram, a third focused on paddy, maize and jowar. Work is available all year round, hence out-migration is negligible, though gender wage gaps do exist<sup>3</sup>. While one village expressed a preference for mixed cropping, others tended to be mono-cropped, the latter seen as easier to manage from the perspective of labour.

In terms of consumption, they eat jowar *roti*, rice and very occasionally millets. Rice is available easily and cheaply through the PDS, so they usually consume this and sell their own produce to meet household expenses. The main reason why all households still cultivate some millets is not for food (the problem of processing has led to a decline in its consumption), but rather for the straw, which when mixed with maize and groundnut makes a good feed for cattle. There is also a prevalent belief in one of the villages that consumption of millets lead to joint pain and swelling in the face. Cleaning and removal of stones needs to be done manually as available sieves are unable to do so effectively. Though the millets can be hulled in the local rice mill, there is a lot of breakage and low recovery of less than 50 per cent. It is also not as tasty as hand-pounded grain, both of which are laborious processes. Apart from processing, weeding too remains a problem, and as in Kundura, women here reported a shortage of labour during the harvesting period; as millets mature at the same time as paddy.

One of the villages visited had a majority Muslim population. Here women were mainly engaged in home-based *bidi* production, while men grew and traded in betel leaves. In this village, the Hindus, though in a minority, are the major landowners. Given the population composition, men tend to dominate and women are rarely given an opportunity to speak in public. Women's SHGS do exist; unfortunately we did not have an opportunity to interact with them separately.

A key issue that emerged is the lack of control by women over household decision-making, including around cropping decisions, and allocation of income earned from the crops, given that marketing is almost exclusively done by men. As in Kolli hills, they only control self-earned income, and this is largely used for household consumption expenses and education of the children. All farm income is controlled by men; while some women are able to give suggestions, especially in nuclear households, the final decisions remain with the men.

### Key Issues and Recommendations

Work both in agriculture and non-farm enterprises is available locally in the villages and in Hubli-Dharwar towns, hence migration from this area hardly exists. While women are

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<sup>3</sup> While men can earn Rs 100 per day, for women the wages range from Rs 50-80.

engaged in all agricultural activities, men remain totally in control of the household resources and decision-making.

- Capacity-building needs to focus on both men and women, with women too receiving production-related training and men sensitised on nutrition, as ultimately they control the money used for consumption.
- There is a need to focus on drudgery-related interventions to save women's labour time. This could include technical innovations for agricultural processes including weeding and post-harvest storage and processing, but also other activities that reduce time spent in reproductive work like fuelwood collection. The introduction of fuel-efficient and smokeless stoves is one possibility under consideration.
- Research needs to:
  - a) focus on seed varieties and selection to ensure different maturity periods in order to better fit local and gendered work cycles.
  - b) explore how interventions have intensified gendered workloads and enhanced yields, and how in turn the returns are used. Are women's contributions recognised and is some of the surplus income allocated to addressing their priorities including improving household nutrition.
- Share a few key tools relating to gender planning (Harvard framework) and papers discussing useful indicators for measuring empowerment and decision-making (e.g Kabeer, Alsop) as well as the intersection between labour and crop rights (e.g Carney on the Gambia).

### Uttarakhand

During the visit, meetings were conducted with women (and a few men) at two locations, one each in Rudraprayag and Chamoli, but with representatives of all four project villages, and with the project staff. HESCO's interventions focus on making technology available to communities and thereafter depending on both the demonstration effect and community support for its upscaling. They have developed expertise in rainwater harvesting, power generation through improved water mills, value addition for both millets (biscuits, laddoos) and fruits (jams, jellies, juices and pickles of oranges, apples, plums, apricots, mangoes etc).

In the Rudraprayag villages, the main crops are paddy (kharif) and wheat (rabi), though millets<sup>4</sup>, pulses and beans are grown alongside during the kharif season and mustard during rabi. Millet production has gradually reduced due to poor seeds and low productivity, rather than competition with other crops, as land is not really a huge constraint<sup>5</sup>. While post-harvest processing remains manual, this is also the case for other crops such as paddy, which are threshed manually (with their feet), before being taken to the mill, hence not considered a huge disadvantage. In the Chamoli villages, mandua (finger millet) remains a part of the

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<sup>4</sup> The main varieties are finger millet (mandua), barnyard millet (jhangora) and grain amaranth (chaulai).

<sup>5</sup> Land can also be leased in from those who have surplus for no charge, as the lessor wants to ensure that the land is used and does not become wasteland, rather than earn money from it. Further, the quality of land used for paddy and millets are different.

regular diet, with rotis of mandua and wheat being consumed every other day. Here, especially in the high altitude village, potato is the major crop in the kharif season, along with finger millets, grain amaranth and red kidney beans, while wheat and potatoes are also grown during the rabi season. In the roadside village, paddy is grown in the kharif and potato only as a rabi crop.

The general problems facing agricultural production across the villages are those of timely water availability and the menace of animals such as the monkey and wild boar, apart from the near absence of post-harvest processing facilities. Marketing, especially for potatoes, remains a problem, as in the absence of local cold storages or state-regulated collection points, it is entirely controlled by contractors, who pay a low price of between Rs 200-300 per quintal of potatoes, and this only after they make the sale.

Apart from ploughing and some assistance with bund preparation, all agricultural activities are undertaken by women as men are mostly migrant or employed locally in the private or public sector as wage labour or petty administrators/workers. While men bring home cash, women's labour contributions extend beyond farming and household work to fuel and fodder collection from the forests. While all of them maintain cattle (cows and buffaloes), these are mainly for the dung that they use to manure their fields, rather than milk, the production of which is very low. Growing some fodder crops on their bunds could potentially reduce the time women spend in collecting fodder.

Most women in these villages have an account with the savings scheme run by HESCO, wherein they deposit any savings once a month, but can withdraw it any time on a need basis. Some of the women have organised into groups to undertake value addition activities. One such group produced laddoos of grain amaranth for sale at the Badrinath shrine. This is a profitable enterprise and has the potential for scaling up, given the large number of pilgrims who visit the shrine each year. HESCO is currently in negotiations with the Temple Committee to get this laddoo the status and recognition of an offering to the deity (*Prasad*). A few other women have set up a shop on the main road to sell juices and other products to the pilgrims during the season, supporting in the process other women who are engaged in adding value to horticultural products. Still others organised a labour group which took on contracts for road construction works as part of the NREGA. Though the programme only provided 41 days payment, they organised the work efficiently and ensured that each member received the full wage in her post office account. Even though not formally organised into SHGs, women here have a history of collective action, which enables them to work together and support each other, but also have a clear sense of marketability and market linkages, further facilitated by HESCO.

#### Key Issues and Interventions:

While women here are economically active and almost single-handedly manage both local productive and reproductive work, opportunities for earning income are limited, especially in the remote villages, as is access to information and other resources such as credit and

technology. Labour sharing is widely practised, but women's labour time remains at a premium, given their multifarious responsibilities. HESCO has already attempted to build on women's strengths, and provide them support, especially technical support for enhancing production, reducing drudgery and expanding opportunities for value addition, which can contribute to diversifying diets and improving nutrition but equally open up opportunities for earning incomes.

- Further strengthen existing interventions in terms of cropping practices (line sowing, manuring and use of vermi-compost, local seed multiplication etc) as well as technologies for threshing and post-harvest processing of millets.
- Continue innovations to reduce women's drudgery by ensuring water availability close to their homes (through rainwater harvesting), planting fodder crops in the field bunds, exploring the possibility of fuel-efficient stoves and so on.
- In terms of value addition activities, costs, time spent and returns all need to be factored in. Returns can be economic, in terms of earning incomes, but equally in terms of contributing to improved nutrition. Creating market linkages is already a priority activity and this needs to be continued. For instance, if finger millet biscuits need to be promoted in the rural context, it may be worth considering a linkage with the ICDS or mid-day meal programme. The same could also be explored for the sale of horticultural products such as pickles, jams and jellies.
- One area that needs consideration is providing women access to decentralised storage facilities. While this may not be a critical consideration for millets at present (but rather for potatoes), with an expansion of production and value addition, this is likely to emerge as a major need.
- The research component needs to monitor each intervention from the productivity dimension, but equally in terms of its implications on women's labour time and control over both the output and the decisions relating to its allocation.

#### Some Common Issues

- Technology interventions (agronomic practices as well as machinery and equipment) need to be sensitive to the labour contributions of men and women and in particular address women's drudgery. These need to be located within an understanding of the larger livelihood context (including both productive and reproductive work) and the gendered division of labour therein.
- Women's access to resources, especially information, both in relation to productive and reproductive tasks, needs to be ensured. The interventions therefore need to be sensitive in their capacity-building efforts to ensure that they do not fall into the stereotype of directing production information to men and nutrition information to women. Gender sensitivity in information sharing would in turn strengthen women's bargaining position in their household and vis-à-vis the community.
- Where group activities or value addition enterprises are attempted, it is important to ensure women's control over the income. While women contribute equally to agricultural production, they do not receive a commensurate share of the benefits, whether in cash or kind, or in terms of addressing their priorities. Apart from

capacity-building and awareness generation to bring about attitudinal changes as discussed above, there is need to ensure recognition for women's work in agriculture by providing them rights over the crops they primarily cultivate as well as ensuring that any income earned by them is safe and available for their use when required.

- The methodology for the action research component is unclear in a majority of project sites. While a benchmark survey is being conducted, it lacks adequate information on the range of interventions undertaken, on gendered participation, decision-making and allocations. This needs to be addressed, with attention to elements of productivity, nutrition, labour requirements and control over earnings. Responsibility for documentation and research too needs to be clarified, as also the methodology for data collection and analysis. Within action research, participatory analysis methodologies are often helpful both for confirming the findings and for initiating discussion around further improvements and interventions.

### In Conclusion

It is worth reiterating the starting premise that gender relations are socially constructed, hence are not fixed, but do change with context. In all the four project locations discussed above, women are deeply involved in agricultural production, yet their degree of control over assets, including their own labour, is variable, and their say in household decision-making regarding resource allocations uncertain. Empowering rural women then implies enhancing the choices available to them as well as supporting their participation in decision-making processes that critically affect their lives.

This understanding provides the project with an opportunity to plan and make interventions in a way that facilitates a move towards greater gender equality. One way of enhancing women's choices is by addressing the issue of time, poverty and labour intensive work through technical innovations and drudgery-reducing interventions. Other strategies for enhancing their wellbeing are through nutritional improvements, facilitating an expansion of livelihood opportunities whether in terms of income earning, expenditure saving, social support networks, savings mechanisms and so on.

The advantage of action research is the possibility of closely monitoring each intervention in terms of its material and social impacts, discussing the emerging insights with the concerned women, indeed analysing the data in participatory ways, making space for taking corrective action if needed during the course of the project itself. This is a worthwhile methodology, with potential to be empowering, in so far as it can contribute to the building of research and analytical capacities at the community level, especially amongst the women participants.