

Empowerment of Women and Pathways to Development in the SAT of India : Insights from Gender-based Social Analysis

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This paper highlights the dynamics and pathways of development of rural women and men in the semi-arid tropics (SAT) of India. It chronicles a series of studies undertaken at ICRISAT which aimed at understanding the gender perspectives in agricultural research, inclusive of gender concerns for empowering men and women in the marginalized and vulnerable regions of SAT. The findings from the case studies show that empowering rural women (in particular) point towards recognizing the power of individuals (agency), enhancing their skills to change the context in which they live and thereby bringing about equitable and sustainable change and development. The distinctive view of empowerment in this study encompasses networks of relationships which help bring about change and improvement in the physical, economic, socio-cultural and political well-being of women (particularly formal and informal social networks). A sequential analysis is implemented using a series of related case studies conducted over a period of almost two decades (1992 to 2011) and complemented by analysis harnessing the VLS longitudinal household panel data. For example, how does technology uptake lead to empowerment particularly for marginalized groups including women and tribals? What stimulates gender-equitable change?

Empirical investigation using a gender sensitive social analytical framework illustrates that women groups emerge from their common interest for both individual and collective participation in household and community decision making and benefit sharing. In particular, the study observed that social networks play a crucial mediating role in the empowerment processes. Social networks and relationships expand the choices available to individuals or groups, for example, selecting and adopting seed technology from a range of choices and alternative investment options. It documented collective action that may lead to better access to resources, information, knowledge and even opportunities for political participation. The participation of men and women in groups or networks (that may

cross caste, class and gender barriers) mediate the empowerment of women and men, and enables them to be agents of change. The network analysis undertaken in this study effectively illustrate the dynamic interplay among individuals within households and institutions in a village economy, and the temporally evolving networks which leads to gender-equitable access, allocation and control of resources. There were differences in ways that social processes were used by men and women, because most of the time women did not use the formal networks directly. As social networks were seen to have developed either formally (through formal organizations) or informally - through kinship groups, neighborhoods networks, work groups, self-help groups, or other informal interactions – the study also determined the types of social networks that the marginalized groups usually associate with, as well as the networks that the powerful groups have access to, and the relationship between these two groups. Ultimately, it identified gender-differentiated social opportunities, constraints, and risks for more relevant and responsive social development interventions.