GENDERING THE COLLECTIVE: BEYOND FAMILY FARMING

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ABSTRACT

In the global concern with food security, poverty, and sustainable livelihoods, rather little attention has been paid to the institutional transformation of agriculture. The discussion has focused largely on the desirability or otherwise of small family farms (which constitute most farms globally) and large-scale commercial farms.\(^1\)

Some see substantial potential in smallholder family farms for providing food security and viable livelihoods, while others favour large commercial farms on grounds of economic efficiency. But neither institutional form adequately addresses the problems encountered by most farmers today. On the one hand, small farmers, and especially the growing proportion of women farmers, face serious resource constraints and poverty in developing countries. On the other hand, at least in the near future, agricultural development remains the main option for reducing rural poverty and absorbing the vast body of existing and new entrants to the workforce, given limited prospects for non-farm jobs. Large commercial farms appear unlikely to play this role. The situation thus begs for alternative models of farming involving smallholders, beyond family farming.

Could an alternative lie in a collective approach, namely group farming—wherein small farmers (and especially women) voluntarily pool their land, labour, capital and skills to create medium-sized enterprises (but without forfeiting rights in owned land), and cultivate jointly, sharing costs and benefits? Can this model provide a pathway to more sustainable livelihoods to millions of resource-constrained and often non-viable smallholders in developing countries? More particularly, what prospects of success do women’s collectives hold in overcoming collective action challenges? This talk will focus on these little researched questions.

Although farmer cooperation around marketing has been widespread, globally and historically (including in Europe and North America), typically this has not involved joint production of the marketed item, and hence does not pose the same challenges, or hold the same potential benefits, as the ‘fully integrated cooperation’ required in group farming.

The idea of group farming, in itself, is not new, but over the decades it has taken different forms: top-down socialist collectivisation; state-promoted cooperative farming in the 1950s and ’60s in newly independent post-colonial countries as part of agrarian reform; group farming undertaken in some European countries; and families forming groups voluntarily in many former socialist regimes, to overcome resource scarcity after decollectivisation of agriculture in the 1990s. These earlier cases, however, mainly involved male-managed farms where women’s contributions were often rendered invisible.

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\(^1\) Although family farms and smallholders are not identical categories, most family farmers can be surmised to be smallholders, given that by FAO figures at least 88% of the 570 million farms globally are family farms and 84% of all farms across 111 countries are under 2 hectares in size.
How can we “gender the collective”, such as to help women farmers improve their access to land and inputs, gain autonomy in making production decisions, exercise control over their output, and establish independent identities as farmers? Given the growing feminisation of agriculture, it is imperative to answer this question, not only for empowering women farmers economically, but also for increasing farm productivity and agricultural growth in developing countries. Equally, we need to know if such collectives could also empower women socially and politically?

A rare opportunity to address these questions was provided by two experiments begun in the 2000s in the Indian states of Kerala and Telangana. Constituted only of women, the groups lease in land to farm jointly, sharing labour, the cost of inputs, and the returns. Based on primary sample surveys in each state, Agarwal compares all-women group farms with small individual family farms (95% of which are male managed), in terms of productivity and profits.

Notably, Kerala’s groups strikingly outperform individual family farms, both in terms of their annual value of output per hectare and annual net returns per farm and per hectare, while Telangana’s group farms perform much worse than individual farms in annual output, but are equivalent in net returns. In both states, groups do much better in commercial crops than in traditional foodgrains. What factors underlie the divergent performances of Kerala and Telangana? What lessons can we draw from these examples for replication elsewhere, in terms of what works and what does not? This talk will provide some answers.