

3rd International Conference on **Agriculture & Horticulture**

October 27-29, 2014 Hyderabad International Convention Centre, India

The last mile: Novel strategies for reaching farm women

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Rural Women form a crucial resource in agriculture and the rural economy through their roles as farmers, labourers and Entrepreneurs. Women farmers are an essential part to the solution to ensure global food security. In India too, as majority of the rural women (73.9%) are involved in agriculture both as cultivators and agricultural labour but they generally have less access to land, seed, fertilizer, capital, credit, education and training. Farm Women therefore form an important clientele for the Last Mile Delivery which means reaching farm women with appropriate and timely advice and enabling them to access the inputs they require. In the study area of three selected states, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu the percentage of female agricultural labour are 21%, 9.1% and 18.4% higher than men agricultural labour. Moreover, the combined percentage of female cultivators and agricultural labour amounts to 83.8%, in Andhra Pradesh, 73.9% in Bihar and 79.4% in Tamil Nadu. Data was collected from 180 farm women from these three states with the objective of assessing their training needs to adopt improved rice production technologies. Farm women expressed the need for information on suitable varieties to be grown (48%) methods of planting to save water (21%), quality seed (27%) and control of insect pests and diseases (39%). Three comprehensive training programs were organized for farm women in Andhra Pradesh to impart knowledge and skills by the subject matter specialists in the area of expressed needs. Apart from training the novel strategy used to reach the farm women was the provision of the inputs in exchange for training attendance. A few of the other strategies that can be effectively used are, inputs distributed through a loan structure, accompanied by training, community seed banks run by women SHGs to ensure local supply of quality seeds. Formation of women farmers' groups thus facilitates the dissemination of agricultural innovations and providing access to farm inputs and credit facilities with the greatest benefit of a network of mutual support. Women Extension Volunteers' (WEV) can be trained for providing affordable extension delivery systems and increasing coverage to female farmers. ICTs can be used to reach women farmers to disseminate improved farming practices and close gender gaps in yields and productivity. Labour saving devices, increasing the access of women farmers to better seeds and fertilizer, farming advice and joint title or sole title to land will enable them to have greater harvests. Based on the large number of landless agricultural labour, training farm women in processing and value addition along with facilitating them to acquire processing technology or equipment may offer an opportunity to improve their economic status. These are some of the novel strategies that can be effectively used to reach the female farmers. Last Mile Delivery is thus a challenge for both private and public extension systems.

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