

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE AND FARMER ORGANISATIONS - IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Kusum Athukorala and Padma Weerakoon

### A. Introduction

After the 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). IMT related studies frequently remark on poor participation of women in FO activity (Athukorala and Zwarteveen 1994, Zwarteveen 1994 Athukorala 1996).

In 1993-96, as part of the IIMI Gender Program, Sri Lanka Gender Case Studies in gender and irrigation (SLGC) a study examining linkages between gender and irrigation was initiated in three irrigation systems in Sri Lanka. Two were in major irrigation systems based on dry zone reservoir systems in the North Central Province (NCP) and the third, in the highlands of the Central Province (CP) was a wet zone anicut system. The main objective of this study was to document and analyze gender roles in irrigated agriculture and irrigation management.

Field data collection for the study started in three systems, Rajangane (RG) and Kalankuttiya in Mahaweli System "H" (KL) in the NCP and Gampola Raja Ela (GRE) in CP in at the beginning of the Maha season in October 1993, and continued until the end of the Yala season in 1995. The selection of these particular systems and subsystems were influenced by the IIMI Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Study which was already being carried out in the same systems.

The main crop in RG was paddy in both seasons. In KL while Maha cultivation was predominantly paddy, the most profitable source of income for the families was OFC cultivation, mainly chillie in Yala even though water was made available only for cultivation on a bethma basis. In GRE cultivation was possible in the two Maha seasons observed as the system was closed in Yala for rehabilitation. Limited cultivation was carried out in water logged fields and by accessing a small stream. In GRE the irrigated land area is very small and thus irrigated agriculture is not seen as a substantial income source for the community.

The three systems were then at different stages of IMT. RG had undergone already undergone rehabilitation and turnover through the Major Irrigation Systems Project (MIRP) project; GRE was undergoing rehabilitation and was being turned over to FOs under the National Irrigation Rehabilitation Project (NIRP) project while in KL, one of the elected subsystems D3 305 was selected as a pilot canal for the proposed Mahaweli restructuring project. Within GRE, the two sites selected were Ulapane and Thambiligala, in KL it was D2305 and D3 305 in Galnewa block and in RG, tracts 9 and 11.

SLGC was primarily designed to explore gender relations in irrigated agriculture in Sri Lanka which had hitherto been a grey area. Therefore the study was specifically designed to collect qualitative and not quantitative data. Data was collected by using participant observation and structured and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data collected regarding income and expenditure including agricultural expenditure was later entered into formats and a database which was designed subsequently. The four major areas of research under which data was gathered are -

- 1) access and control over resources
- 2) farmer organizations
- 3) gender ideology
- 4) Gender division of labour

In every system, the sample selection of 30 households selected using PRA techniques including wealth ranking, representing different socio-economic categories.. Of the thirty households selected for study in each system 25 were landholders and 5 landless families. This group of landless poor were include in the study to ensure capture of data from the marginalized, landless families who are rarely observed in IMT studies due to being landless, who nevertheless contribute to the productivity of the system as well as subsist mainly on earnings in the system.

This group of 90 families were systematically monitored by the researchers throughout the four agricultural seasons covered by the study. Each family was visited once a week on a regular basis though there were occasional gaps. The number of respondent families had decreased at the end of the study due to families shifting out of the system and death of respondents.

In addition to the experiences of the longterm Sri Lanka Gender Case Study Program (SLGC) this paper makes reference to field observations from past and ongoing field experiences of studies carried out in Sri Lankan irrigation systems specifically field work carried out in the small tanks, INMAS systems of Huruluwewa and Ridiyagama in NCP and Southern Province (SP). Other field studies cited in this paper except Kome (1997) and Van der Molen (1997) did not focus particularly on gendered participation: however a 1992 study on cost effective rehabilitation strategies (ADRC/ECL 1992) did carry out a parallel survey of women in irrigation systems in 7 major systems.

The focus of this paper is the gendered participation in irrigated agriculture and on the the relatively limited involvement of women in Farmer Organizations (FOs) and discuss this discrepancy in terms of potential implications for the success of Participatory Irrigation Management policies, and the future well-being of women and their families.

## **B. What is Participatory Management ?**

**Participatory Irrigation Management has within the past decade assumed a key role in the rehabilitation, operation and maintenance of irrigation systems in Sri Lanka and is presently seen as the interaction of stakeholders with line agencies related to irrigated agriculture for the enhancement of operationalization and productivity with enhanced decision making powers being devolved on the users. It is expected that this would result in the optimizing of irrigation efficiency as well as agricultural productivity.**

**Therefore it is of paramount importance that the FOs should**

- facilitate adequate representation for not some but all the stakeholders in FOs;**
- provide a forum whereby their needs could be represented;**
- act as a conduit for a two-way exchange of information;**
- provide a supportive environment whereby optimum participation creates community empowerment and**
- become a means for achieving sustainable development.**

**By and large, the success of a participatory management program depends on the ability of the farmer organizations (FOs) to mobilize stakeholders to carry out relevant functions and fulfil the above listed expectations. Participatory management implies that all stakeholders have equitable access to the decision making fora.**

**The persons who live off irrigated agriculture in a system are not only landholders but also include leaseholders both legal and illegal, encroachers, traditional and non traditional 'ande' sharecroppers. All these groups are stakeholders in so far as they are dependent on irrigated water and cultivate irrigated land as sole or significant part of their livelihood strategies as well as contributing to the productivity of the systems.**

## **C. Who are the stakeholders in irrigation systems?**

**If FOs are to assume all the functions and roles that they are expected to assume, one crucial issue to be considered is the need to optimize stakeholder participation which then brings us to the question - who should be represented through FOs ?. There are various possibilities:**

**Legal landholders.** One problem encountered with granting FO membership status to legal landholders, is the problem of lands belonging to absentee landlords. These are worked either through sharecropping arrangements or leasing. The sharecroppers and leaseholders may not be involved in O&M activities organized by the FO. Field observations in 1998 in Mahaweli System H recorded the concerns of the FO office bearers about the impact of non participation of absentee landholders ( who they have termed “ sancharake saha teppal govi” - postal and touring farmers - due to their means of operating their holdings) on O&M of tertiary systems. The number of landholders in all systems under study is more than those actually resident. Eg. In D3 305, in Galnewa Block Mahaweli system H a system studied under SLGC and recently revisited, the number of allottees was 116 and the number of resident farmers was 75.

In the sample studied for the SLGC the landownership pattern was as follows. In GRE the lands are sinakkara or own land with some being devala lands belonging to the Hanguranketha Devale worked on traditional ande rights. In RG the land allotments in Tract 9 and 11 were different; In Tract 11 the allotment was 2 1/2 acres paddy and 1/2 acre highland. in Tract 9 3 acres paddy and 1/2 acre highland are settled under the Land Development Ordinance. In KL the original allotments of one hectare of paddy and 1/2 hectare of highland are transferable to a single inheritor usually the spouse. In RG too usually the landowner male or female had named the spouse as the inheritor. In systems settled under LDO such as Ridiyagama and Huruluwewa, some of the lands which are held under LDO were legally transferable to three persons; where there were more than this number of siblings the holding was legally held intact but in fact the families had devised systems of cultivating similar to the traditional thattumaru to promote equitable use among siblings. ( Table 3 Landownership in SLGC systems)

- 1) **Actual cultivators.** The group of actual cultivators includes at least some of the legal landholders (those who cultivate the land themselves), the second generation settlers who are leasing land from their parents, other leasees (both from within the system as well as from outside the system) and encroachers. It also includes those who assist the landholder in cultivating the fields, e.g. the family members, hired laborers and attam laborers. The responsibility for cultivation may also vary according to crop and system. In the Yala chillie cultivation in Kalankuttiya was seen as female labour intensive as against Maha paddy cultivation in the same system. ( Table 1 and 2 Gender Tasks in irrigated agriculture - SLGC)
- 2) **Irrigators.** The group of irrigators includes landholder-cultivators, family members of the landholder, hired and attam laborers and friends or relatives who are asked to irrigate the plot.

- 3) Providers of labor for maintenance. Among the people that provide labor for maintenance are the legal landholders and their family members, leasees and their families, and agricultural laborers.
- 4) Farm managers - decisionmakers which would include some landholders, leasees, family members of landholders and ande sharecroppers.

This list of potential membership criteria already shows that there are a large number of different people involved in the tasks and responsibilities related to irrigation, irrigated agriculture and irrigation management. The landholder is not necessarily the cultivator; actual cultivation is often done by combining the skills, experience and labor of a number of people; the task of irrigating may be done by someone who is not the landholder; the task of maintaining the canals and decisions regarding these tasks are often not concentrated in one person.

This brings us to the question of studying whether there is any way of deciding which of these tasks or qualifications is more important with respect to participatory management and involvement in FOs? Who should FOs represent and whom do they represent? Which stakeholders should they facilitate and which group would have access to the FO?

In reality, the problem of FO membership and representation is often solved at the local level. Various arrangements arise, based on the judgement of the leadership and the communities involved. In some FOs, for example, leasees and tenants, the operators of land irrespective of tenurial rights are invited to participate in FO meetings. Some are allowed to join not as full members but in a form of 'associate membership', where they have the right to attend meetings, to participate in discussions and to receive information. Associate members in some instances are denied the right to vote in some systems.

In most FOs, membership criteria evolve in a way that is acceptable to most people concerned. In GRE, RG and KL the participation was limited to landholders with a few occasions of representation by members of the family. In KL it was noted that even when women attended FO meetings as representative of the husband, there was a tendency to note the husband's name thereby presenting a skewed perspective on participation. A letter from the landholder may be necessary for the representative to be present at the FO meetings.

A recent field visit to Ridiyagama reveals that the IMD field staff has made innovative changes in FO representation in response to the needs of a system which has a high ratio of tenant farmers, both those with ande rights and leaseholders. In an adjustment of membership criteria in order to facilitate the needs of stakeholders, the IMD has made arrangements to facilitate the representation of tenant farmers, especially holders of traditional ande rights in the FOs while

ensuring that their attendance at meetings cannot be construed as impacting negatively on the rights of the legal landholder.

What is striking, however, is that whatever the actual criteria for membership that are being applied or adhered to, women are rarely considered as potential members of FOs by the agencies involved as institutional partners of participatory management. Although currently gender desegregated data on landownership and FO membership is not available with line agencies, all previous studies in IMT have observed that in most FOs, participation of women generally is very low. Is it that female landowners are rare in irrigation systems? Is it that FO participation is defined as participation in the meetings and not in O&M? Are women not eligible to become members, even if they are landholders in their own right according to the criteria defining FO membership? Or is it that they are not particularly interested in participating in FOs?

Legal landholders. There are no reliable data available in Sri Lanka about the number of female landholders in irrigation systems as compared to the number of male landholders. An estimate would be that the percentage of female landholders is somewhere between 20 - 40%. Many of those female landholders in the systems studied for SLGC are not allottees but widows, who have inherited the land from their husbands. However in System H there are also a number of women who had been allocated land at the original time of settlement. In the KL field site, .....% of all legal landholders are women, but the percentage of female FO members is much lower, especially when 'membership' is taken to mean active participation. (Table 3 landownership in SLGC)

Actual cultivators. What is the role played in irrigated agriculture by men or women? The traditional concepts of labour participation, with its strong connotation of religio-agro rituals have now given way before the forces of commercialism and modernization. Within the past decade in particular, women's participation in certain tasks hitherto constrained due to the perception of ritual pollution has been gradually changing in non-traditional areas as land preparation and threshing. In 1992 women in Minneriya were observed to be breaking the taboo on entering the threshing ground and rare instances of females ploughing both with tractor and buffalo were noted. Currently the involvement of women is noted as being extended over the traditional boundaries and involve breaking of century old gender norms especially in settlement schemes.

“Women have a particular role in the water sector.... as participants in certain stages of paddy farming ( principally transplanting, weeding, and harvesting, but also other stages) ( ADB 1994).

There are regional differences in the nature and degree of men's and women's participation in irrigated farming. While the traditional gender tasks defining gender ideology are yet in place in GRE where women engage in only transplanting and infilling

with some input into actual irrigation, the forces of modernization and economic necessity are seen as propelling communities to change in KL and RG.

Their actual involvement in agriculture related activities is also a function of the socio-economic position of the household. Tables 1 and 2 give an aggregate picture of the gender division of labor in the SLGC study sample. The tables show that in the Dry Zone systems, there is hardly any gender division of labor anymore, almost all tasks can be done by both men and women. The observed exception is the subtask of plowing within land preparation which is still seen as a predominantly male task and transplanting which is still a predominantly female task. Most women interviewed for SLGC agree that tasks which involve bending the back for a long period of time such as transplanting are not favoured by men. The harvesting and gathering of sheaves is shared while transporting to the threshing ground is usually a male task due to the weights of the bundles.

**In cultivating OFCs, the involvement of women is higher than in paddy cultivation, since women are believed to be better in cultivating crops which need more intensive attention such as chillies, tomatoes and onions. In KL, the female participation in Yala is seen as very high in all tasks as chillie is the predominant crop for the seasons and this is a female labour intensive cultivation ( Table 2 ) Even such tasks as spraying pesticides for OFCs is sometimes carried out in KL by women. This is usually in the face of societal disapproval and their own husbands' prohibition as they want to save the expenditure incurred on wage labour as well their confidence in their own ability to do a thorough job.**

**“ Women do not spray agro chemicals. But Seelawathie is some woman, though old. She works like a man.”**  
**( comment on Seelawathie, woman farmer, KL, SLGC field diaries)**

**In the past in traditional villages women did not enter the threshing ground until the paddy had been measured as it was feared that pollutive nature of women may affect the harvest (Leach 1971 ). More older and conservative farmers in KL recalled the fact that in their traditional purana village homes, women were even forbidden to walk through the ripening paddy fields which was seen as a male domain The entry of women to the threshing ground is now seen as being ignored mainly but not solely by female headed households and female landowners. Traditional gender ideology in this instance is perceived as being eroded by financial constraints experienced by farming communities.**

**“ When there are economic difficulties people try whatever they can to keep themselves alive and therefore women are also allowed to get themselves involved in the work of the threshing floor.”**  
**( Ariyapala, male farmer in KL, SLGC field diaries)**

**There are a number of households in KL and RG where the actual farmers are women whose husbands are involved in other activities, sometimes outside the**

system. Some are recognized as almost solely responsible for all farming and irrigation activities and decisions and as the better farmer by the community. As female landowners, they express a keen interest in the water management and agency decisions. There are many such examples to be observed in the SLGC. Yet, even some of these women have limited their participation in Fos. Sometimes even where there is actual participation, the record keeping system within FOs make it particularly difficult to establish female participation eg. by going through records such as Minute books. In KL it was found that in one instance, even when women attended as their husbands' representative, it would be the man's name which would be recorded in the attendance list.

It is seen that in the every system researched the nature of gender tasks for which labour is hired is a very reliable indicator of gender norms. The use of female family labour in non traditional tasks for work in own land is not seen as a major contravention of norms. But in the use of hired labour both the contractor and contractee is seen to approximate to the norms subscribed to in that system. In RG and KL gangs of 'contract women' work on land preparation including non traditional tasks such as building bunds. In GRE the only tasks that women engage in as hired labour is transplanting and infilling, in keeping with the traditional gender ideology prevalent in the system.

Irrigators. In Gampola Raja Ela, the Wet Zone System, there are very few women involved in the task of irrigating. This may be true for many small anicut systems in other parts of the country. Traditionally, irrigation is conceived as a male task as it is part of irrigated agriculture long seen as a male domain. However, in Rajangane and System H, there are many examples of women being involved extensively in the task of irrigating. There are even cases of women doing night irrigation in the Dry Zone systems especially KL though women would usually try to trade rotations in order to avoid going out at night. Women's involvement in irrigation is seen as higher in KL and that too for chillie cultivation in Yala( Table 1 and 2)

Apparently here, the task of irrigating has lost its solely male connotation. Husband and wife may go together to irrigate their fields, or sometimes they go separately depending on the work load. In some households, irrigating has become the sole responsibility of either the man or the woman. One FC representative in RG was observed to have handed over his allotted task of water distribution at FC level to his wife and daughter.

In RG as well as in KL, women appear to be concerned than their husbands about the adequacy and equity of water deliveries and are knowledgeable about rotations and water delivery. They share the task of irrigating and even if they do not themselves irrigate, women often go to the fields to monitor the flow of water to the field and to make sure that they receive the proper amount. A remarkable feature of women irrigators is that while ensuring their access to water, they often express concern about their neighbours in the field getting sufficient water. This is seen as a

concern growing out of their social networking process as poor women access the generosity of the wealthier neighbours in troubled times and it is the women as housewives who have to handle such requests for attention.

.Providers of labor for maintenance. In Gampola Raja Ela, either male landholders or male laborers carry out the canal maintenance tasks. Women never engage in maintenance of canals. In Rajangane and Kalankuttiya, maintenance is seen as a joint responsibility, and is often carried out by women, men and children together. Richer households and leaseholders may hire laborers, and some households also arrange for attam labor to carry out maintenance tasks.

#### Farm managers/decision makers

Especially among the wealthier farmer families, women are seen to play a significant role in the management of agricultural and agriculture related enterprises. In rich and middle income families it is also observed that joint decision making is more common. Households in which either men or women are solely responsible; households in which most decisions pertaining to irrigated farming are taken jointly by husbands, wives and sometimes adult children.

In all socio-economic groups, women are seen to play a key role especially in the domain of financial management and decision making in irrigated agriculture. Women are seen to be active in financial accounting for domestic and production purposes, in arranging giving and taking loans within the community, though not in negotiating with banks. They are foremost in organizing and mobilizing savings and often maintain secret savings which are made available to the family in times of crisis. They take the lead especially in settlement schemes of accessing agri-financing and mobilizing labour using their social networks. ( Table 1 and 2 ) Their characteristic involvement in this area of irrigated agriculture make them an important asset to FOs. This is recognized in the 1994 ADB Strategic Framework.

“Nevertheless there seems to be acceptance that women may have a particular ability in administration, financial matters and organisation, and that they could have an effective role in CBOs, farmer organisation, etc”

#### **D. Why is it that women are not more involved in FOs?**

When the present functioning of FOs is examined, it is often noted by researchers and line agency officers that the participation of women stakeholders is seen to be limited. However it must be admitted that recent studies indicate that the participation of men in FOs is poor too ( SLGC data, HARTI/IIMI 1997)

This paper seeks to examine the reasons for limited female participation in FOs by posing the following commonly asked questions and some possible answers.

**1. Women are not involved because they are not interested.**

Limited participation at kanna meetings and FO meetings are often recorded and construed as the lack of interest of women in FO activities. If women are not eager to participate, it is because they may perceive the FO as not functioning properly or adequately serving their needs. This is moreover a factor which may affect male and female non-participation.

Else it could be that they have more effective means of receiving the same benefits without actual participation. For example they may not feel the need to actually participate if they feel that they can receive the same information through a family member, relation, FC representative or neighbour and if their needs could be thus represented.

Women are seen to favour presenting their needs directly to decision makers in the irrigation line agencies, even without attending FO meetings because they seem to prefer this mode of contact and one to one interaction. It is observed report that women members of the family present complaints to line agencies in cases even when it is not a female headed household. It is felt that they may wish to win sympathy or that they are more articulate in presenting their case and prefer one to one interaction. There is marked reluctance to present their needs in the formal setting of the DCO meeting.

They are seen to be interested in the decisions taken at FO meetings in order to understand how it impinges on their respective households. Even when their husbands or male representatives do not volunteer information, women are seen to be keen on having full details. ( The degree of interest is higher in RG and KL where the sole livelihood is irrigated agriculture than in GRE where irrigated agriculture is not the most important part of the household economy).

**2. Women are not involved in FOs because of the lack of time.**

This is certainly true of women as they are seen to put in longer hours of work because of their responsibilities in agricultural production as well as domestic tasks. Consequently the decision to attend meetings becomes more difficult for women than men. Especially for female heads of households, the difficulty is compounded by the need to obtain information and present their problems. When the anticipated benefits are high, women are seen to make an effort, at the expense of other activities to attend FO meetings .

Those women who attend meetings are somewhat critical of the manner in which the meetings are conducted. They find the duration of the meetings too long, the discussions are protracted unnecessarily etc. Also most representatives are male.

Sometimes they object to the often rough and argumentative atmosphere in which they are not comfortable and cannot present their case adequately. Then the perceived benefits of the meeting may not be seen as sufficient to outweigh the losses incurred in participating.

3. Women cannot afford the economic loss involved in participation in the FO meetings.

This is true for a number of women, especially female heads of households. But it also holds true for many men as well. The cost of participation may be too high to bear especially for the poorer stakeholders. It is seen that many FO office bearers have at least a relatively higher than average level of income and are often drawn from the village elite. Even when a poorer farmer is elected to office because of his ability he finds it difficult to carry on as he has to incur expenses which he can ill afford.

4. Husbands or other men (neighbours, sons, relatives) are able and willing to represent women landholders at meetings; therefore they do not need to attend FO meetings.

This is true of most cases though Kalankuttiya has several significant instances of female landholders preferring to represent their case themselves. Especially women with younger children to look after may opt for this because their heavy domestic work load. Also older women landholders who experience difficulties in getting about may prefer to send sons to represent them. In most cases, female landholders are allowed by the FO to be thus represented.

However husbands and male representatives are not always seen to adequately report back to women landholders; and women thus represented cannot adequately participate the discussions of issues that affect their lives. During the time D2305 was being handed over as a pilot for the Mahaweli Restructuring program in 1995, the SLGC undertook a rapid assessment of men and women's perception of the implications of the event. Women were shown to have a poorer awareness of the institutional changes and the impact on the community. In a PRA carried out in D2 305 and D3 305 in 1998 the level of awareness of men about the implications of the Mahaweli restructuring project was seen to be clearer and derived from their interaction with the agency officers and FOs; women were more dependent on informal contacts and were not so well informed as the men.

This marginalisation of a significant group from direct decisionmaking and the subsequent lack of information may have a negative impact on the management of the whole system. From the FO point of view, it faces the disadvantage in not being able to tap the knowledge and experience of women stakeholders who are

experienced farmers. From the agency point of view, key management decisions are not reaching a substantial group of stakeholders or are distorted in the process.

#### **5. Women are not interested in taking up office in FOs.**

Very few women are seen to have taken up office in FOs at all compared to their involvement in other village level organisations such as savings and credit groups and funderal assistance societies. However they seem more ready to take up the responsibilities of FC representative rather than at the higher level of the DCO. This may be due to the fact that they feel they can balance it with their household and agricultural responsibilities as it does not entail travel to System level meetings outside the vicinity.

Also the involvement of women in FOs is noted to have been higher in certain irrigation systems due to a combination of other variables. It was also observed during field surveys in 1992 and 1993 that in Huruluwewa, where the IMD project manager followed a policy of actively encouraging female involvement in FOs, a higher degree of participation was recorded with instances of women taking on office even at DC level in the FOs. Van Der Molen cites the case of Indigahawewa in NCP as another exception in having high female participation (16%) in the cascade she studied (1997). But there is no reason given for this increased level of participation other than the men are too busy to attend FO meetings in comparison to the other villages studied in the same cascade.

Weerasinghe observes that the female participation observed in 1995-97 in an IFAD funded rehabilitation of a tank in Galweeragollewa, Medawachchiya and in the functioning of the FO to be very high and that this FO was led by female office bearers. Here it is noted that the educational status of the women is high and there is high male outmigration in the village.

The same high levels of participation of female officebearers is noted in Ridiyagama in 1998 where there are currently 5 female office bearers in DCOs. Those women officer bearers interviewed in Huruluwewa in 1995 and 1998 ( Athukorala 1995, Seneviratne 1998) and Ridiyagama in 1998 ( Athukorala 1998) cite the encouragement recieved by the IMD Project Manager as the sole reason for taking up office.

But it is also noteworthy that all these women who were seen as involved as office bearers have had higher than average educational status in the systems; in some cases they have had a previous history of participation in community organisations or political organisations. All have have high status within the village, having built up social capital through maintaining good interpersonal relationships with the community. They are generally older women whose families are grown up thus releasing them from at least part of their domestic tasks connected with younger

children and whose economic status is relatively high, releasing them from the necessity of engaging in wage labour.

**6. Women feel diffident about actively participating in male dominated FO forums.**

The prevailing gender ideology as it relates to irrigated agriculture especially paddy cultivation has influenced the participation of women in FOs. Somehow irrigation and agriculture related meetings continue to be seen as a male domain. Women usually tend to go together for FO meetings and refrain from participation if there are no other women participants.

“ Since the meeting hall is close to my home I will first send my son to check if there are a lot of women attending. I will only go if there is at least one other woman. If not I will try to persuade some other woman from the village to go along with me”

( Karunawathie, female landholder KL)

Many women feel uncomfortable in the sometimes aggressive atmosphere in which FO meetings are conducted. Sometimes FO meetings are held in the night and women generally find this culturally unacceptable. The FO of Tract 9 RG was termed the “ Re Samithiye” ( Night Society) due to its habit of scheduling meetings for the night. A woman who attends an FO meeting may yet ask her male neighbour to speak up on her behalf and present her case. It is seen that women participate in a much more active manner in other organisations such as savings and credit groups and funeral assistance societies.

Again men are seen to perceive FO activities especially as office bearer as an enhancement of their social status and a contribution to the community. They tend to use the term “ samaje sewa” to describe their FO involvement. Even when their husbands are involved as FO representatives women tend to focus more on the practicalities of the situation and the advantages that such an involvement may bring. For instance they see that it would create an opportunity for interaction with the line agency officers and thereby improve their access to services. A series of interviews with FO officer bearers and their wives carried out in 1994-95 for the SLGC highlights this difference in perceptions of men and women to involvement in FOs. The women interviewed repeatedly stressed the opportunity to interact with agency staff and thereby improve their access to obtain services as a main inducement to take on office in the FOs. In all the systems studied the positive or negative perception of the spouse regarding FO activity was a decisive factor in undertaking office in the FOs.

**E. What are the constraints to female participation in FOs ?**

**When the functioning of participatory management systems is studied we need to define the following factors which are seen to influence female participation in FOs -**

**a. Sociocultural perception of women's roles**

**b. perception of line agency decisionmakers**

**Both the above factors combine to place constraints on the participation of women in FOs. Line agencies often tend to assume that stakeholders, farmers, users are all men and work on these parameters. It is rarely that an attempt is made to bring about the conditions which enhance female participation in FOs by explicitly encouraging and creating conditions which would facilitate this process.**

**This approach is strongly dictated by the fact that the establishments of FOs have been in many instances been undertaken as part of irrigation rehabilitation project. ( ADRC/ECL 1992; Kome 1997) In all the three SLGC systems participatory management had been introduced as part of the package for system rehabilitation. Line agencies also tend to overlook female landholders from training programs etc on the assumption again that most of these irrigation related training would be more useful for men and that women are not and would not be interested in obtaining these training as they do not irrigate. Both these assumptions are seen as needing to be reviewed according to available SLGC field data. Women in KL who are intensively involved in OFC cultivation have stated interest in learning more about disease recognition and more effective pesticides usage. But this type of training has not been available and even if it was may not be made available for women. None of the women in KL who were so intensively involved in irrigated agriculture were ever involved in a farmer training.**

**This situation is due to the entrenched assumption that irrigation is primarily a male field of operation. This seems to be an instance where attitudes of line agencies merely reinforce a sociocultural norm which serves to operate as a barrier against female involvement in FOs. But in reality these norms are already been eroded and the community has Other such constraints are seen in the belief that the womens' place is in the home where reproductive activities are seen to be given prominence. Her contribution to agricultural production and her involvement in decisionmaking is sidelined.**

**Interventions designed for women in many irrigation centred development projects often seem to concentrate on income generation activities such as poultry keeping, sewing etc - (ADRC/ECL 1992) again emphasising their activities in the domestic sphere. Such attempts seem to be less mindful of the fact that women are already very busy and that they are intensely involved and also interested in improving the efficiency of their efforts within the field of irrigated agriculture.**

## **1.Summary**

**What then is the real reason for the gap in women's participation in irrigation and Fos and what can be done to optimise participation.**

**The following are reasons why there should be an attempt to improve female involvement in FOs by creating a supportive environment**

- It will lead to an improvement of efficiency by involving more stakeholders in decision making and improving their flow of information.**
- It will by supporting the principle of equity and strengthen community empowerment leading to sustainable development.**

**The Aslong project in the Phillipines records how the participation in FOs of women who played a salient role in irrigated agriculture and managed the household budget was facilitated by the introduction of a proxy system ( Cloud 1994) In 1996 the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka had drafted a scheme where membership in Fos would be given to a male and female member of the family. This has not yet been operationalised.**

**If such attempts are made it may be useful to recognise the present constraints affecting women and plan accordingly. For instance in a system such as Kalankuttiya, any training which are specifically geared towards women should take into account their responsibilities within the cropping system. Women are more likely to have time for training after transplanting and before harvesting in Maha; in Yala, due to their intensive involvement in OFC cultivation they are less likely to be interested or have the time to spare.**

**Another reason which may be viewed as a constraint of any supportive policy changes possible in achieving gender equity is that no study has yet been carried out to examine the financial losses incurred if any, due to limited participation in FOs for men and women, emphasising on the differential impact on female headed households.**

**While the SLGC has very detailed data on FO participation and this paper presents anecdotal information from other systems as well, a extensive study on the impact of gender norms and their impact on irrigated agriculture and FO participation has not been undertaken by any organisation. Such a study should also take into account the demographic changes caused by the two below mentioned factors**

- 1. High involvement of women in agriculture**
- 2. One fifth of the households in the country is female headed.**

The participation of women in the water sector as a whole is seen to have undergone changes nationally within the past decade. Societal and economic changes such as ME employment and the influx of female labour into the export promotion zones is seen to have changed status of women within the family. However within the rural sector, according to Census data 40% of the agricultural workers in Sri Lanka are women and more that 70% of this group work without pay or profit. Of the total enrollment in farmer pension schemes 23.5 % are women.

Casualties due to the Northern and Southern civil conflicts and may have impacted on the rise of female headed households to a point where one fifth is female headed. The percentage of female headed household has risen from 18.8 % in 1992 to 21.4% in 1994 - for the first quarter only. ( Census and Statistics 1995, Athukorala1996) ..

Finally the above argues for the inclusion of gender analysis be considered in participatory management initiatives as a tool for promoting equity and efficiency in the irrigated agriculture sector. Gender is often misconstrued as focussing only on women's activities. Gender analysis is seen by its critics as a fashionable donor driven agenda which is not appropriate to the Sri Lankan culture. At the other extreme projects pay lip service to gender simply to qualify for donor funding.

It is emphasised that gender analysis is a tool which needs to view the differential needs of men and women within a culture specific and context specific approach. Gender sensitive approaches built on upto date situation analyses needs to be used as part of a local driven agenda in order to optimise participation of women in Farmer organisations.

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**Table 1: Gender Participation in Irrigated Agriculture - Summary of Tasks Relating to Paddy**

in Person-Days

Rajangana Tasks Performed	Maha Season				Yala Season			
	Female	%	Male	%	Female	%	Male	%
Preparation of land	107	5.0	2,019	95.0	199	10.6	1,683	89.4
Nursery preparation	37	73.4	14	26.6	32	76.0	10	24.0
Transplanting	311	56.3	242	43.7	12	5.4	209	94.6
Crop care	341	12.7	2,346	87.3	310	12.2	2,223	87.8
Irrigation	59	10.3	513	89.7	31	6.4	457	93.6
Harvesting	75	11.1	598	88.9	49	7.4	618	92.6
Marketing and sale of produce	44	28.8	108	71.2	19	16.1	97	83.9
Agri-financing and labor mobilization	5	10.7	42	89.3	2	5.8	36	94.2
Preparation of meals for helpers	128	100.0	-	-	104	98.6	2	1.4
Farmer organization activities	9	9.8	83	90.2	6	6.9	81	93.1
Supervision of labor	27	14.3	162	85.7	24	13.2	159	86.8

Kalankuttiya Tasks Performed	Maha Season				Yala Season			
	Female	%	Male	%	Female	%	Male	%
Preparation of land	336	17.1	1,631	82.9	85	14.6	499	85.4
Nursery preparation	45	69.0	20	31.0	19	72.5	7	27.5
Transplanting	427	71.4	171	28.6	27	28.1	69	71.9
Crop care	865	30.3	1,993	69.7	241	26.4	671	73.6
Irrigation	93	23.9	294	76.1	32	15.5	172	84.5
Harvesting	300	36.7	516	63.3	80	32.1	170	67.9
Marketing and sale of produce	21	12.7	147	87.3	9	11.3	67	88.7
Agri-financing and labor mobilization	34	37.3	57	62.7	10	25.2	28	74.8
Preparation of meals for helpers	187	95.4	9	4.6	52	96.3	2	3.7
Farmer organization activities	44	24.8	134	75.2	11	17.8	51	82.2
Supervision of labor	1	6.3	8	93.8	2	50.0	2	50.0

Gampola Raja Ela Tasks Performed	Maha Season				Yala Season			
	Female	%	Male	%	Female	%	Male	%
Preparation of land	3	0.3	893	99.7	3	0.8	350	99.2
Nursery preparation	13	13.1	87	86.9	12	26.1	34	73.9
Transplanting	581	84.3	108	15.7	168	79.4	44	20.6
Crop care	204	17.0	994	83.0	68	13.9	419	86.1
Irrigation	22	17.5	104	82.5	3	7.8	30	92.2
Harvesting	221	47.6	244	52.4	97	51.6	91	48.4
Marketing and sale of produce	137	33.3	274	66.7	60	38.0	97	62.0
Agri-financing and labor mobilization	13	12.0	95	88.0	2	9.1	20	90.9
Preparation of meals for helpers	151	100.0	-	-	49	100.0	-	-
Farmer organization activities	2	3.1	63	96.9	1	4.3	11	95.7
Supervision of labor	12	17.6	58	82.4	5	21.5	18	78.5

**Table 2: Gender Participation in Irrigated Agriculture - Summary of Tasks Relating to Chilli**

in Person-Days

Rajangana Tasks Performed	Maha Season			
	Female	%	Male	%
Preparation of land	-	-	8	100.0
Nursery preparation	0	65.8	0	34.2
Transplanting	1	7.1	7	92.9
Crop care	1	3.7	26	96.3
Irrigation	-	-	7	100.0
Harvesting	18	56.5	14	43.5
Marketing and sale of produce	0	8.3	3	91.7
Agri-financing and labor mobilization	-	NA	-	NA
Preparation of meals for helpers	-	NA	-	NA
Farmer organization activities	-	NA	-	NA
Supervision of labor	-	-	4	100.0

Yala Season			
Female	%	Male	%
-	-	4	100.0
1	40.0	2	60.0
1	66.7	1	33.3
19	51.4	18	48.6
3	100.0	-	-
4	77.8	1	22.2
1	24.9	2	75.1
-	-	0	100.0
0	100.0	-	-
-	NA	-	NA
-	-	2	100.0

Kalankuttiya Tasks Performed	Maha Season			
	Female	%	Male	%
Preparation of land	93	35.9	166	64.1
Nursery preparation	9	50.7	9	49.3
Transplanting	73	69.1	33	30.9
Crop care	159	46.1	186	53.9
Irrigation	9	26.5	25	73.5
Harvesting	119	66.2	61	33.8
Marketing and sale of produce	2	11.6	15	88.4
Agri-financing and labor mobilization	5	52.6	5	47.4
Preparation of meals for helpers	2	100.0	-	-
Farmer organization activities	-	-	4	100.0
Supervision of labor	-	NA	-	NA

Yala Season			
Female	%	Male	%
196	32.3	410	67.7
44	35.6	79	64.4
219	56.9	166	43.1
727	44.7	900	55.3
88	31.7	189	68.3
814	70.5	340	29.5
25	15.7	136	84.3
12	28.1	29	71.9
25	83.5	5	16.5
10	28.0	26	72.0
1	40.0	2	60.0