



Professional Insights Provided by Women Extension Personnel in Odisha

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Four significant domains of strengths that were outlined from the responses were capacity-building, empowering facilities, digitalization of extension, and recognition of gender diversity
- The limitations hindering women agricultural extension officers from exerting professional expertise were reported.

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ABSTRACT

The extension services offered by the extension professionals to the agricultural community are more diversified now than ever and will continue to vary to satisfy the growing demand. The effectiveness and productivity of the services are highly influenced by the performance of the extension professionals involved. To study their level of professionalism, it is imperative to know the factors that hinder their professionalism level. This study was conducted in the year 2023-2024 in Odisha to assess contributory factors affecting professionalism and seek suggestions to overcome those problems. A sample comprising 120 women agricultural extension personnel was selected through purposive sampling. The rank-based quotient (RBQ) method was applied to analyse the constraints perceived by respondents, and the word cloud tool was used to analyse the suggestions received using the R software. The significant barriers that restricted the women extension functionaries from exerting their professionalism level were receiving less training, mobility challenges, and an insufficient workforce. Further, to overcome the challenges, women agricultural extension personnel suggested the provision of skill-based workshops related to advanced technology use and efficient allocation of operational resources could enhance their performance level.

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural extension coupled with advisory services facilitate farmers and other rural communities a platform to gain knowledge, access to technologies and information, and their interaction with other actors, and guides them to create their competency-based abilities and behaviours, to enhance their standard of living and well-being (Christopolos, 2010). However, these extension strategies

frequently overlooked the actual demands of a woman farmer. Women farmers comprise almost half of the agricultural workforce (World Bank, 2017). 80 per cent of Indian women who are actively employed come from the agriculture family, according to Oxfam report (2018), 48 per cent of farmers are self-employed, whereas 33 per cent are labour force participants. Despite the feminization of agriculture, present extension approaches often disregard the actual demands of women farmers making them vulnerable to access

many benefits. There was a misconception that women farmers performed only a guiding role in commercial agriculture, while men were the leading decision-makers. An extension service dealing with a women-to-women approach would result in a better transfer of information to women farmers than a men-to-women approach (Lamontagne-Godwin et al., 2017). At the global level, only 15 per cent of women work as extension experts (Chowdary et al., 2023). Hence, the need of the hour is to assess and understand the professionalism traits of female professionals in extension organisations to build a strong human resource in the overall agriculture sector. Agricultural systems and practices are evolving rapidly across the globe, which demands improved technologies and advanced services (Nair et al., 2023). Farming community requires induction of professionally qualified personnel and their regular trainings in order to maintain credibility of the extension professionals (Slathia et al., 2012). Professionalism, which combines competency and role performance level, needs to be highlighted by finding out the competency and performance gap, or the gap between the present and expected competence level of the professionals. Administrative control, academic qualification, area of specialization and experience contributes significantly to level of knowledge and ultimately the competency (Sinha et al., 2021). All these factors call for attention to a closer analysis of understanding the professionalism gap. Specifically, there have been fewer studies that focus on the constraints women extension functionaries face in agricultural extension. Performance anxiety, fewer training opportunities, funding, and organisational support are the few challenges faced by extension professionals supported by some research studies. Mobility constraints, lack of flexibility in extension works, and inappropriate extension packages were the major obstacles for female extension advisors (Adebayo & Worth, 2022). Several factors were severely hampering the competency level of extension staff, a minimal number of training opportunities, acquiring training personally was very expensive, lack of genuine information, and absence of institutional drive and further, the respondents also expressed attending more exposure visits and in-service training programs to increase their competency level (Mehta et al., 2021). A study revealed that the perception of KVK personnel about the objectives of extension education suggested that elements like job satisfaction and facilitating exposure to mass media platforms needed to be improved (Singh et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The population of women extension functionaries in the agriculture sector in Odisha is not well documented. Hence, the present study was carried out by applying a purposive sampling method, and 120 samples were finalised. Female extension personnel who were either agriculture officers, horticultural officers, fisheries officers of the state department, and KVK scientists with a minimum of two years of professional experience were taken as the respondents. The data collection tool was developed keeping in view the objectives and variables of the research. Personal interviews were conducted to collect data. Major constraints taken for the study were identified through initial discussion with experts and respondents, as well as from the existing literature. The

constraints were categorised under six barrier groups and each group contained specific statements. Respondents were asked to rank these constraints: rank 1 being the most severe, rank 2 being the moderately severe, and rank 3 being the least severe. Qualitative data were gathered through interactive discussion with key informants, and literature, books, and data available on the internet were the key resources for secondary data. The rank-based quotient (RBQ) method was used to analyse the collected data. RBQ was calculated as follows,

$$RBQ = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n Fi(n+1-i)}{N \times n}$$

Where, F_i = the frequency of respondents for the i^{th} rank of the problem, N = total number of respondents, n = the number of ranks, i = concerned rank

The suggestions were framed by asking open-ended statements to the respondents, and several suggestions were received from the extension personnel. The qualitative data was analysed using the word-cloud generator tool in the R package.

RESULTS

Constraints faced by women agricultural extension personnel

The first domain of barriers comprised work environment-related constraints, and based on the RBQ, “lack of flexible work arrangements value” (54.77) was the most severe constraint, followed by “instances of favouritism/unfairness” (51.93), and “poor teamwork spirit” (50.82). In the context of capacity-building hurdles, the biggest obstacle was “less provision of skill-based training” (78.87). The most severe challenge acknowledged by women extension professionals in addressing operational challenges was the “low availability of transport mediums to interior areas” (78.60). It is visible from the result that among the inter-organizational obstacles, “lack of coordination between the line departments” (70.82) was perceived as the most severe problem. The fifth domain of barriers included gender-related issues faced by women agricultural extension professionals, and “no clear policy to address gender bias” (70.00) was perceived as highly severe. Among the six major domains of constraints studied, “capacity-building hurdles” were perceived as the most serious, with a mean RBQ value of 73.59 followed by “operational challenges”, and “inter-organizational obstacles”. Moderately severe barriers were “gender barriers”, “work environment-related constraints” and “personal barriers”.

Suggestions received from women agricultural extension personnel to overcome the constraints

A few broad areas crucial for strengthening women agricultural extension personnel’s competency and role performance level were represented in Table 2. Four significant domains of strengths that were outlined from the responses were “capacity-building,” “empowering facilities,” “digitalization of extension,” and “recognition of gender diversity.” The visual result of the suggestions provided by the respondents were illustrated in Figure 1. It helped to simplify the data and provided more clarity as it revealed the frequencies of different words. It can be predicted that training, workforce, performance appraisal, opportunities,

Major Barrier	Constraints	RBQ value	Mean RBQ	Overall Rank
B1(Work environment)	Lack of flexible work arrangements and transparency	54.77	52.50	V
	Poor teamwork spirit	50.82		
	Instances of favouritism/unfairness	51.93		
B2 (Capacity building hurdles)	Less provision of skill-based training on new farm technologies	78.87	73.59	I
	Limited investment in employee training programmes	75.82		
	Inadequate availability of training materials/outdated training materials or insufficient trainers	66.10		
B3 (Operational challenges)	Less availability of different e-resources	66.10	71.00	II
	Lack of transport facilities to remote areas	78.60		
	Lack of workforces in my institution	68.31		
B4 (Inter-organizational obstacles)	Lack of coordination between various line departments	70.82	67.02	III
	Highly competitive work culture hinders networking opportunities	63.88		
	Presence of complex institutional structures creates networking barriers	66.38		
B5 (Gender-related issues)	Gender-based disparity like promotions or other opportunities is evident here	46.10	57.86	IV
	No clear policy to address gender discrimination/bias in my institution	70.00		
	Lack of representation of women in leadership positions in my institution	47.49		
B6 (Personal barriers)	Unwillingness to learn new skills	37.37	48.83	VI
	Social-barriers	61.37		
	Inability to focus due to personal distractions or family-related issues	47.77		

Area	Suggestion
Capacity-building	Timely training for employees
	Providing performance-appraisal
Empowering facilities	Sufficient workforce
	Adequate transport facilities for field visits”
	More resources as per need
Digitalization of extension	Use of technology-driven approaches
	Availability of e-resources
Recognition of gender diversity	Training on gender-sensitization
	Policy reforms to address gender-related issues

DISCUSSION

The lack of flexible work arrangements was a severe challenge due to the constant deadlines and ever-growing workload implemented. Similar results were elucidated by Das & Borua (2017), who stated that work management aspects of ATMA functionaries in Assam were hindered by lack of cooperation from seniors and inadequate staff. Overall, the most significant challenge was related to capacity-building hurdles, inadequate skill-based training, and low funding with scarce training resources. Similar results were reported by Kumar et al., (2018) where lack of training



Figure 1. Word cloud of suggestions provided by women agricultural extension personnel in Odisha

on new technologies was a major barrier for horticulture extension personnel. They frequently needed to visit interior areas while the services provided by their institutions were inadequate. The results were in line with the findings of Adebayo & Worth (2022), who stated that access to institutional assets like transportation was limiting their extension functions. Networking with other line departments in the agriculture sector is crucial, however, the primary challenge reported was a weak collaboration between the line departments. Similar observations were made by Mansour et al., (2022), who highlighted that extension workers in Egypt were facing an absence of coordination in their institutions with other NGOs, private sectors, and mass media. Gender barriers in the workplace sometimes prohibit an individual's equal participation and communication between different genders. Kelan (2020) observed that progress toward gender equality and equity was still limited. The present study derived similarities with Kelan's study; women officers' opinions and views were respected, and discrimination did not affect gender barriers. However, the practice of gender-sensitization activities and policies to address this concern in their institutions was inconsistent. In the context of personal barriers, societal challenges stemming from experiences, attitudes, and cultural norms were the most prominent barriers for women extension personnel. Aiswarya et al., (2018) mentioned that prevalent cultural norms often made it difficult for women to embrace extension advisory services as an occupation.

Facilitation of skill-based training programmes should be increased to improve their level of professionalism, similar findings were given by Chavhan et al., (2017). Regarding advancements in extension services, including advanced technology-driven devices and technology management orientation will be a great alternative. In their study, Shanmuka et al., (2022) suggested that digitalization within extension services could increase reach and impact the farmers effectively. More ground-level trained extension staff need to be recruited with flexible work arrangements, reforming gender policies, along with the provision of gender-sensitization programmes, and transportation facilities should be made more feasible, and partially similar suggestions were reported by Jayasingh et al., (2022); recruiting staff to optimize workload, providing better facilities, and sanctioning funding for operational activities. A pluralistic approach can be adapted to work with other agricultural organisations collaboratively and communicate updates and relevant information regularly. These findings partially aligned with the results of Battu (2021), who suggested that collaborative approach precisely a pluralistic approach could create a favourable and efficient work environment. Lastly, acquiring adequate institutional support, including better facilities and resources, network connectivity, and support from superiors. Similar suggestions were found in the study conducted by Patra et al., (2020), who found that for effective use of computers by KVK professionals, ensuring adequate facilities with power supply and support from seniors were important aspects.

CONCLUSION

Women extension functionaries serve an essential role in increasing feminization in agriculture, bridging the gender productivity gap, and providing equal access for rural women to

extend advisory services. Additionally, the competence and performance level of extension personnel have an enormous effect on the effectiveness of extension advisory services. In a similar context, the present study revealed that in their job, despite their expertise, they encounter limitations in areas such as mobility, receiving few skill-based training, inflexible work arrangements, unavailability of resources, and insufficient workforce. To address these challenges, suggestions were received from them, which included a major focus on the timely provision of training, specifically, giving constructive feedback regularly, sensitizing employees more on technical-aided approaches, and building a collaborative network with other line organizations. Some effective policies can be generated in future to augment the professionalism of women extension professionals, leading to an efficient extension system in India.

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