

Effects of organic farming on the empowerment of women: A case study on the perception of female farmers in Odisha, India



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ABSTRACT

Several projects claim that organic farming empowers women and promotes gender equality. To explore the effects of organic farming initiatives on the empowerment of women as perceived by female farmers, a qualitative field study with interviews in Odisha (India) was conducted. Results show that, although organic farming has positive impacts on women, such as improvements in health and food security, there are significant drawbacks due to factors such as the additional workload. Women are also widely excluded from business decisions in organic farming, as the investigated organic initiative works within traditional gender patterns. Although female farmer groups exist, women are neither included on the cooperative level nor in agricultural training on organic methods, which leads to the reinforcement of deeply embedded gender inequality. Fully exploiting the potential for empowering women through organic farming and increasing gender equality in India would require technical training and working beyond traditional social structures, to include women in higher administrative levels.

Introduction, research objective and methods

In developing countries agriculture is critical for reducing rural poverty, enhancing food security, narrowing income disparities as well as for delivering environmental services (Byerlee, De Janvry, & Sadoulet, 2009). Fostering organic agriculture, in particular is seen to have considerable potential to improve the livelihood of smallholder farmers and lead to sustainable development (Altieri, 2002; Eyhorn, 2007; Lyons & Burch, 2007; Scialabba, 2007; Walaga & Hauser, 2005; Willer, Youssefi-Menzler, & Sorensen, 2008). To realize this potential, women play a fundamental role (Byerlee et al., 2009) as they are important adopters in organic farming (Soltani, Azadi, Mahmoudi, & Witlox, 2014). They also hold the central position within the family for the provision of food and food security (Farnworth & Hutchings, 2009). Nevertheless, through widespread gender disparities, especially regarding the access to resources and markets as well as weak positions in intra-household negotiations, the development potential remains unfulfilled (Agarwal & Herring, 2013; Byerlee et al., 2009; Koroma, 2014; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011; Waris, Nirmala, & Kumar, 2016). Especially in India, gender is an important discrimination factor (Waris et al., 2016) and Indian women face prejudice throughout their lives (Das & Tarai, 2011). They are disadvantaged with respect to education, burden of work and access to resources and land. Although women have enjoyed equal property

rights since 1992, the great majority of land is still owned by men. Participation in household decision-making is usually very low and free movement of women often restricted (Das & Tarai, 2011). In India around 78% of women as compared to nearly 63% of men are engaged in agriculture (Rao, 2006). Additionally, women contribute substantially to subsistence activities in farming (Bhasin, 2007) and carry out a high proportion of labor within farming households (Bhasin, 2007; Satyavathi, Bharadwaj, & Brahmanand, 2010). According to Rao (2006) within these households about 70% of farm work is performed by women. This underlines the crucial role of women in the Indian agricultural sector (Rao, 2006).

In India, organic farming has been promoted for many years (Eyhorn, 2007). The main objectives of the programs are to enhance farmers' livelihoods and to achieve environmental improvements. Gender equality is not being addressed explicitly, as the programs mainly focus on local natural resources, on sustainable cultivation and on decreasing the use of external synthetic inputs such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, defoliants, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and chemically treated seeds (International Trade Centre, 2007, 2011). However, the international principles of organic farming specifically include the aim of increasing gender equality (IFOAM, 2007), besides environmental, economic and social dimensions (IFOAM, 2014). According to IFOAM (2007), organic farming can help women to gain access to education, increase their power in

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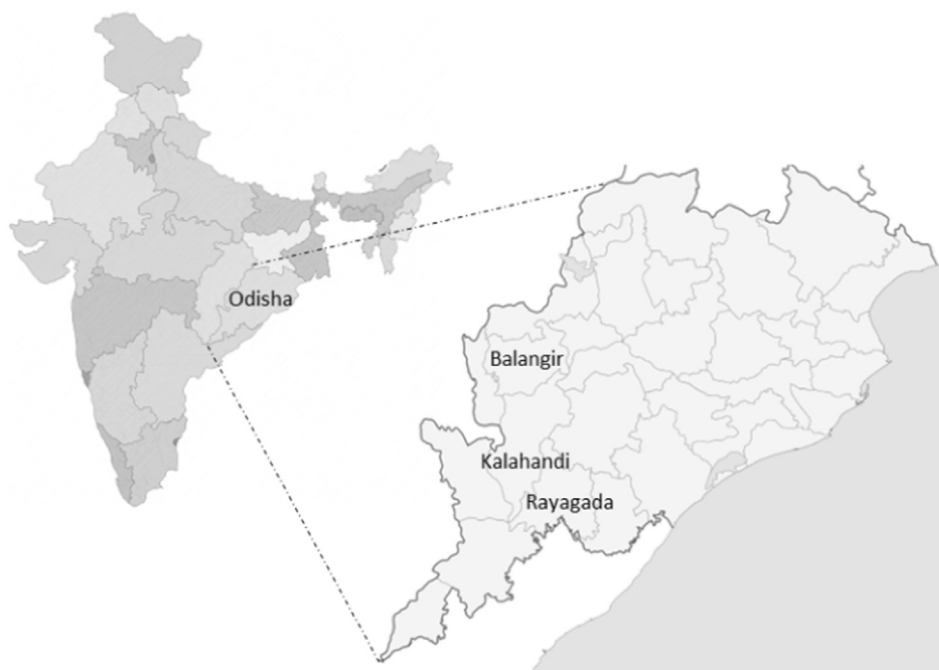


Fig. 1. Study region in Odisha, India, showing the districts of Balangir, Kalahandi & Rayagada.

decision-making as well as improve their health. Organic farming additionally empowers women by allowing them to apply their traditional knowledge and embrace their role as *'keeper of seeds'* which in turn encourages biodiversity. Further, through higher and more diverse income as well as lower input costs women face less financial risks and are less at risk of exploitation due to a higher level of social awareness (Farnworth & Hutchings, 2009).

In order to explore these claims, a field study has been conducted from June to August 2014 in the rural region of Odisha in India (see Fig. 1) on the perception of female farmers of the impacts of organic farming on their livelihoods and the empowerment of women and gender equality.

The empirical work combined qualitative interviews of farmers, with expert interviews and participant observation. It was supported by *Chetna Organic*, an Indian non-governmental organization and company specialized in organic cotton cultivation, promoting certified organic farming. Qualitative interviews with thirty male and female organic farmers were carried out to gain an understanding of farmers' livelihoods and gender aspects in the study region. The interviews were analyzed according to the content analysis approach (Kuckartz, 2007; Lamnek, 2005). For the coding, both the top-down (using codes derived from the interview guide) as well as the bottom-up approach (adding codes emerging from interviews) were used (Flick, 2009), applying the software *Atlas.ti*. Participant observation (Bernard, 2002) was done during the entire field work, which included the participation in different *Chetna* workshops on gender issues. Expert interviews (Gläser & Laudel, 2009) were also conducted with staff and managers of *Chetna*, the governmental initiative *SMS Cotton*, the *All India Co-ordinated Cotton Improvement Project* as well as *Trade-Craft UK*, to expand the context for the gathered information.

Social and economic aspects of the study area

Like most rural regions in India, Odisha is facing poverty with an overall poverty rate of 32.6% (Planning Commission of India, 2013), food insecurity (World Food Program and Indian Institute of Human Development, 2008) as well as discrimination of social groups. In Odisha, due to the Indian cast system, a high share of the population faces social exclusion (Bose, Arts, & van Dijk, 2012), social isolation from the Hindu society (Mitra, 2008) and economic disadvantages

(Balarajan, Selvaraj, & Subramanian, 2011). According to the governmental classification (Government of Odisha, 2011), 23% of the population in Odisha are *Scheduled Tribes* (ST) (also called *'Adivasis'*), 17% belong to *Scheduled Castes* (SC) (*'untouchables'* or *'Dalits'*) and an unknown share belongs to *'Other Backward Classes'* (OBC), which is also an official term for disadvantaged communities (Balarajan et al., 2011; Lakerveld, Lele, Crane, Fortuin, & Springate-Baginski, 2015). The rural poverty headcount ratio (the percentage of the rural population living below the national poverty line) of ST in Odisha is 66, of SC 47 and of other groups 25 (NSSO, 2011). With respect to gender affiliations, women from tribal groups have partly more autonomy than Hindu women, e.g. in moving and marriage decisions (Das & Tarai, 2011), but a patrilineal system of land inheritance is also prevalent in tribal communities (Kumar, Choudhary, Sarangi, Mishra, & Behera, 2005). Women have a significantly lower level of education than men (Das & Tarai, 2011; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011): In Odisha the illiteracy rate of women in ST is 81% (for men it is 57%) and in SC it is 57% (for men it is 37%) (Das & Tarai, 2011).

In Odisha farming is the main income source and basis of the livelihood of more than two thirds of the population. Typically farms in the region are small and marginalized: 80% of these farms are one to two hectares in size, 13% are two to six hectares, and only 7% are more than six hectares (Upadhyay, 2013). Farming households in the study region, as in other developing countries (Giné, 2011; Jabbar, Ehui, & Von Kaufmann, 2002; Khandker & Faruquee, 2003) often face excessive indebtedness because of high interest rates on loans (NSSO, 2014). Borrowed funds are needed to buy agricultural inputs including e.g. pesticides, such as *Monocrotophos*, which is banned in other countries due to its toxicity (Rajendran, 2004). Toxic inputs may cause serious health problems for farmers, as they do not use protective gear during the application. Furthermore, they can be hazardous, as they are ingested through food crops and may contaminate the groundwater.

In Odisha approximately 85,000 farmers are growing cotton on around 124,000 ha land (Directorate of Agriculture and Food production Odisha, 2013). Although cotton is not a traditional crop for the region of Odisha, it has gained in importance over the last 20 years and in 2011, the government of India declared Odisha one of the major cotton growing states of India (Directorate of Agriculture and Food production Odisha, 2013). Cotton is mainly grown in Odisha's southern and western parts in the districts Balangir, Kalahandi and Rayagada

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