

Rituals, taboos and gender

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Future in Our Hands Development Fund (FIOH) is a Sri Lankan NGO supporting marginalised farmers in their quest for endogenous development. FIOH works with local 'mobilisers' to stimulate farmers to form groups, to analyse their situation and initiate activities to improve their standard of living. Over 90% of the members of the local groups are women. In this article controversies in gender roles are discussed, such as the taboos on women during their menstruation periods.



Photo: J. Kahandawa

Over 70% of the local mobilisers are women. They are selected from the local communities, and receive a 3-6 month training course on participatory methodologies for mobilising people, as well as techniques for inducing group discussions to activate hidden strengths. The training is conducted within the communities using participatory training methods. The main feature of this training is that it is built on the concept of learning from and with the people, to stimulate development from within.

Also in the local groups over 90% of the members are women. This does not mean that the men are not involved, but women have taken the lead. There are presently about 475 groups with a membership of 2600. The number of members in a group varies from 5-10.

Traditional saving strategies

As all the members of the groups are of similar social and economic status, there are many common interests they can work on. All groups were initially set up using personal savings. At first people laughed at the idea of these poor people having savings. Even the husbands opposed this idea by saying:

"It's us who earn money for the family, and as it is not adequate even for our living it cannot be used for savings".

But the women were very innovative in addressing these challenges, and return to traditional practices. Thrift was one of the traditions in these rural communities: a housewife keeps aside one fistful of rice before she starts cooking each meal. At the end of the week each woman has collected about half a kilo of rice, which is shared in the group as savings, and sold to another group member at a reasonable price. This money went into the group fund. In this way the group fund soon became a major source of credit for farming and other income-generating activities. Men appreciated the achievements of the women. Instead of discouraging them, they now help the women with their group activities.

Mutual labour sharing is another activity started by various groups. This traditional collective activity was revitalised to suit present day conditions, and helps the women to complete their farm work efficiently, cheaply and on time. It also stimulates them to interact more frequently, to become more involved in social work, and to increase

their political influence.

Controversies discussed

As a result of these experiences, more groups have decided to use traditional farming practices again. In this process, FIOH has facilitated networking among traditional practitioners, to get to know them better and to enhance the exchange of experiences. This has created a sense of respect towards indigenous knowledge and traditional practitioners about whom outsiders often have a distorted vision.

Network meetings were organised, which functioned as forums for the discussion of issues related to indigenous knowledge and practices. For example, controversies occur when people, who are not knowledgeable on astrology, indicate auspicious timing, or *neketh*. To solve this problem, the network of practitioners developed a calendar describing all the possible *neketh* during one cultivation season. This calendar has been published by FIOH, and has become an important handbook for farmers.

Another important issue discussed is how indigenous knowledge can be preserved. Many practitioners do not pass



the knowledge on to more than one student. Most of the knowledge is in the memory of the practitioners, and sometimes written on ancient *Ola* leaves. Such discussions have opened the minds of many practitioners, who are becoming more flexible in passing on knowledge.

Gods and purity

In traditional farming, it is believed that the gods can influence the harvests. They can help in matters related to prosperity, and their blessings are necessary for crop protection. The gods also include the sun, moon and other planets, which provide energy in the cultivation of crops. Other gods are in charge of a particular geographical area. They look after the interests of the farmers and should be respected.

Devils, it is believed, will do anything that will hinder good harvests, and should be kept away to ensure a good crop. There are also neutral beings, such as the *Bahirawa*, who is in charge of the earth, and will do no harm if treated well and properly respected. The rituals in agriculture are all related to this cosmivision. The *kem*, for example, or traditional practice, can be used to protect crops from disease. The effect of a *kem* is explained in different ways. One way is that it harnesses the energy of the cosmos from gods and devils, to give maximum protection against disease.

When dealing with gods and devils, the concept of purity and impurity comes in. The person performing a ritual, to harness the strengths from the gods and repel the bad effects of devils, is vulnerable. He or she can be a victim of devilish influences, and any bad performance to the gods can make them angry. This means that the person who performs the ritual should be extremely clean, both physically and mentally.

Women are considered to be at a disadvantage in relation to cleanliness. Monthly menstruation is regarded as very unclean, and therefore women cannot perform rituals that require purity. Girls prior to attainment of puberty, and women who have attained menopause, are considered clean and can perform certain rituals. Virgins before puberty are considered super clean, in fact the symbol of prosperity, and can participate in various rituals related to agriculture and medical treatment.

Discussions

In the present situation of change, the traditional roles of men and women in farming have become controversial.

Therefore, in the network meetings, gender roles have become an important issue for discussion. The following dialogue can demonstrate this.

Abeyratne, an elderly farmer, explained his techniques for crop protection to the members of one of the groups. The technique included a *kem* for paddy bug that included 'chanted' water and a few other rituals. In brief, the *kem* he performed was to spray the water in the paddy field early morning using a branch of leaves.

I asked: "Can this be performed by your wife or any other woman?"

His immediate answer was a firm "No." I asked: "Why?"

The farmer was stern in his tone. "Dear sir, farming is a sacred profession. Farming provides food for people and without farming, people will have no food. It is a gift of nature god.

Everything related to dealing with farming should be done with utmost cleanliness. Women cannot perform anything that needs utmost cleanliness."

"Why do you consider women as unclean?" I asked.

"Naturally they have their menstruation periods. We call it 'killa' or 'kili period'. There are three main 'killas'. First is the attainment of puberty. The second is when a person has contact with a dead body. The third is the menstruation period. A person who is unclean due to these three incidents can perform no auspicious things related to farming", explained Abeyratne.

I asked the group: "Nowadays there are families headed by women, and quite a lot of farmers are women. Does this mean that they are not able to protect their crops or get the blessings of nature gods because they are women?"

Another elderly farmer Ariyaratne explained: "That is the irony of farming today. It's true that nowadays these things are changing. But the fact remains that women are not clean and they cannot perform some rituals that need absolute cleanliness. So they have to get a man to perform them. The reason that there are so many problems in modern farming is non-adherence to these traditions."

Meeting the challenge

Many women agreed with the arguments about menstrual periods. I asked them the same question: "What rituals are you performing and what rituals are you not performing?"

One woman explained: "To get the blessing of gods by chanting Buddha mantras is possible for women too."

Another woman jumped in: "We do not

perform anything related to devils. But we can do all things related to get the blessings of gods."

But there were other views: "Things have changed nowadays," explained another. "We have now started questioning the notion of *kili*. What is *kili*? We agree that women should not perform certain actions related to evil during the menstruation. But that is only for five days. Add two or three days to it and that will be a maximum of eight days."

Another woman added: "Yes, we should be practical. Take my case. I am a woman with three girl children. I have to do farming in order to survive. I know that I should not perform certain things during *kili* period. But the rest of the time I do everything that can be performed by men."

Changing attitudes

Sharing different views through group discussions with women has influenced the attitudes of men with regard to the basic concept of *kili*. A well-respected traditional healer as well as a practitioner of rituals related to farming, R.M. Ukkubanda, analyses the position of women differently. "The traditional notion of *kili* is not practical now. Many men interpret it differently, and use it to downgrade the position of women. Farming is a task that should be performed by both husband and wife. Both should have a good understanding of things they can perform and what not. A good husband will know when his wife should not perform certain tasks. A good wife will know when her husband should not perform certain tasks. If both have mutual understanding and respect, there cannot be any conflict in relation to *kili* or anything like that."

Ukkubanda's analysis summarises the changing attitudes of men in relation to women's involvement in farming practices. He is the husband of a group member in one of the FIOH facilitated women's groups. There are only a few men, however, who look at this reality in the same way as Ukkubanda. Nevertheless, similar to the other issues mentioned above, this is an indication that this kind of discussion on endogenous development issues is improving the position of women.

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