Role of Women in Agricultural Decision-Making: A Case Study of the North Central Province of Sri Lanka

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Although women constitute a substantial proportion of Sri Lanka's agricultural labour force, empirical evidence on their decision making authority and control over agricultural resources in Dry Zone farming systems remains limited. This study therefore examined (i) women's participation in agricultural and household decision-making, (ii) their control over agricultural income, and (iii) differences in decision-making according to household characteristics. A cross-sectional survey of 197 female farmers was conducted using random sampling in Mahailuppallama, Katiyawa, and Senapura in the Anuradhapura District. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and ANOVA in SPSS software. The sample consisted mainly of married women (85.1%), the majority being middle- to older-aged (56.3% over 40 years), with 67.0% having secondary education. Only 16.5% were household heads, with the remainder residing in male-headed households. Respondents reported high involvement in routine household decision-making (including food preparation, daily expenditure, and visiting relatives) but relatively low involvement in major financial and asset-related decisions such as savings, asset purchases, housing, and decisions concerning children's education and occupation. In the agricultural domain, women exhibited limited participation in technical and input-related decisions (land preparation, sowing method, fertilizer application, irrigation, and machinery use), while demonstrating greater involvement in weeding, storage of produce, determining the proportion of produce for home consumption, decisions on the use of income, and saving behaviour. Although 73.9% of respondents were permitted to retain some portion of agricultural income, 27.1% could keep only 25% or less, indicating constrained financial autonomy. Perceptions strongly reflected male dominance in control over farming inputs, land and irrigation rights, and agriculture-related decision-making, and women identified poor household economic conditions, low remuneration, violence against women, limited employment opportunities, non-recognition of women's contributions, and lack of training as major constraints. Factor analysis distinguished farm, financial, and household decision-making domains, and ANOVA indicated significantly higher farm related decision-making scores among female household heads than non-heads ($F=6.735$, $p=0.010$), with only a marginal difference in financial decisions ($F=3.776$, $p=0.054$) and no significant difference in children and household-related decisions ($F=2.309$, $p=0.130$). Overall, the findings reveal that although women farmers in the Anuradhapura District play a key role in routine household and post-harvest decision-making, they remain largely excluded from technical agricultural and strategic financial decisions. This highlights the need for gender-responsive interventions to strengthen women's participation in technical farm decisions, improve their access to agricultural training and extension services, and promote equitable control over agricultural income and other productive resources.

Keywords: female farmers, agricultural decision making, household decisions, perceived constraints, north-central province.

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