

INDIA: Only a new law will guarantee Indian women have rights to land: scientist

By Rina Chandran

Reuters (21.12.2016) – <http://reut.rs/2hr94LY> – India must pass a law granting women equal rights to land as men if the country is to ensure more food is grown for its more than 1 billion people and greater respect for the environment, a leading scientist said.

M.S. Swaminathan is known as the father of India's 'Green Revolution' for developing high-yielding varieties of wheat in the 1960s that helped make the country self-sufficient in food.

As a member of the upper house of parliament he drafted a bill in 2011 to protect the rights of women farmers. Although the bill lapsed when his term ended in 2013, Swaminathan, 91, has not given up hope that a similar law will be passed.

"We need to increase awareness of the need for equal rights for women farmers, but we also need a law that guarantees it," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in an interview.

India's constitution gives women equal rights but rarely do they exercise those rights when it comes to land ownership –

“a complex social issue that is tied to how we treat the girl child versus the boy child,” Swaminathan said.

“The father may say: ‘I am giving my daughter dowry for her marriage, so I don’t have to give her land.’ They are afraid they will lose control of the land if they give it to the daughter,” he said in an interview at his office in the southern Indian city of Chennai.

Women make up more than a third of India’s agriculture workforce, yet only about 13 percent of farmland is owned by women, according to official data.

Land is usually transferred through inheritance in India, and it is almost always men who inherit land.

While a Hindu woman is entitled to a share of land owned by her father, she is generally under pressure to give up this right when she gets married.

Some states issue joint titles when they allocate land to the landless poor. But rarely are women added to old titles.

Destitution

As more men from villages migrate to urban areas in search of jobs, their wives and daughters tend to the land.

But land titles are almost always in the man's name, and women farmers are denied loans, insurance and other government benefits because their names are not on the titles.

"Men may do the plowing, but the rest of it – including harvesting, threshing, storage – is done by women," said Swaminathan, who was named by Time magazine in 1999 as one of the 20 most influential Asians of the 20th century.

Women farmers tend to grow more food crops rather than cash crops, and are more sensitive to the environment and to their children's long-term needs, Swaminathan said.

"But we are slow to acknowledge the important role of women, and slow to give them rights," he said.

India ranked 130 of 155 countries on the UNDP's gender inequality index, worse than countries including Cambodia and Zimbabwe, on parameters such as infant mortality and education.

Swaminathan studied agriculture after witnessing the terrible effect of the 1943 Bengal famine, which is estimated to have killed more than 3 million people.

In more recent years, he said he has been struck by the plight of widows of farmers who killed themselves in western

Maharashtra state following crop failures.

“The land is immediately claimed by his father or brothers, and the woman is left destitute. It is heart rending,” he said.

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