

## Agricultural Extension in South Asia

### **The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World**

Melinda Gates (2019)  
Bluebird Books  
Pages: 273  
Price: INR 599  
ISBN Number: 978-1-5290-0550-9

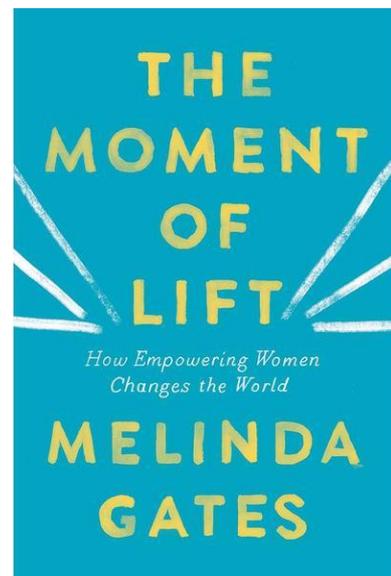


Businesswoman and philanthropist extraordinaire Melinda Gates, the co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) leaves an indelible impression through her book, *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World*. Mrs Gates provides an insight into the pressing need for taking heed and putting in place systems that empower women, provide them with equal opportunities – whether it be in the areas of healthcare, education, access to services as a farmer, or in a workplace – that accept and acknowledge her gender, and adapts accordingly.

She has reaffirmed the need for not limiting initiatives to only certain categories which shriek ‘women’. In the course of different chapters she has presented relevant data and anecdotes identifying champions of women worldwide, and has woven it into her own journey – as a person, a professional, a champion, and a philanthropist.

*“Delivery of science is as important as the science itself”*, (p. 44). Though this is said in the context of empowering mothers through maternal and newborn health, this holds true for all extension programmes, be it in healthcare or agricultural extension or rural development. It is especially relevant when it comes to delivery of extension and advisory services to women farmers. Sometimes we don’t realize that there are women farmers and it takes someone else to point it out to us (as is highlighted in Chapter 7, ‘Seeing Gender Bias: Women in Agriculture’). Even when programmes are designed, these are usually done in such a way that the needs (mobility, literacy, access to technology) of women farmers are continuously ignored at the time of service delivery, and later on cultural norms are blamed for its non-functionality/ coming in the way of actual delivery.

*Moment of Lift* tackles very controversial issues, such as family planning, child marriage, female genital cutting, as well as issues pertaining to sex workers and on to the more obvious ones of educating girls and women. The book highlights the fact that even if the cultural norms are a deterrent, if the programmes are designed to respond to specific needs, they will deliver and be instrumental in bringing forth change in societal behaviours. What is critically needed is ‘intent’. This is very much evident from investing into PRADAN once BMGF realized the central role women play in agriculture; *“We’re supporting more organizations like PRADAN that take an overt and intentional*



*approach to empowering women*". It also means a change in perspectives (listening and responding) rather than imposing technology and solutions from an outsiders' perspective.

Building a culture of gender sensitivity within institutions and organizations is the actual lift needed. It is very illuminating to know that this intent was spelled out on paper by Melinda Gates in the September 2014 issue of *Science*<sup>1</sup>, and gender is a central theme in all their programmes.

Women are custodians of seed across all cultures. However, knowing this and responding to these needs is something that hasn't been really happening at the ground level or within seed breeding programmes. Sometimes there are 'simple solutions' to simple problems. This comes through in the case of International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) where IRRI researchers consult both men and women farmers and collect their trait preferences on rice seeds prior to undertaking breed improvement in seeds.

Women are farmers, yet they are denied an identity as farmers. They think of themselves as farmhands within their household. This is also because access to land rights, technology and services is biased against them. It is important to tackle these issues head on, mobilize an enabling environment so that we can lift up the entire system so as to become food secure, adapt to climate change stresses, and enable nutrition sensitivity as women are the nutritionists within their households across all cultures.

The importance of collecting data to reiterate and reinforce the need for gender equity when it comes to agriculture is expressly dealt with in Chapter 7. Information on 'What do women and girls need' as against sex-disaggregated data that most extension programmes collect is quite a departure from the traditional approach to gender.

Overall, it is an excellent book for all those who want to understand programmes from a gender lens and how such an approach can bring about powerful transformation. It can also be an eye opener for all the skeptics who start getting cross-eyed when the words gender, women and empowerment are mentioned, especially within the domains of agricultural research and extension system. When Melinda Gates establishes the mandate of *putting women and girls at the center of development* with all her investments into developmental programmes it is hard to ignore. It also provides candid narratives of 'missing great ideas' especially in the context of developmental programmes not delivering or still lagging behind, because these programmes have not taken into consideration the dimension of women and their needs.

'Women in agriculture' was a chapter that started with much aplomb – quoting relevant data and analysis (number of women farmers and low yields) – yet it ended without providing the reader a more meaningful insight into how to make sure that the policy environment is an enabler for women in agriculture. Moreover, there should be systems in place within the organizations working on extension and advisory services with rural women that can help them respond to those needs. Also there is a need to monitor and review the progress of some of these measures. This is what FAO's GRAST<sup>2</sup> (Gender and Rural Advisory Services Tool) aims at. GRAST helps users to understand the extent to which the enabling environment promotes the improvement of rural women's situations in general and the provision of gender-sensitive RAS in particular. To conclude the book would have had greater appeal and more value if it had opened up about the policies/systems put in place within the Gates Foundation to make the programmes delivered by it more gender sensitive.

---

<sup>1</sup>Science. 2014. Vol. 345, Issue 6202. 12 September 2014.

<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/345/6202/1273.abstract>

<sup>2</sup>Petrics H, Barale K, Kaaria SK and David S. 2018. The Gender and Rural Advisory Services Assessment Tool. FAO. Pp. 92. <http://www.fao.org/3/CA2693EN/ca2693en.pdf>

On the whole I would like to congratulate the author on tackling many controversial issues in this book and continuing to weigh in on the need for gender parity, empowering women and getting champions (both men and women) to endorse these in order to create a better world. Especially as a feminist there are many titbits (from Mrs Gates own life and from those she affected) in this book that are very familiar to many of us but are encouraging all the same.

**Nimisha Mittal**



*Nimisha Mittal ([nimisha61@gmail.com](mailto:nimisha61@gmail.com)) is Lead Researcher, Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP), Hyderabad, India.*