

HARVESTING HOPE: EMPOWERING WOMEN FARMERS IN INDIA'S AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Trupti Prangya Ratha¹, Ratna Binodini Amiya Priyadarsini Das²

^{1,2}PhD Research Scholar, SOA, SNIL, BBSR.

ABSTRACT

Women play a critical yet often unrecognized role in India's agricultural economy. Despite constituting a significant part of the agricultural workforce, they face numerous challenges such as lack of land ownership, limited access to resources, and socio-cultural barriers. This paper delves into the socio-economic conditions of women farmers in India, the obstacles they face, and the potential solutions to empower them. It highlights how empowering women farmers can drive agricultural productivity, improve rural livelihoods, and contribute to India's overall economic growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the backbone of India's economy, providing livelihoods to nearly half of the population and contributing significantly to the country's GDP. In rural India, women are at the heart of agricultural activities, engaging in everything from crop production to livestock management. Despite their substantial involvement, women farmers are often referred to as "invisible farmers," as their contributions are frequently overlooked and undervalued.

The term "farmer" is often associated with men, sidelining women and excluding them from key agricultural decisions, resources, and government programs. This paper aims to explore the role of women farmers in India, identify the challenges they face, and propose strategies to empower them. Empowering women farmers is crucial not only for gender equality but also for achieving sustainable agricultural growth and food security in India.

Agriculture is not only a vital part of India's economy but also the mainstay of rural livelihoods, employing nearly 60% of the rural population. Within this sector, women play a central yet often unacknowledged role. Women contribute significantly to agricultural labor, performing a wide range of tasks from sowing, weeding, and harvesting to livestock care and post-harvest processing. In fact, women constitute around 42% of the agricultural workforce, with their participation even higher in certain sectors like horticulture, animal husbandry, and small-scale farming. Despite their vast involvement, women farmers remain invisible in policy discussions and are often excluded from formal recognition as "farmers."

The historical neglect of women farmers in India stems from deep-seated gender biases, patriarchal land ownership patterns, and a lack of targeted policies that address their unique challenges. Cultural norms often dictate that farming is a male-dominated domain, marginalizing women's contributions and excluding them from key decision-making roles, access to resources, and agricultural extension services. In reality, women perform essential agricultural tasks alongside men and often bear the dual burden of managing household responsibilities and farm work.

Additionally, the term "farmer" in official discourse is often associated with land ownership, which disproportionately excludes women since land inheritance and ownership laws favor men. Women are more likely to be involved in unpaid family labor or work as informal wage laborers, further diminishing their economic and social standing. This limited access to land ownership and formal recognition as farmers restricts their access to credit, subsidies, and government programs aimed at supporting the agricultural sector. This paper seeks to highlight the vital yet overlooked role of women farmers in India's agricultural landscape. By examining their socio-economic conditions, the barriers they face, and the potential for policy interventions, this study advocates for a more inclusive and equitable approach to agricultural development. Empowering women farmers is not only a matter of gender equality but also a strategic necessity for ensuring food security, improving rural livelihoods, and enhancing agricultural productivity. Acknowledging and addressing the specific challenges faced by women farmers can unlock their full potential, fostering resilience and growth in India's agricultural sector.

The empowerment of women farmers is critical to achieving the broader goals of sustainable agricultural development, rural poverty alleviation, and gender equity. This paper explores these interconnected issues while proposing solutions to overcome the systemic barriers that women farmers face, ultimately aiming to create a more inclusive agricultural policy framework in India.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies underscore the central role women play in Indian agriculture. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2011), women contribute to about 60-80% of the total farm labour, depending on the region and the type of agricultural activity. Despite this, the Indian agricultural sector tends to view women's work as an extension of household duties, resulting in the systemic undervaluation of their contributions (Agarwal, 2014). Women are

particularly prominent in labour-intensive tasks such as sowing, weeding, and harvesting (Kelkar, 2013). In many regions, especially where male migration is prevalent, women are the de facto heads of farms, taking on managerial roles in addition to their labour responsibilities (Rao, 2006). However, the notion of "invisible farmers" (Agarwal, 1994) persists in India, where women are often excluded from official agricultural statistics and policy considerations. This invisibility is compounded by the fact that much of their work occurs in informal, unpaid, or subsistence contexts, making it difficult to measure and recognize their economic contributions. One of the most significant barriers for women farmers in India is the lack of land ownership. Women account for less than 13% of landholders in India, a figure that has remained stubbornly low despite legal reforms such as the Hindu Succession Act of 2005, which theoretically grants equal inheritance rights to daughters (Bina Agarwal, 1994; Rao, 2018). Studies show that without secure land rights, women face reduced access to formal credit, government subsidies, and technological advancements, all of which are crucial for increasing agricultural productivity (Kelkar, 2013). Additionally, cultural norms often prevent women from claiming or exercising their legal inheritance rights, with male relatives typically inheriting land (Sharma, 2011).

Objectives

The primary objectives of this research paper are as follows:

1. To Analyse the Role of Women in Indian Agriculture.
2. To Identify the Challenges Faced by Women Farmers.
3. To Evaluate Existing Government Policies and Interventions.

Hypothesis

1. Primary Hypothesis

Empowering women farmers through improved access to land ownership, financial resources, and agricultural technology will lead to increased agricultural productivity, better rural livelihoods, and overall economic growth in India.

2. Secondary Hypotheses

Government policies and interventions, while beneficial, are not adequately reaching women farmers due to structural and cultural barriers, limiting their effectiveness in empowering women.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Role of Women in Agriculture

The survey revealed that women farmers are heavily involved in all aspects of agricultural production, from planting to post-harvest processing. However, despite their extensive labor contributions, most women do not have formal recognition as farmers, as land ownership is predominantly in the names of male family members. This lack of recognition limits their access to agricultural subsidies, credit, and training programs.

2. Challenges Faced by Women Farmers

a. Lack of Land Ownership

Only 12% of the women surveyed owned land in their own names, which significantly hindered their access to formal credit and agricultural extension services. Without collateral, women farmers often have to rely on informal moneylenders, who charge exorbitant interest rates. This restricts their ability to invest in better agricultural inputs or technologies.

b. Limited Access to Resources

Women farmers reported lower access to quality seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, and agricultural machinery compared to their male counterparts. The lack of targeted agricultural extension services further limits women's ability to adopt modern farming techniques. In regions where agricultural officers conducted training, women reported not being included or informed.

c. Socio-Cultural Barriers

Deep-rooted patriarchal norms remain a significant barrier to women's full participation in agriculture. Women's contributions are often seen as supplementary to men's work, and they are rarely involved in household or community-level agricultural decision-making. Additionally, the double burden of managing both household duties and farm work places a disproportionate strain on women, affecting their productivity and well-being.

3. Effectiveness of Government Policies

While the government has introduced several programs aimed at empowering women farmers, including the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), the reach of these initiatives remains limited. Many women, particularly in

remote areas, are unaware of such programs, and even those who are aware face difficulties in accessing them due to bureaucratic hurdles and lack of information.

4. Opportunities for Empowerment

Despite these challenges, there are emerging opportunities to empower women farmers. The rise of women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has proven effective in improving financial inclusion and collective bargaining power for women farmers. Women involved in SHGs reported better access to microcredit, agricultural inputs, and training, which enhanced their productivity and income.

4. CONCLUSION

This research highlights the critical role women farmers play in India's agricultural landscape, despite the numerous challenges they face. Women are essential to agricultural production but are systematically marginalized in terms of land ownership, resource access, and decision-making power. Government initiatives aimed at empowering women farmers are a step in the right direction, but their implementation needs to be more inclusive and accessible.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Securing Land Rights for Women:** Legal reforms and social programs should be strengthened to ensure women have secure land ownership and inheritance rights. This could include joint land titles for women and their spouses, as well as land redistribution programs that prioritize women.
2. **Improving Access to Resources:** Agricultural policies should be gender-sensitive, ensuring that women farmers have equal access to credit, seeds, fertilizers, and technology. This can be achieved through targeted agricultural extension services and subsidies specifically designed for women farmers.
3. **Enhancing Awareness of Government Schemes:** Increased outreach and awareness campaigns are needed to inform women farmers about available government programs. These campaigns should be designed in ways that reach women in rural and remote areas, utilizing local languages and community networks.
4. **Supporting Women-Led Cooperatives:** Encouraging the formation of women-led cooperatives and Self-Help Groups can improve women's collective bargaining power and access to resources. These groups can also serve as platforms for training and capacity-building.

By addressing these issues, India can unlock the potential of its women farmers, contributing not only to agricultural growth but also to broader social and economic development.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Agarwal, B. (1994). *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Kelkar, G. (2013). Gender and Productive Assets: Implications for Women's Economic Security and Productivity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(23).
- [3] Rao, N. (2018). Land, Gender and Agrarian Change in India. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 18(3).
- [4] Cernea, M. M. (2000). Risks, Safeguards and Reconstruction: A Model for Population Displacement and Resettlement. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(41).