

Women in Agriculture: The Hidden Pillars of Food Security

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ABSTRACT

In rural India, women play a pivotal role in agriculture. From early morning fieldwork to managing homes and food, their labour keeps both farms and families running. This highlights their growing contribution to food security, not just by producing crops, but by managing budgets, preserving seeds, and adapting to climate challenges. Despite being a larger part of the agricultural workforce, women face major hurdles- lack of land rights, limited access to credit and training, and social barriers. Yet, when supported, they become powerful agents of change. By the real-life stories, policy suggestions, this piece calls for recognition, investment and empowerment of women farmers in agriculture - the real backbone of India's farming future.

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INTRODUCTION

In the villages of rural India, far from the spotlight, a quiet revolution is taking place. It isn't led by big machines or loud slogans—but by the tireless hands of women. From the first light of dawn to well after sunset, they're out in the fields—planting, weeding, feeding cattle, collecting water, cooking, and caring for their families. Their day doesn't end when the sun sets; it simply shifts from farm work to housework.

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG) on gender equality and women's rights and at least 11 of the 17 SDGs require indicators related to gender dynamics.

Yet, despite doing so much, these women are rarely called what they truly are—farmers. Their work is often brushed off as just part of “household duties,” invisible in government records and public conversations. But the truth is, they are the backbone of rural life and food production. It's time we see them, value them, and honour their role as key players in India's agricultural story.

The Backbone of Rural Agriculture

When we think of a farmer, most of us picture a man—maybe with a plough in his hand or sitting proudly on a tractor. But in reality, that image leaves out a huge part of the story. In village after village, it's often the women who are out in the fields—digging the soil, planting the seeds, pulling out weeds, watering crops, harvesting grain, drying it in the sun, and even walking to the market to sell it.

Yet somehow, their hard work slips through the cracks. Their names don't appear on land papers. They're rarely called for training sessions or given a seat at the table in farmer meetings. They do so much—but are hardly ever seen or heard. Their hands feed families, but their voices go unheard.



Fig 1: Population dynamics of women in Indian agriculture (Vision 2050, CIAE Bhopal.)

Figure 1 depicts an important story about how farming in India has changed over the years. From 1971 to 2011, the number of people working in agriculture kept growing, and while men always made up a large part of the workforce, something else was happening quietly—more and more women were stepping in. Between 1991 and 2011, the rise in women working on farms was especially sharp. By 2020 (as projected), they will be nearly equal to men’s workforce. This elicits that women play a greater role in farming than they’re often given credit for—and their presence is only getting stronger.

Women and Food Security: Growing More Than Just Crops

When we talk about food security, it’s not just about growing enough grain. It’s about ensuring whether every household has access to safe, nutritious food all year round. It’s about meals on the table, health for the family, and the ability to bounce back during hard times like droughts or inflation.

Women contribute to food security in more ways than most realize:

- **Food Availability:** They grow vegetables in kitchen gardens, rear poultry, and manage small plots of farmland. In many villages, it’s the woman who first wakes up and checks the fields before anyone else.
- **Access to Food:** Often, women are the ones managing the household budget. They decide what’s bought from the market, how food is rationed during lean seasons, and how leftovers are reused without waste.
- **Utilization:** They cook the meals, make nutritional decisions for their families, and ensure children, elders, and even animals are fed properly. Their knowledge of traditional recipes and local herbs keeps families healthy even in times of scarcity.
- **Stability:** Through age-old practices like saving seeds, rotating crops, and using organic manure, women farmers build resilience into their farms. They are often the first to adapt when the climate changes or a new pest threatens the crop.

In simple terms, women in agriculture don’t just feed their families—they build systems that keep food on plates, even when times are tough.

Challenges They Face

Despite their enormous role, women farmers face multiple challenges that limit their potential:

- **Lack of Land Ownership:** In many cultures, land rights are passed through men, leaving women with limited or no ownership. Without legal land titles, women cannot access credit, insurance, or government schemes.
- **Limited Access to Resources:** Agricultural extension services, training, seeds, tools, and subsidies often bypass women, assuming men are the ‘real’ farmers. This deprives women of opportunities to improve productivity.
- **Heavy Workload:** Women involve in all the domestic chores and looking after children simultaneously looking after the farm activities, often working longer hours than men.

- **Low Decision-Making Power:** Even when women contribute equally or more, but they are not involved in making key decisions at the household and community levels.
- **Social and Cultural Barriers:** Gender stereotypes, lack of mobility, safety concerns, and unequal education further limit women's ability to fully involve and get benefit from agriculture.

Changing Winds: Recognizing Women's Role

The past decade has seen a growing recognition of the importance of empowering women in agriculture. Research consistently exhibits, when women were given equal access to resources, farm productivity can be increased by 20–30%, which can significantly reduce global hunger.

In India, several government schemes and NGOs have begun targeting women farmers directly:

- **Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP):** It is a central government initiative which mainly aims to improve the women's status in agriculture by capacity building and supporting them through self-help groups (SHGs).
- **Krishi Vigyan Kendra's (KVKs):** Many KVKs now run special training programs exclusively for farm women on improved agricultural practices, value addition, and entrepreneurship.

What Needs to Be Done?

If we truly want to ensure food security, especially in a world fighting against the climate change, pandemics, and economic instability, investing in women farmers is no longer optional- it's essential. Here's what needs to be done:

1. **Recognize Women as Farmers:** Policies, subsidies, and support systems must explicitly identify women as farmers—not just labourers or homemakers.
2. **Secure Land Rights:** Women should be provided with equal rights to own and inherit the land.
3. **Access to Resources:** Extension services should be gender-sensitive. More female extension agents, mobile-based advisories, and tailored training sessions can bridge the gap.
4. **Financial Inclusion:** Women need access to credit, insurance, and savings instruments. Micro-finance and women's banks can be powerful enablers.
5. **Support for Domestic Work:** Community childcare centres, access to clean fuel, and time-saving technologies can reduce women's unpaid workload.
6. **Encourage Leadership:** Women need to be encouraged to actively participate in village committees, water user groups, and farmers' associations, ensuring their voices shape agricultural policies.

CONCLUSION

Women in agriculture are not just labourers—they are decision-makers, innovators, and leaders. They hold the keys to sustainable farming and food security. Yet, their contributions remain hidden behind the curtains of tradition and gender bias.

To build a future where no one goes hungry, we must bring women to the centre of agricultural policy and practice. It's time to stop seeing them as 'helpers' and start recognizing them as what they truly are—the backbone of global food systems.

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