

The Feminization of Indian Agriculture: Empowering Women in the Heartland

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Introduction

In the vast expanse of India's agricultural landscape, a profound transformation is underway - the feminization of agriculture. Traditionally perceived as a male-dominated sector, agriculture in India is experiencing a significant shift as more and more women take up active roles in farming activities. This evolution not only challenges entrenched gender norms but also holds the promise of substantial socio-economic change.

National Sample Survey (NSS-2017) data shows, that there has been a steady decline of men in agriculture over the last three decades. This trend can be fittingly termed as "Feminization of Indian Agriculture". As more men have moved to non-farm work in the industrial and service sectors, women have remained in agriculture in substantive manner. For centuries, Indian agriculture has been synonymous with male labour. Men were primarily responsible for tasks such as ploughing, sowing, and harvesting, while women's roles were confined to subsidiary activities like weeding, planting, and post-harvest processing. However, with changing times and socio-economic dynamics, women are increasingly stepping into the forefront of agricultural production.

One of the primary drivers of this shift is the changing rural landscape. Migration patterns have led to the exodus of men from rural areas in search of better employment opportunities, leaving behind women to shoulder the responsibilities of farming. Additionally, the spread of education and awareness has empowered women to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their rights in agricultural activities.

Furthermore, various government initiatives aimed at empowering rural women have played a crucial role in fostering their participation in agriculture. Schemes such as the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)

have provided women with access to credit, training, and technology, enabling them to enhance their productivity and contribute more effectively to the agricultural sector.

Scenario of Farm Women

The women of the pre agrarian societies collected wild fruits, berries, tubers and roots and had generational experience in identifying edible plants and knowledge about plant's life cycles and how they grow. It has been suggested that women's extraordinary vision, more developed motor skills and ability to process finer details evolved due to the importance of their involvement in foraging activities for millions of years. For example: The average women's eyes can distinguish about 250 shades and hues, while an average men can only see 40 – 50. In most traditional societies, even today this historical association of women in Agriculture is revered of ten women sow the first seeds to bestow good luck for a bountiful harvest.

Women farmers in agriculture sector employees 80% of all economically active women they comprise 33% of agricultural labour force and 48% of self- employed farmers. As per the Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report 2021-22, the agriculture sector had the highest estimated percentage (62.9%) distribution of female workers. In rural India, about 7080 % of the women depend on agriculture. Average women spend nearly 3300 hours in the field in a crop season as against 1860 hours spend by men.

The feminization of Indian agriculture is not merely a statistical phenomenon but has far-reaching implications for rural communities and the economy as a whole. Here are some key aspects to consider:

- ✚ **Economic Empowerment:** Women's involvement in agriculture has the potential to significantly boost household incomes and alleviate poverty in rural areas. By actively participating in farming activities, women are not only generating additional income but also gaining greater control over household finances, thereby enhancing their economic autonomy.
- ✚ **Food Security:** Women play a critical role in ensuring food security for their families and communities. Their involvement in agriculture contributes to increased food production and better nutrition outcomes, thereby addressing food security challenges prevalent in many rural areas.



- ✚ **Sustainable Agriculture:** Women are often the custodians of traditional agricultural knowledge and practices. By integrating women into agricultural decision-making processes, there is a greater likelihood of promoting sustainable farming methods that are environmentally friendly and resilient to climate change.
- ✚ **Social Empowerment:** The feminization of agriculture has the potential to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality in rural communities. As women gain greater visibility and recognition for their contributions to agriculture, it can lead to broader social changes, including increased respect for women's rights and enhanced gender parity.
- ✚ **Technological Adoption:** With increasing access to training and technology, women are embracing modern agricultural practices and innovations. This not only enhances productivity but also facilitates their integration into value chains, thereby opening up new market opportunities and avenues for growth.

Major Constraints Impeding Women's Contribution in Agriculture

Farm women in India face a multitude of challenges, stemming from a complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors. Some of the key challenges they encounter include:

- ✚ **Limited Land Ownership and Control:** In many parts of India, women have restricted access to land ownership and control due to patriarchal land tenure systems. Even when they are involved in farming activities, their rights to land may be informal or insecure, leaving them vulnerable to displacement and exploitation.
- ✚ **Unequal Access to Resources:** Women farmers often have limited access to crucial agricultural resources such as seeds, fertilizers, and modern farming equipment. This lack of access hampers their productivity and restricts their ability to adopt sustainable and profitable farming practices.
- ✚ **Financial Constraints:** Women farmers in India often face challenges in accessing credit and financial services, including formal banking institutions and government-sponsored schemes. Discriminatory lending practices, lack of collateral, and limited financial literacy further exacerbate their financial constraints.
- ✚ **Limited Access to Education and Extension Services:** Many farm women in India have lower levels of education compared to men, which hinders their ability to access information about modern agricultural practices, technologies, and market trends.



Additionally, extension services often fail to adequately reach and address the specific needs of women farmers.

- ✚ **Unpaid and Underpaid Labor:** Women contribute significantly to agricultural production in India, both on family farms and as agricultural wage labourers. However, their labour is often unpaid or underpaid, and their contributions may go unrecognized or undervalued within household and community dynamics.
- ✚ **Social and Cultural Constraints:** Deeply entrenched gender norms and cultural practices often limit women's autonomy and decision-making power within agricultural households and communities. This can manifest in various forms of discrimination, including restrictions on mobility, limited participation in decision-making processes, and unequal access to resources and opportunities.
- ✚ **Health and Well-being:** Farm women in India often face challenges related to health and well-being, including inadequate access to healthcare services, high levels of reproductive health risks, and heavy workloads that can lead to physical and mental health issues.
- ✚ **Climate Change Vulnerability:** Climate change impacts, such as erratic weather patterns, water scarcity, and environmental degradation, disproportionately affect women farmers in India. Women often bear the brunt of climate-related shocks and stresses due to their roles as primary caregivers, water and resource managers, and agricultural producers.

Approaches for empowering women in agriculture

- **The Direct Benefit Transfer:** It will effectively deny access to agricultural inputs and extension services for women farmers working on their own family lands, as sharecroppers and women's collaboratives, who lease land. It brooks no delay in introducing various policy measures for empowering women in farming & allied areas for improving their access to land, such as 'joint pattas' for both homestead and agricultural land; providing credit access through speedy issue of Kisan Credit Cards; creating multiple livelihood opportunities through crop-livestock farming systems, agro-processing, etc., thereby providing an enabling environment to women to contribute to their best ability in improving overall productivity-production trigger and their own family's income

- **Approaches to mainstreaming gender concerns:** An egalitarian approach to gender-based concerns is necessary. Some of these matters are being addressed by Earmarking 30 per cent of funds for women under various major schemes/programmes and development interventions. Introducing ‘pro-women initiatives’ to help women derive the benefits of all beneficiary– oriented components of different programmes/ schemes and missions; and focusing on formation of women Self Help Groups (SHGs), Women Federations and Farm Women Producer Organisations /Companies; capacity building interventions; linking them to micro credit; enhancing their access to information and ensuring their representation in decision making bodies at various levels.
- **Budgetary allocations for Women in Agriculture:** The growing presence of women in the agriculture sector over the years, has not been matched with equally substantial increase in the allocations for women farmers. This is only a good beginning and now needs to be refined and allocations made in consonance with the women’s share under each scheme.
- **Women oriented Mass Media and ICT support:** ICT has been influencing all spheres of human lives including the process of information dissemination in agriculture sector. While, the ICT led extension systems are capable of changing farmers’ lives by improving access to information and sharing knowledge through click of a button, they are far more important and essential for women farmers who are overburdened and hard pressed for time
- **Women and Research:** Along with an in-depth understanding of women’s involvement in agriculture, suitability of available technological options for them is an equally important issue. In order to reduce drudgery of work and improve work efficiency of women’s worth in agriculture, the technology designing has to keep their specific issues in mind as such, research on gender issues in agriculture and allied sectors including technology refinement in favour of women has to be a continuous and an ongoing activity.
- **Government Initiatives:** The National Policy on Farmers 2007 had suggested giving priority to ‘Recognition and Mainstreaming of Women’s role in Agriculture’. Ministry of Agriculture and farmers welfare is taking pro-women initiatives through various schemes and programmes and 30% of benefits and resources are earmarked to women.



Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) is a programme exclusively for women farmers. Objective of this scheme is to empower women in agriculture by making systematic investments to enhance their participation and productivity, as also create and sustain agriculture-based livelihoods of rural women.

Government has increased its focus on women self-help group (SHG) to connect them to micro-credit through capacity building activities and to provide information and ensuring their representation in different decision-making bodies. Recognizing the critical role of women in agriculture, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare has declared 15th. October of every year as Women Farmer's Day. National Gender Resource Centre in Agriculture (NGRCA) is set up in the Ministry to fulfil the national commitment to empowerment of farm women. NGRCA is a focal point for convergence of all gender related issues in agriculture and is to serve as an epicentre to coordinate and synergize various efforts aiming at women's empowerment through agriculture. ICAR- Central Institute for Women in Agriculture, Bhubaneswar has been in the forefront undertaking research on issues affecting women in agriculture. It has focused on participatory action research in different technology-based theme areas involving rural women to test suitability of technologies for women and suggest their refinement. The Institute is also working to catalyse and facilitate Research and Development institutions to bring in farm women perspectives in their programmes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the feminization of Indian agriculture marks a pivotal moment in the country's agricultural landscape, ushering in a wave of change that holds immense potential for rural development and gender equality. As more women step into the forefront of farming activities, they are not only driving economic growth but also challenging traditional gender roles and norms. However, while the progress made is commendable, it is crucial to acknowledge the persistent challenges that hinder women's full participation and empowerment in agriculture. Addressing issues such as limited access to land, credit, and extension services, as well as cultural and social barriers, is essential to ensure that the benefits of feminization are realized by all. Moving forward, concerted efforts from policymakers, civil society organizations, and the private sector are needed to create an enabling environment for women in agriculture. This includes implementing gender-sensitive policies, providing targeted



support and resources, and fostering a culture of gender equality and inclusion within rural communities. Ultimately, the feminization of Indian agriculture is not just about increasing women's presence in the field but about recognizing and valuing their contributions as equal partners in the journey towards sustainable development. By harnessing the full potential of women in agriculture, India can build a more resilient, inclusive, and prosperous future for all its citizens.

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