

(A No. 130) The Invisible Backbone: Recognizing and Empowering Women in Agriculture

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Women are the **invisible backbone** of the global food system. From sowing seeds and harvesting crops to tending livestock and processing food, they perform the majority of the world's most critical, yet often unrecognized, agricultural labor. In India, where agriculture is the largest employer, the contribution of women is monumental, a reality that is increasingly being termed the "**feminization of agriculture.**" Despite their pivotal role—or perhaps because of the socio-economic distress driving it—women farmers face systemic barriers that limit their productivity, suppress their incomes, and deny them dignity and land ownership. Unlocking the full potential of women in agriculture is not just an equity issue; it is the single most efficient way to **ensure global food security, reduce poverty, and build climate resilience.**



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The Scale of Contribution: The Feminization of Agriculture

The involvement of women in Indian agriculture is pervasive, intense, and crucial across the entire agricultural value chain.

The Unsung Workforce

- **Labor Share:** Women constitute an estimated **60% to 80%** of the farm labor force in developing countries and over **60% of the agricultural workforce** in India. They are heavily concentrated in the most labor-intensive and monotonous tasks, such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and threshing.
- **Post-Harvest and Allied Activities:** Their work extends far beyond the field. Women perform nearly **95% of the labor in animal husbandry and fisheries** and a vast majority of post-harvest operations, including drying, processing, grading, and storage. Livestock care, fodder collection, and dairy management are predominantly female responsibilities.
- **Seed Keepers and Managers:** Historically and presently, women have been the primary **conservators of agro-biodiversity**, preserving traditional seed varieties and local knowledge essential for resilience against pests and climate variability.

The Rise of Female Farm Managers

The phenomenon of feminization of agriculture is intensifying due to **increasing male migration** from rural areas to urban centers in search of better, non-farm employment. This shift, often driven by agrarian distress, climate change, and low farm profitability, leaves women—including wives, mothers, and daughters—to manage farms independently. While this provides women with an unexpected role as **de facto farm managers and decision-makers**, it often compounds their existing workload and stress, a situation sometimes described as the **"feminization of agrarian distress."**

Systemic Barriers: The Gender Gaps

Despite their massive contribution, women farmers—often referred to as *Mahila Kisans* in India—are marginalized by deeply ingrained social norms and policy blind spots. This disparity creates significant **gender gaps** in access to and control over resources.

1. Land Ownership and Tenure Security

This is the single most critical barrier. While women are the primary cultivators, they own a minuscule portion of the land.

- **Minimal Ownership:** Globally, less than 15% of the world's landowners are women. In India, women account for barely **14% of landholders**, controlling only about **11% of the agricultural land**.
- **Invisible Labor, No Rights:** Without a title deed in their name, women are not legally recognized as "farmers." This invisibility deprives them of essential government benefits.

2. Access to Credit, Technology, and Inputs

The lack of land ownership prevents women from offering **collateral** for formal bank loans or institutional credit.

- **Credit Exclusion:** Women are forced to rely on informal, high-interest credit sources or male family members.
- **Technological Gap:** Agricultural extension services, training programs, and the distribution of modern equipment (tractors, tillers, specialized machinery) are largely designed and delivered for men. Women farmers, often due to mobility and cultural constraints, are excluded from training on improved seeds, climate-smart practices, and farm mechanization.
- **Inappropriate Tools:** Most farm equipment is heavy and ergonomically designed for men, increasing the **drudgery** and health risks associated with women's farm labor (e.g., weeding, transplanting).

3. Wage and Decision-Making Disparity

Despite performing the same or more arduous work than men, women face stark pay inequality.

- **Gender Wage Gap:** Women agricultural laborers are systematically **paid less** than their male counterparts for equal work. Even among self-employed farmers, women running family farms report significantly lower net incomes than men.

- **Limited Agency:** In male-headed households, women often perform the labor but have minimal say over **crucial decisions**—what crops to grow, when to sell, and how to spend the income.

4. The Double Burden of Work

Rural women bear the "**double burden**" of working on the farm and simultaneously managing all unpaid domestic and caregiving duties (fetching water and firewood, cooking, childcare, etc.). This leads to **time poverty**, limiting their ability to participate in markets, education, or local governance.

The Economic and Social Case for Empowerment

Closing the gender gaps in agriculture offers one of the highest returns on investment in development.

1. Productivity Boost and Food Security

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that if women farmers in developing countries had the **same access to productive resources as men**, they could increase yields on their farms by **20-30%**. This increase in global agricultural output could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by up to **150 million**.

2. Poverty Reduction and Welfare

Research consistently shows that when women control income, they tend to spend a larger portion of it on their children's **nutrition, health, and education**, leading to improved long-term family welfare. Empowering women farmers is a direct path to reducing rural poverty.

3. Climate Resilience

Women's deep, localized knowledge about seed varieties, soil types, and water conservation makes them crucial agents of adaptation. Policies that empower women to make independent decisions based on this knowledge enhance the entire community's resilience to climate shocks.

Way Forward: Strategic Interventions

To transform the status of women in agriculture, policy must move beyond simple recognition to comprehensive, rights-based interventions.

1. Granting Land Rights and Recognition:

- **Joint Pattas:** Mandating joint land titling (in the names of both spouses) for all land transfers and government schemes.
- **Legal Awareness:** Campaigning to educate rural women on their rights under inheritance laws (e.g., Hindu Succession Act, 2005).
- **Specific Farmer Status:** Officially recognizing the "de facto" female farm managers as "**farmers**" in policy records, ensuring they receive KCC, insurance, and subsidy benefits.

2. Gender-Responsive Extension and Technology:

- **Women-to-Women Extension:** Establishing and strengthening **Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs)** as the primary vehicle for agricultural extension, training, and collective action (e.g., collective procurement and marketing).
- **Ergonomic Mechanization:** Subsidizing the development and distribution of **small, light, and ergonomically designed farm tools and machinery** tailored for women's use, thereby reducing drudgery.
- **Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP):** Strengthening targeted schemes like MKSP, which specifically focuses on empowering women in agriculture through skill development, improved inputs, and enterprise promotion.

3. Financial and Market Inclusion:

- **Credit Linkage:** Facilitating easier credit access for women SHGs and FPOs (Farmer Producer Organizations) led by women.
- **Market Mobility:** Addressing mobility constraints by providing subsidies for transportation and developing women-friendly market infrastructure.

The journey toward true gender equality in agriculture requires a systemic shift—recognizing the woman not merely as a farm laborer, but as the **primary farmer, manager, and entrepreneur**. By securing her rights and providing equitable access to resources, India can unleash an immense force for economic growth and sustainable food production.