



WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: UNSUNG HEROES OF INDIA'S FIELDS

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Introduction

India's agricultural tapestry is rich and diverse, woven by the hands of millions of rural women who till the land, nurture crops, tend animals, and manage household nutrition. Despite this, women are often seen as marginal contributors, and their efforts are unaccounted for in data and discourse. According to the Census and FAO, women comprise nearly 48% of India's agricultural workforce. In regions such as Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal, women comprise over 60% of the active farming population. However, they remain unrecognized as "farmers" in official documents, policies and planning frameworks. The typical tasks performed by women, such as sowing, weeding, irrigation, harvesting, post-harvest processing, and food preservation, are intensive and often done manually. Their work is crucial for crop health and household food security, yet they remain unpaid and unacknowledged by the government. Recognizing them as co-farmers and not just "helpers" is essential to ensuring gender-equitable development in agriculture and food systems.

The Feminization of Agriculture: A Silent Revolution

India is witnessing a slow but significant transformation in its rural economy, a process described as the "feminization of agriculture." With more men migrating to urban areas in search of jobs, the responsibility for agriculture is increasingly falling on women. This trend is particularly evident in tribal, hilly, and dryland regions. Women now perform not only physical farm labor but also managerial tasks, such as choosing crops, hiring labor, marketing produce,

and managing finances. Despite this increasing involvement, only approximately 13% of agricultural land is owned by women. This legal and institutional gap deprives them of essential inputs such as bank credit, government subsidies, crop insurance, and training opportunities, all of which are linked to land ownership. Without land titles, their voices in decision-making also remain weak. Feminization without empowerment creates a paradox: more women in agriculture but fewer rights and opportunities. Addressing this requires reforms in land rights, credit access, and policy design that place women at the center.

The Challenges They Face: Double the Work, Half the Recognition

The lives of women farmers are daily battles against invisible barriers. She begins her day before sunrise, cooks, collects water and firewood, sends her children to school, and then works in the field under the scorching sun, planting, weeding, and harvesting, often with a baby tied to her back. After a full day's work, they return to household chores. This "double burden" is both physically exhausting and emotionally draining for women. Additionally, female farmers face systemic inequalities in accessing farm inputs, market prices, and agricultural knowledge. They are excluded from training programs because of social norms, mobility issues, and timing clashes with household responsibilities. Agricultural tools are rarely designed for women's use, causing injuries and reducing their efficiency. Cultural attitudes still undervalue women's contributions, considering their work as a "natural duty" rather than an economic activity. Until women receive equal

access to resources, fair recognition, and freedom from bias, their productivity and potential will remain severely underutilized.

From Shadows to the Spotlight: Stories of Strength

Amidst these challenges, Indian rural women continue to shine, and their strength is evident in countless untold stories. In Andhra Pradesh, groups of tribal women have revived traditional millet cultivation through the Community Managed Natural Farming initiative. Their success has improved family nutrition, restored soil health, and brought in a steady income. In Maharashtra's Yavatmal district, a women-led Farmer Producer Company now exports organic cotton directly to international markets, cutting out middlemen and ensuring better prices for farmers. In Tamil Nadu, women SHGs have taken the lead in producing value-added products from banana, turmeric, and millets, running successful cottage industries. These are not isolated events. They represent a growing movement of women stepping into leadership roles, managing farms, handling finances, and embracing innovation in agriculture. Their success stories challenge stereotypes and show that, given the right support, that is, land rights, training, and market access, women are not just contributors but changemakers in agriculture. They are not the beneficiaries of development but the drivers of it.

Empowering Women is Empowering Agriculture

Empowering women in agriculture is not just a question of gender justice; it is a strategic necessity for ensuring agricultural sustainability and food security in India. Studies by international bodies such as the FAO have shown that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, farm yields could increase by 20%–30%, potentially reducing hunger for millions. Moreover, women farmers tend to reinvest more in family nutrition, children's education, and community well-being, creating ripple effects in development. A holistic approach is needed, one that ensures women have secure land rights, access to timely credit, gender-sensitive extension services, and inclusion in

policy-making platforms. Government schemes must move beyond tokenism and address the real structural barriers. Promoting women-led Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), investing in labor-saving tools, and providing digital literacy for accessing markets can be transformative. Agriculture cannot thrive when half of its workforce is held back. Investing in rural women is an investment in India's future.

Conclusion

As we look toward building a more resilient and inclusive agricultural future, we must begin by recognizing the silent force that has long sustained it: women. Their contributions are not supplementary; they are foundational to India's food system, rural economy, and ecological sustainability. Despite their presence in every stage of farming, women remain marginalized in policies, markets, and conversations.

To unlock the full potential of Indian agriculture, we must move beyond symbolic recognition and bring about real transformative change. This means ensuring that women farmers have equal rights to land, access to credit and technology, training tailored to their needs, and a voice in shaping the agricultural policies. This means dismantling deep-rooted gender biases and fostering a culture of respect, representation, and reward.

A thriving agricultural India is impossible without women at its core. Let us sow the seeds of equality today so we may harvest a future that is not only abundant in crops but also in justice, dignity, and opportunity for every woman who tills our land.