

SEEING THE UNSEEN WORKFORCE: WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Gender inequality not only presents social and moral challenges but, as has now been well documented, also leads to economic repercussions. India also has the challenging prospect of a rural landscape, where deep-rooted **social stigma, limited opportunities**, and the general **informal nature of the workforce**, make change slow despite numerous efforts from ecosystem actors.

A need to formalise women's participation in agriculture.

Agriculture is one of the main sources of livelihood for women in rural India. The women play a critical role across the entire value chain, right from the pre-harvest stage, to on-farm operations, post-harvest activities, and in a few cases, direct or indirect involvement in market operations. Despite their contribution and value addition, however, women are viewed as informal workers who are characterised as domestic support or even go unpaid. This results in poor financial security, safety, and well-being for women in the workforce in the rural landscape.

These issues result in a **reduced scope of work, social barriers** and a **lack of opportunities** for women in agriculture to get recognition. Women in India's rural landscape, therefore, end up being victims of society and the circumstances they face.

Interventions by the government and philanthropic organisations.

Enabling gender equality in agriculture has been an important issue that the government and philanthropic capital have been trying to address through various interventions.

The government has attempted to alleviate the position of women in agriculture through a combination of policy initiatives, setting up certain programmes and schemes, and directives for funding. Philanthropic capital has focused on programmes that are implemented to sensitise women, and build awareness and decision-making across levels. However, there is still a need for further innovation that can result in higher inclusion, increased participation, and wider reach among women across states. The current government and philanthropic initiatives need to shift **from gender equality to gender equity** for achieving realistic goals in the agriculture sector.

Key drivers and actions for formalising women in agriculture.

To address the challenges women in agriculture face, specifically around their **scope of work, social barriers, and lack of opportunities and development**, there are four levers with corresponding actions that can be taken. These have the potential to contribute towards a transformational change for the 'shadowed' workforce in agriculture.

WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

- **Lever 1: Technology inclusion** to increase the scope of work and opportunities for women farmers.
- **Lever 2: Utilising human resources effectively** in order to overcome social barriers and create equal opportunities for women farmers.
- **Lever 3: Integrating innovative finance models** to increase the scope of work for women farmers.
- **Lever 4: Developing better market access** through increasing women farmers' scope of work, helping them to overcome social barriers and increasing opportunities for them.

By understanding some key action points to be taken to enable these levers, the status of women's participation in agriculture and formalising their contributions can be realised sooner for the benefit of the larger society and economy.

Formalising Women's Participation in Agriculture

In the 2020 Annual Global Gender Index, India ranked 112th among 153 countries, a red flag for India as an emerging economy (World Economic Forum 2020). Gender inequality not only presents social and moral challenges, but also leads to economic repercussions. India also has the challenging prospect of a rural landscape to contend with, where deep-rooted **social stigma, limited opportunities**, and the general **informal nature of the workforce**, make change slow despite numerous efforts from ecosystem actors.

Women are extensively engaged and actively contribute to activities in agriculture and allied sectors. The workforce participation rate for rural females is **significantly higher at 41.8%** against the urban women's participation rate of 35.31% (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI] 2017). They play a critical role in the agricultural value chain, from the pre-harvest stage, to on-farm operations and post-harvest activities, and a few even work in direct or indirect market operations. Women in agriculture, however, are limited by issues pertaining to land rights, drudgery, and a lack of decision-making.

These issues result in a **reduced scope of work, social barriers** and a **lack of opportunities** for women farmers to get recognition in agriculture. Therefore, women in India's rural landscape end up being victims of poor financial security, with their safety and well-being at risk.

The majority of women are employed in low-skill operations and lack awareness of land rights and their rights to equal income opportunities. This combination of circumstance and lack of awareness means most of them only earn a low wage and are deprived of their right to land. The evidence suggests that women with strong property and inheritance rights earn nearly four times higher (Landesa 2018). Additionally, if they have more agency over their earnings, they contribute to a range of benefits for their families and communities. This demonstrates how empowering women economically can result in achieving economic and social outcomes.

During the 2000s, the agriculture sector saw tremendous change in terms of farm mechanisation, agritech inclusion, various cultivation methods that optimise cost, and government schemes that promote the economic development of farmers. Today, 88% of total farm power comes from tractors, diesel engine pump-sets, electric pump-sets and power tillers, which is an indicator of how productivity has been enhanced through technology, while also providing, cost saving and potentially higher on-farm returns (Gulati & Juneja 2020). However, when it comes to women's role on farms, there has been low adoption of the drudgery-reducing farm technology. This further widens gender disparity in the long run by marginalising and restricting women to non-mechanised work.

There is a need for a paradigm shift away from interventions aimed at achieving **gender equality** to interventions focusing on **gender equity**. This requires increasing the scope of the type of work made available to women, such as farm mechanisation training, and enabling

them to be empowered economically. This will result in women having a significant and influential role in driving economic and social developments in the rural landscape.

However, for women in rural India, there is an overarching patriarchal culture and society, that has yet to endow them fully with certain legal rights such as inheritance. The undercurrent of these socio-economic factors, along with the challenges women in agriculture face, mean that they are rallied to being the 'shadowed' workforce in agriculture: informal and disenfranchised.

Note: Gender equality is when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities (United Nations Population Fund n.d.).

Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men. To ensure fairness, strategies and measures must often be available to compensate for women's historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from otherwise operating on a level playing field. Equity leads to equality (United Nations Population Fund n.d.).

Interventions Empowering Women in Agriculture

Enabling gender equality in agriculture has been an important issue that the government and philanthropic capital have been trying to address through various interventions.

The Government has attempted to alleviate the position of women in agriculture through a combination of policy initiatives, setting up certain programmes and schemes, and directives for funding. The central and state governments have initiated several flagship schemes and programmes to improve women's stature in society by creating livelihood opportunities, promoting decision-making, capacity-building initiatives and supporting income generation.

EXAMPLES

- The **gender budget for women-specific schemes** was first introduced in the year 2005-2006, to mitigate gender-based disadvantages. It is used as a marker to assess the gender responsiveness of the Union Budget (Raman S 2021).
- In the Prime Minister's vision of **Atma Nirbhar Bharat**, the Government of India has prioritised the agenda of '**Gender Mainstreaming in Agriculture**' to provide access to resources and schemes for rural women engaged in agriculture and allied sectors.
- Under the **DAY-NRLM scheme**, training on the use of the latest agriculture and allied techniques, and agroecological best practices are being imparted to women farmers through local community experts and extension agencies.
- The **Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK)** developed by the **Ministry of Women and Child Development** has empowered rural women through community participation. These training programmes have opened avenues for rural women in new livelihood opportunities.

Philanthropic capital has focused on uplifting women's status, by mobilising female farmers into self-help groups (SHG), Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), and promoting alternative livelihood opportunities within agriculture and allied sectors. Programmes are implemented to sensitise women, build awareness, and decision-making across levels. However, there is still a need for further innovation that can result in higher inclusion, increased participation, and wider reach to women across states.

EXAMPLES

- In 2016 **Oxfam India in collaboration with SEWA Bharat** (a federation of women-led institutions providing economic and social support to women in the informal sector) started a three-year joint project in two districts of Bihar, Munger and Bhagalpur with the support of Oxfam Germany and the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The aim of the project was to directly engage with **3,000 households** and enable them to avail government schemes. **Since 2016, nearly 1400 women farmers have benefitted from this.**
- **Landesa's Girls Project** helps adolescent girls build knowledge and establish a foundation of empowerment that can stay with them through adulthood. The objective is to **position girls in rural West Bengal, to claim their land rights when they are women**, and in doing so, to also empower them as adolescents in the short term.
- **SEWA** works with **women who are from the most marginal social and economic segments of society**, and who have limited political representation at any level. In all the co-operatives supported by SEWA, the trade or service activity is carried out entirely by women. SEWA's approach is that those who do all the work should also have the **voice, visibility, decision-making power and control.**

The current government policies and philanthropic programmes are formulated keeping **gender equality** in mind, but they often lack a **gender equity** lens. In effect, the policies become short-sighted therefore to the realities of women farmers. However, society and practitioners are still learning and experimenting with what works best to empower female farmers and how society can achieve ideal equality outcomes..

Key Levers and Action to Formalise Women in Agriculture

To combat the challenges women in agriculture face, specifically around their **scope of work, social barriers, and a lack of opportunities and development**, there are four levers with corresponding actions that can be taken. These have the potential to contribute towards a transformational change for the 'shadowed' workforce in agriculture.



Lever 1: Technology inclusion to increase the scope of work and opportunities for women farmers.

Making technology more inclusive of women means creating access for them to gender-friendly technologies and machinery, tailored capacity-building programmes, including them in farm mechanisation. The smartphone revolution can also aid the recognition of women's role and participation in agriculture. Currently, these areas of intervention are gaps in the ecosystem and have untapped potential to enhance the station of female farmers, which could enable them to alter their opportunities from largely unskilled to skilled labour. This key intervention could result in increased wages, greater farm production and more effective utilisation of human resources. Technology inclusion also opens the possibility of empowering women beyond just the scope of their work, extending to their personal development and enabling them to take higher ownership of work on farms and higher efficiency in day-to-day operations.

- **Action 1: A bottom-up approach for designing women-focused equipment and farm mechanisation training.**

The design thinking to build equipment should take a bottom-up approach, which accounts for the context and needs of women farmers. For example, generally, women wear sarees in rural areas and therefore may not be comfortable using technological equipment that is not optimised to meet this need. This simple yet critical socio-cultural factor is an important consideration. This could significantly alter the design thinking process, ensuring that such agricultural equipment is catering to and is inclusive of women.

- **Action 2: Including farm schools at district levels, that have a dedicated curriculum for female farmers on equipment usage, training programmes, specialised tool training, and on-farm skill development.**

The farm schools should be able to cater to capacity-building programmes that enable automation and technological inclusion of women in agriculture. Dedicated schools to learn technical skills need to be built at district levels, followed up by programmes that usher female household participation in learning and development.



Lever 2: Utilising human resources effectively in order to overcome social barriers and create equal opportunities for women farmers.

Skilled human resource mobilisation has been a challenge in the rural landscape, because of the migration of skilled youth to urban areas due to a perceived lack of opportunities in rural areas. While this trend applies to educated female youth as well, an added challenge for women lies in the unrecognised nature of their work. They are expected to fulfil certain domestic responsibilities due to social stigma and deep-rooted patriarchal practices, which need to be overcome to ensure women's upliftment in the rural landscape of India.

- **Action 1: Household sensitisation programmes integrated with behavioural adult learning models.**

Household sensitisation and capacity-building programmes should be made outcome-oriented and follow a behavioural adult learning model for co-ed learning. Through this approach, male counterparts of women in agriculture will be able to better understand their specific gender challenges and rationales. Innovative learning models will need to emphasise more visual elements and then integrate this with practical learning exposure through learning-by-doing methods. By overcoming social and household barriers for women and increasing opportunities for them in the household, this intervention will elicit a higher impact.

- **Action 2: Promoting engagement in rural areas with female agriculture graduates.**

The existing unskilled and skilled workforce from the rural farming ecosystem can benefit from the expertise and insights of agriculture graduates. Positioning educated females, who can hold influential positions in the rural landscape and will be instrumental in the development of village models, can add great value to uplift women, provide them with holistic development, and create a sustainable livelihood opportunity for women in these communities.



Lever 3: Integrating innovative finance models to increase the scope of work for women farmers.

Setting up financially sustainable microfinance programmes for the impoverished population will improve their access to microfinance and their economic status overall. For women, in particular, the alternative livelihood channels that this could open up would enable them to also provide for their household's well-being. The development of an innovative and diversified microfinance sector, which makes a real contribution to women's empowerment, needs greater commitment and equity-oriented programmes. This requires action from the government and support from philanthropic capital to intensify implementation by donors as well.

- **Action 1: Increasing access to productive credit.**

For every rural woman, there should be intended benefits attached to productive credit. This will allow for innovative models to allocate an assured amount for various purposes such as farm-based operations, allied activities, nutrition, and farm mechanisation to name a few. The total amount of credit can then be segregated, as per the ratio defined by the needs of the woman, which can be governed and managed through a system set up by the government. Philanthropic organisations can be the catalysts for this as programme designers, and implementing bodies can help enable better credit access for women.

- **Action 2: Innovative microfinance models.**

The scope of rural finance can be broadened to include farming and rural non-farm activities, and recognise the importance of savings mobilisation. Loans granted need

to be in response to the needs of the farmers rather than the supply targets of the microfinance institutions. Value creation-based models are an instrumental way through which women's needs can be catered to, based on profile evaluation and the objectives of the beneficiary's needs. There is a dire need for women in agriculture to receive collateral-free financing, that eradicates the need for collateral means to secure a loan disbursement.

Identification and strengthening of useful roles for donors, that assist in creating a favourable policy environment, improving legal and regulatory frameworks for rural financial markets, building institutional capacity, and supporting innovations to lower transaction costs and improve risk management are needed. These actions should be taken in a progressive way to provide financial access to women in the rural landscape.



Lever 4: Developing better market access through increasing women farmers' scope of work, helping them to overcome social barriers and increasing opportunities for them.

Even though there are interventions around mobilising more women towards forming FPOs and SHGs, women farmers lack market access, which is a significant bottleneck in their development and recognition. Women who have greater ownership may be more aware of how to gain market access, but largely, it is men who take advantage of market-related operations and it caters to them in the rural landscape. Additionally, women-led FPOs have to contend with challenges, such as acceptance from buyers, because of the existing socio-cultural barriers women in agriculture face. To combat this critical issue, a precedent needs to be established by the Agricultural Produce Market Committee for the mandatory inclusion of women. There also needs to be higher women farmers' safety and security in order for them to have seamless operations, which plays a critical role in enabling a higher impact for women-led organisations.

- **Action 1: Special provision to build the capacity of women on accessing markets effectively.** Specialised and women-oriented customised training for women-led FPOs and SHGs should be incorporated into input and output market linkage, as this is an area where women's participation and ownership are lacking. Periodic, regular learning and development should not only be carried out, but their progress following training interventions should also be tracked to measure outcomes based on key learning indicators.
- **Action 2: Setting up women-centric incubation centres.** A government-led intervention to create incubation centres for women-led enterprises will help to change the agricultural landscape. Entrepreneurship models for women farmers need to be supported by these incubation centres from incubation, product development, market research and demand generation, to scale up. These institutions should be built on the objective of providing end-to-end, hand-holding support and designing programmes right from the initial development programme stage, to setting up operations and achieving key outcomes.

Collaborative action with government-led programmes, outcome-focused philanthropic interventions and effective public-private partnership models will be instrumental in driving change. The proactive implementation of these action points could then become viable options to initiate transformational change for the 'shadowed' workforce.

Conclusion

Closing the gender gap and formalising the work women do in agriculture does not only impact women, but will also lead to the collective economic and social development of society. There is a need for a paradigm shift, away from policies aimed at achieving gender equality to policies focusing on gender equity. Operational strategies that focus on both gender mainstreaming and gender transformation are necessary to combat the challenging socioeconomic climate women in rural India find themselves. This will also be beneficial in creating an ecosystem to support gender equity within the community, where gender formalisation needs contextualisation and implementation to achieve society's ideal goals.

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