

# Farm Women in Indian Agriculture: Facts and Interpretations

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## ABSTRACT

Women are the backbone of the development of rural and national economics. They comprise 43% of world's agricultural labour force, which rises to 70% in some countries. In the Indian subcontinent the agriculture sector workforce was reported to be 75% in 2011. In rural India the percentage of women who depend in agriculture for their livelihood is as high as 84%; women make up about 33% of cultivators and 47% of agricultural labourers. In as many as 23 of 29 Indian states, women's share in total workforce in agriculture, forestry and fisheries is over 50%. They spend about 30 hours in a week doing agricultural works. The traditional agricultural methods heavily utilized by women subsistence farmers boast environment friendly features such as seed preservation, natural fertilizers and crop rotation techniques that do not exhaust delicate soil. Sadly women are grossly discriminated in several respects. In all activities there is gender wage disparity, with women earning only 60 to 70% of men's wage. Many women in India participate in agricultural work as unpaid subsistence labour. Gender disparity in farm work varies from state to state and is relatively less in the hilly areas where agriculture depends heavily on females. Gender work participation disparity with index values ranges from 0.34 to .059. General trend records the lack of property ownership and farm land the resources for keeping up their labour stability and stability of their households. The existing grave situation is further assuming complex dimension with the growing feminization of Indian farming due to increasing migration of rural men for better employability and remuneration. Empowerment of women without gender disparity to safe guard food security is great concern for national economy.

**Keywords:** Women, Indian Agriculture, Gender Disparity, Food Security

Women are the backbone of the rural economy. They make up almost half of the world's farmers. As the primary caregivers to families, women provide food and nutrition; they are the human link between the farm and the table. Women can be the key agents of change in agriculture , nutrition and rural development. They can play a vital role for achieving the sustainable Development Goals 2 which aims to end hunger and malnutrition by 2030. Whether they work on a farm or in a lab, women around the world are transforming agriculture to be more resilient and sustainable.

## Looking back

It was women who first domesticated crop plants and initiated the art and science of farming. When man went hunting in search of food, women started gathering seeds from the native flora and

began cultivating those for food, fodder, fibre and fuel. Women have played and continue to play a key role in the conservation of basic life support systems such as land, water, flora and fauna. They have protected the health of soil through organic recycling and promoted crop security through the maintenances of varietal diversity and genetic resistance. Despite women's extensive and valued participation in agriculture, they continue to have less access than do men to modern agriculture inputs. As a result, their farm work is labour intensive and yields unsatisfactory economic returned ([agropedia.iitk.ac.in/c](http://agropedia.iitk.ac.in/c))

## World Scenario

Women are the back bone of the development of rural and national economics. They comprise 43% of world's agricultural labour force, which rises

to 70% in some countries. In Africa, 80% of the agricultural production comes from small farmers, who are mostly rural women. Women comprise the largest percentage of workforce to the agricultural sector, but do not have access and control over land and productive resources. However, during last ten years, many African countries have adopted new land laws to strengthen women's land ownership rights. Despite the important roles they play in agriculture, rural women in Africa suffer from the highest illiteracy rates and the most visible face of poverty. Social customs and norms dictate women particularly rural women should, in addition to agriculture, be responsible for cooking carrying water, fetching firewood and for looking after young's. The social rules are also limit their participation in decision making process and access to the economic opportunities which have increased the level of gender inequality (Saquine Mucavele, Mugede, 2017).

## Indian Experience

Agriculture is the back bone of the Indian economy and women play vital role in building this economy. The importance of women in agriculture sector and Indian economy becomes increasingly visible when around more than 60% of the 1.3 billion people who live in rural India, agriculture is a way of life. Female in the agricultural sector represents a momentous demographic group.

### (I) Women Role

Based on 2012 date India is home to the fourth largest agricultural sector in the world. India has an estimated 180 million hectares of farm land with 140 million of which are planted and continuously cultivated. In India agriculture is still dominant with poor conditions of farmers as well as small farm sizes. According to 2011 statistics, the average farm in India is about 1.5 acres which is miniscule in comparison with France and USA having average size of 50 hectors and 178 hectors respectively. With the passage of time the farm size has further been depleted (around 1.1ha) and small farmer tradition remains a hallmark of Indian agriculture, where women are forced to support family and support small farm life style. In 2011, The agricultural sector workforce in the subcontinent was 75% women (Singh and Sengupta, 2009).

In this context a statistical profile of rural India gives few interesting readings. The percentage of women who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is as high as 84%. Women make up about 33% of cultivators and about 47% of agricultural laborers, (Rao, 2006). In 2009, 94% of the female agriculture labour force in crop cultivation, 45.43% growing oil seeds and 39.13% in vegetable production. According to FAO, Indian women represented a share of 21% and 24% of all fishers and fish farmers, respectively (<https://m.rediff.com/business/co>).

In as many as 23 of the 29 states, women's share in total workforce in agriculture, forestry and fisheries is over 50%. In states such as Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, this share exceeds 70%. Typically, their contribution to agriculture is more in hilly regions than in the plains. Women are engaged in multidimensional activities. They handle all kinds of jobs ranging from crop sowing to irrigation, fertilizer application, weeding and crop harvesting. They are also engaged in livestock rearing, fodder collection, beekeeping, mushroom cultivation, poultry and allied activities. Besides these, they are involved intimately in household chores.

The traditional agricultural methods heavily utilized by women subsistence farmers pursue environmentally friendly feat was such as seed preservation, use of natural fertilizers and rotation techniques that do not exhaust delicate soil. Women connection to land is reflected in their almanac-like knowledge of plant varieties. Rituals and ceremonies in various parts of the country ("Lohri" in Punjab or "*Navadhanya Puja*" in the South) demonstrate this close relationship. Ceremonies elaborate the role of women in preserving biodiversity of food crops (Satyavathi *et al.* 2010).

### (II) Time Spent

Women in addition to rigorous agricultural work are responsible for the well being of the household including child care. Based on time allocation studies, it is found that Indian women spend about 25 hours in a week doing household chores and 5 hours in caring and community work (Satyavathi *et al.* 2010). Besides the 30 hours of unpaid works, women spend same amount of time as men carrying out agriculture work (The Times of India, 2012).

Daughters typically supplement or substitute the

mother's unpaid work around the household. Girls do significantly more house work than boys, which compromises their schooling.

### (III) Gender disparity

Women are grossly discriminated in several respects. Under the male dominated patriarchal society in India women especially rural women seldom are encouraged to go to school and hence their basic level of education is alarmingly poor. An estimated 52-75% of Indian women engaged in agriculture are illiterate and that prevents them from participating in skilled labour sector. In fact, the typical work of the female agricultural labourer or cultivators is limited to less skilled jobs. In all activities there is gender wage disparity, with women earning only 60-70% of men's wage. Moreover, many women participate in agricultural work as unpaid subsistence labour. Gender disparity in farm works varies from state to state and seems to be relatively less in the hilly areas where agriculture relies heavily on females. According to CIWA, Bhubaneswar "The Gender Work Participation Disparity Index" value for Nagaland, Manipur and Himachal Pradesh is less than 0.15 which indicates least gender inequality in work. On the other hand Punjab, Haryana, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha have relatively gender work participation disparity, with the index value hanging 0.34 to 0.59 (<http://m.rediff.com/business/co>).

Women lack ownership of property, the land being rarely in their names. They have little access to cheaper credit and other agricultural related sops, which are usually linked to land ownership. The study has indicated that 84% of non-property owning females faced psychological abuse, with 49% of them being subjected to physical violence as well (Panda and Agarwal, 2006). Significantly hardly around 15% of households are female headed. Women's opinion seldom is entertained and they are unable to participate in decision making process. These handicaps pull them down. Consequently they lack the resources necessary for keeping up their labour stability and stability of their households. The traditional systematic abuses derail women as key producers. Their valued participation often becomes overlooked in research and study.

### (IV) Threat

The impact of climate change is becoming increasingly felt with the rise in temperature, erratic precipitation, frequent drought and flood which has beginning to inflict unusual damage to agriculture. Such kind of threat to Indian agriculture further assumes complex dimension due to accelerated level of pollution caused by intensive modern chemical farming practiced to achieve high crop productivity. Sadly small and marginal farmers are incapable to withstand effectively such unprecedented onslaught as they do not have adequate resources to combat. Particularly traditionally deprived women in agriculture are going to be hit hard since they are most vulnerable due to lack of any worthy support systems. Following the liberalization of Indian economy a new phenomenon is happening in the form of growing womanization of Indian agriculture. With the prospect of better employability and higher remuneration the interstate migration, even migration to another country, is taking place particularly from rural India leaving old and woman folk at home to look after the agricultural and domestic activities. As a result this has created a new problem not seen earlier and women in general have to carry out additional burden which their male counterpart is to perform in the farming. In addition, with the globalization and free market economy India is now bound to new trade agreement with several developed countries. Consequently severe competition in food production chain including seed and agri-processing is gradually creeping up. Rural women traditionally involved in such activities who are financially and technologically handicapped are now being critically tested and facing a serious threat. Since Indian agriculture is by and large rainfed small farming agriculture with potentially large involvement of source starved rural women it is facing very daunting challenge (Patnaik *et al.* 2018).

### Epilogue

Rural women from the most important productive work force in the economy of majority of the developing nations including India. They are the vital component of agriculture growth in building the economy of the country. Food security in India cannot be achieved if the key role played by women is not appreciated and their labour is not adequately

rewarded. No time can be wasted to grant equal representation of men and women in the food production system which is key to the country's GDP growth. Empowerment of women is now an increasing concern for the economy. Famously said "when women move forward, the family moves, the village moves, and the nation moves". Women must have access to land to literacy and should be allowed to accept opportunities without gender disparity to enhance food security.

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