



The Emerging Role of Women in Agriculture: A 21st Century Perspective

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In order to awaken the people, it is the woman who has to be awakened. Once she is on move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves - Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

Abstract

The core of the Indian economy is agriculture. Agriculture in India has the potential to be a significant growth and poverty-reduction engine. A large number of women work in agriculture in emerging nations, and they are vital to the growth of agriculture and related industries. According to aggregate data, women make up roughly 43% of the agricultural labour force worldwide and in developing nations, although there is substantial variation in this percentage depending on age and social class within and between regions. It is quite regrettable that women's contributions to agriculture have not received more attention. They have mostly remained unrecognised workers. Therefore, this article will highlight the role, importance and challenges faced by women in agricultural sector.

Introduction

In the development of agriculture and allied fields, women are significant contributors. There is a considerable deal of regional variation in the type and degree of women's involvement in agriculture. Agriculture creates deeply embedded gender norms, interpersonal ties, and rituals in India. Women who work in agriculture, whether by conventional or industrial means, as subsistence farmers or agricultural labourers, comprise an important segment of the population. This has made gender inequality problems worse and brought about externalities like poverty and marginalisation. Issues like economic independence, the ability to make decisions, agency, and access to healthcare and education are all closely linked to agriculture. But despite these differences, women actively participate in a range of agricultural pursuits. According to the 2011 Census, of all female primary labourers, 24% were cultivators and 55% were agricultural labourers. Nonetheless, women only possessed 12.8% of the operating holdings, indicating the gender gap in agricultural land ownership. Furthermore, women own a disproportionate share of operational holdings (25.7%) in the marginal and small holdings groups. Compared to urban women, rural female labour force participation rates are substantially higher, at 41.8%. In the vast fields that nourish nations, a quiet revolution is taking place. Women, historically underrepresented in agriculture, are stepping into the forefront of this vital sector. Their involvement is not merely symbolic; it's a fundamental shift with far-reaching implications for global food security, economic development, and gender equality.

Historical perspective

For centuries, agriculture has been viewed as a domain predominantly controlled by men. Historical gender norms relegated women to household roles, while men managed the fields

and made agricultural decisions. This division of labor persisted for generations, reinforced by societal expectations and cultural norms. However, as societies evolve and economies transform, the role of women in agriculture is experiencing a paradigm shift. Throughout history, women have always played a vital, albeit often invisible, role in agricultural production. They have been responsible for tasks such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and food processing. In many rural communities, women have been the backbone of small-scale farming, ensuring food security for their families and communities. Despite their indispensable contributions, women's role in agriculture has frequently been undervalued and under recognized.

Challenges

Despite their pivotal role, women in agriculture encounter numerous challenges that hinder their full participation and potential. Gender disparities persist in access to essential resources such as land, credit, and agricultural inputs.

- 1. Land ownership:** Land ownership remains a critical issue, with women often having limited rights to land due to discriminatory laws, cultural practices, and inheritance systems. Without secure land tenure, women are unable to invest in farming activities or access government support programs.
- 2. Access to Resources:** Access to credit and financial services is another significant barrier for women farmers. Traditional lending institutions often require collateral, which women may not possess due to unequal land rights or lack of formal ownership. As a result, women are forced to rely on informal sources of credit, which typically come with higher interest rates and greater risks.
- 3. Education and Training:** Limited education and training opportunities hinder women from fully participating in agricultural development. Furthermore, women farmers often face challenges in accessing agricultural extension services and training programs. Extension services are essential for disseminating knowledge, best practices, and technological innovations to farmers. However, these services are often designed without considering the specific needs and constraints faced by women.
- 4. Gender Norms:** Deep-rooted gender norms and stereotypes can impede women's decision-making power and autonomy in agriculture. Additionally, cultural norms and gender biases may limit women's participation in training programs or extension activities.
- 5. Unpaid Work:** The burden of unpaid care work also disproportionately falls on women in rural agricultural communities. Women are responsible for household chores, childcare, and other domestic duties, in addition to their agricultural responsibilities. Balancing these multiple roles often leaves women with limited time, energy, and resources to devote to farming activities. Moreover, the lack of recognition for women's unpaid labor further exacerbates their economic and social marginalization.

Way Forward

- 1. Social Security:** A social security blanket is essential to ensure that women have a robust support system to juggle household responsibilities, child-rearing, and financial burdens while also managing work.
- 2. Farm Ownership to Women:** It is becoming more and more important to recognise women as farmers, as having a farm would entitle them to programmes and benefits, rather as just cultivators who work on farms. Based on data from the agricultural census conducted in 2015–16, just 12.8% of rural women who work as farmers—73.2% of them own land. Secure land tenure is essential for women's economic empowerment, food security, and poverty reduction.

3. **Recognize Women's Contribution:** Recognising the existence and contribution of women in the agricultural sector requires inclusive methods in the implementation of agricultural policies. Gender imbalance can also be addressed through improved training programmes and extended services for women.
4. **Gender Budgeting:** Creating laws, plans, and programmes that are attentive to gender issues when allocating resources can be a potent instrument for attaining gender mainstreaming and making sure that women and men alike benefit from development. Investments in gender-responsive agricultural extension services and training programs are also essential for building women's capacity, skills, and confidence in adopting modern farming practices. Extension services should be tailored to the specific needs and constraints faced by women, incorporating gender-sensitive approaches and participatory methodologies.
5. **Planning Stage Inclusion of Local Women:** To fully integrate women's contributions to India's agricultural sector, women should be involved in the planning stages of any future development initiatives and action plans. Farmworkers are more familiar with the geology and geography of their community, and they can also provide an equity and inclusion perspective to planning.
6. **Financial inclusion:** Financial inclusion is another critical area where policy interventions are needed to support women farmers. Governments and financial institutions must develop gender-sensitive lending policies and innovative financial products that cater to the needs and realities of women in agriculture. Microfinance programs, savings groups, and insurance schemes can provide women with access to credit, savings, and risk management tools.

Conclusion

The emerging role of women in agriculture is a testament to their resilience, innovation, and unwavering dedication to feeding communities and sustaining livelihoods. As we progress further into the 21st century, it is essential to continue empowering and supporting women in agriculture to unlock their full potential and drive sustainable development in the sector. Women's contributions are no longer confined to the sidelines but are increasingly recognized as essential for achieving sustainable development goals, ensuring food security, and promoting gender equality. In conclusion, the transformative changes brought about by women in agriculture are reshaping the landscape of the sector and paving the way for a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future. The time has come to acknowledge, celebrate, and amplify the voices and contributions of women in agriculture for a better tomorrow.