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Mainstreaming Women in Indian Agriculture: Past Trends, Present Scenarios, and Future Prospects

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The article discusses the mainstreaming of women in Indian agriculture, highlighting past trends, current situations, and future prospects. Factors leading to the feminization of Indian agriculture include poverty, agrarian distress, and migration to urban areas. Women's roles in agriculture have traditionally been undervalued, but efforts are being made to integrate them into the mainstream sector. Despite progress, women still face challenges such as limited access to resources, gender biases, and double burdens of domestic and agricultural work. To further mainstream women in agriculture, there is a need for enhanced policy support, investment in education and training, and utilization of digital platforms. Empowering rural women through secure land rights, training in modern agricultural techniques, and gender-friendly tools can enhance productivity and sustainability in the sector.

“Women have an important role in agriculture. We need to introduce technology, which will help us harness the potential of women in agriculture. We need to divide the agriculture sector into three parts- regular farming, farming of trees and animal husbandry. If we are able to do this, the contribution of our women will increase even more.”

~Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi

Introduction

Agriculture is a cornerstone of the Indian economy, contributing significantly to its GDP and providing employment to a substantial portion of the population. Women have always played a crucial role in this industry, but their contributions are frequently underappreciated and overlooked.

As India seeks to modernize its agricultural practices and enhance productivity, it becomes imperative to recognize and harness the potential of women in agriculture. This article explores the mainstreaming of women in Indian agriculture, examining past trends, present scenarios, and future prospects.

Causes of Feminization of Indian Agriculture

- **Poverty:** Women are often forced to work as agricultural labourers to supplement the family's income because of poverty. Women also perform unskilled labor in family-related occupations.
- **Agrarian Distress and Shift of men to Casual work:** De-peasantization, also known as the migration of males from agriculture to casual work, or disruption of farm labor, is primarily caused by agrarian distress. According to a 2013 report that was published in The Hindu, 7.7 million farmers left agriculture between 2001 and 2011. With rising movement of men from homestead to non-ranch exercises, ladies have assimilated in rural and associated exercises

- **Migration to Urban Areas:** The Economic Survey for 2017–18 indicates that the agriculture industry has experienced a "feminization" as a result of men's increasing migration from rural to urban areas; Women are becoming more involved in agriculture, labour, and business ownership.
- **Mechanization of agriculture:** s agriculture has become more mechanized, women have been restricted to traditional roles like winnowing, harvesting, sowing seeds, and raising livestock. Men have moved on to other non-farm activities, whereas women have remained confined to these roles.
- **Mobility:** Wage disparities between men and women further limit women's opportunities for career advancement. According to the Census, approximately 33.7% of males from rural areas migrate for employment and better economic opportunities. Rural females, on the other hand, have a rate as low as 3.6%.

Historical Context and Past Trends

The gendered division of labor in Indian agriculture has long been a feature of the industry. Women have traditionally been involved in agricultural tasks such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. Despite their substantial contributions, women have frequently been relegated to informal and unrecognized roles.

1. Pre-Independence Era: During the pre-independence era, the agricultural sector was predominantly rural and traditional. Women's roles were largely confined to subsistence farming and household-related agricultural activities. Social norms and cultural practices limited their access to resources and decision-making processes (Gupta, 2011).

2. Post-Independence Developments: The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s marked a significant shift in Indian agriculture, focusing on high-yielding varieties and modern technology. While this era saw increased productivity, women's labor contributions remained largely invisible. Due to their improved access to technology and resources, male farmers frequently reaped the benefits of the Green Revolution (Rajagopal, 2004).

3. 1980s to Early 2000s: The 1980s and 1990s brought increased awareness of women's roles in agriculture. Schemes like Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) were introduced by government, began to address some of these disparities. However, women's participation in decision-making and access to resources continued to be limited (Sah, 1992).

Present Scenarios

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to integrate women into the mainstream agricultural sector. Several initiatives have aimed to improve women's access to resources, technology, and decision-making processes.

Depending on their socio-economic status, rural women engage in agricultural activities in three different ways: They function as:

- Workers in agriculture.
- A cultivator working their own land
- Managers of particular aspects of agricultural production; who participate in post-harvest operations and supervise workers

Functions performed

- Activities in the Agriculture: Women perform all agricultural tasks, from sowing to storage
- Allied Activities: milking, collecting feed, managing cattle, etc
- Women are crucial to the growth of agriculture, food security, and the preservation of local Agro-biodiversity.
- To meet the needs of their families on a daily basis, rural women are also in charge of the integrated management and utilization of numerous natural resources.

Women in agriculture in India: Key schemes

1. Policy Initiatives: The Indian government has implemented various policies and programs to support women in agriculture. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has provided women with opportunities for employment and income generation in rural areas. Similarly, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) has improved healthcare services for rural women, indirectly supporting their agricultural activities (Ministry of Rural Development, 2021).

2. Women in Agricultural Research and Extension: There has been a concerted effort to include women in agricultural research and extension services. Organizations like the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) have developed programs aimed at training women farmers and improving their access to new technologies and practices (ICAR, 2019).

3. Microfinance and Self-Help Groups: Microfinance institutions and self-help groups (SHGs) have played a crucial role in empowering women in agriculture. SHGs provide women with access to credit, training, and market linkages, enabling them to invest in agricultural enterprises and improve their productivity (NABARD, 2020). Studies have shown that women in SHGs are more likely to adopt improved agricultural practices and experience increased incomes (Chowdhury, 2017).

4. Digital and Technological Advancements: The rise of digital technologies has also impacted women in agriculture. Mobile-based agricultural extension services and online marketplaces have provided women with greater access to information and market opportunities.

- For instance, the Digital Green initiative has used digital tools to share agricultural knowledge with women farmers, leading to improved farming practices and outcomes (Digital Green, 2018).
- Further schemes like National Food Security Mission, National Mission on Oilseed & Oil Palm, National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, among others, provides for at least 30% expenditure should be incurred on women farmers.
- **The Central Institute for Women in Agriculture (ICAR-CIWA)**, Bhubaneswar functioning under ICAR is mandated to undertake research on gender issues in agriculture and allied fields. 100% budget of this institute is allocated to conduct research on gender specific issues in agriculture and allied areas.
- Nearly, twelve Indian states have around thirteen 'All India Coordinated Research Projects (AICRP)' centres that make up CIWA.
- The goal of the **Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)** sub-component of the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – **National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM)** is to give women more control over their own lives by making regular investments that will make it easier for them to participate in agriculture-based livelihoods.
- Towards the direction of Women Empowerment, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (MoA & FW) has made special provisions to empower women farmers in order to increase the effectiveness and inclusion of FPOs. To promote a greater number of female farmers to be shareholders a new Central Sector Scheme titled "Formation and Promotion of 10,000 Farmer Produce Organizations (FPOs)" with a clear strategy and committed resources to form and promote 10,000 new FPOs in the country with budgetary provision of Rs 6865 crore was launched.
- Central Sector Scheme of "*Formation and Promotion of 10,000 Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) with women farmers/women SHGs as members*"

- Through aggregation and value addition, women-owned Producers Enterprises are being encouraged to improve market access for their farm produce under DAY-NRLM.
- The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) provides FPOs with support through dedicated funds.
- The *PRODUCE* Fund and the Producers Organizations Development Fund (PODF) aim to collectivize farmers so that they can increase their income by making it easier to find a market for their farm produce.
- Because women are an essential component of FPOs, both male and female farmer members are mobilized through the creation of awareness during the formation phase.
- Through the *PRODUCE* Fund and PODF, NABARD has promoted 5073 FPOs, 178 of which are exclusively female with 0.74 lakh shareholder women members.
- These women FPOs have engaged in a wide range of activities, including animal husbandry, poultry, seed, mushroom, spices, millets, beekeeping, and other related fields.

Challenges Facing Women in Agriculture

Women in Indian agriculture continue to face a number of obstacles despite progress

1. Access to Resources: Women often have limited access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs. Although there have been efforts to improve this, land ownership and control remain significant barriers for many women (FAO, 2011).

2. Gender Bias and Social Norms: Deep-seated gender biases and social norms continue to undermine women's contributions. Cultural perceptions that regard agriculture as a male domain limit women's participation in decision-making and leadership roles (Kumar, 2015).

3. Workload and Health Issues: Women in agriculture typically bear a double burden of both domestic and agricultural work. Health issues and decreased productivity are frequently the results of this heavy workload. Inadequate access to healthcare and sanitation further exacerbates these challenges (Nair, 2020).

4. Education and Training: Despite various initiatives, there is still a need for more targeted education and training programs for women. Many women lack the technical knowledge and skills required to adopt modern agricultural practices (Jain, 2019). Women have typically had less access than men to agricultural training, extension services, and education.

5. Access to land: The primary obstacle that women in Indian agriculture face is a lack of access to land. In India, female landownership is extremely low. Though very little information exists on land ownership among women. As per Census Agricultural Census (2015-16), out of a total 146 million operational holdings, the percentage share of female operational holders is only 13.87%.

6. Access to credit: Women farmers are unable to approach banks for institutional loans because banks typically consider land as collateral.

7. Access to agricultural inputs: Women typically have less access to resources and modern inputs (such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides) that can increase farming productivity than men do.

8. Access to technology: growing technology though beneficial for agriculture, has resulted in confinement of women in low paying traditional works. Additionally, operating most farm equipment is challenging for women.

9. Managing different roles: Women are expected to perform domestic tasks like cooking, child rearing, water collection, gathering fuel wood, and household maintenance in addition to the intense work they do all day on the farm.

10. Wage: Women farmers earn less and sometimes don't get paid, despite working longer hours and harder than men farmers.

11. Marketing: Due to the absence of basic infrastructure like market yards, roads, and transportation, as well as storage facilities like freezers and middlemen, small and marginal

farmers in India do not have sufficient access to marketing facilities. Seclusion, a lack of literacy, knowledge, and information, and other constraints for women are additional constraints. Women are also underrepresented in organizations of a similar nature, such as agricultural marketing committees.

12. Violence: In India, a significant problem that largely goes unreported is workplace violence and sexual harassment against women who work in agriculture.

13 Health and Occupational Hazards: Due to a lack of training, protective gear, and long working hours, women face health risks when cultivating numerous crops and plantations. Inadequate nutrition exacerbates existing health problems.

Future Prospects

Looking ahead, there are several opportunities to further mainstream women in Indian agriculture:

1. Enhanced Policy Support: Continued policy support is essential for addressing gender disparities. This includes improving women's access to land, credit, and technology. Policies should be designed with a gender-sensitive approach, ensuring that women benefit equally from agricultural programs and resources (World Bank, 2022).

2. Promotion of Women Entrepreneurs: Encouraging women to become agricultural entrepreneurs can drive innovation and economic growth. Support for women-led agribusinesses, including access to finance and market linkages, can empower women and contribute to rural development (Sharma, 2021).

3. Strengthening Education and Training: Investing in education and training programs tailored to women farmers can enhance their skills and knowledge. This includes providing training on sustainable agricultural practices, digital tools, and financial management (Patel, 2023).

4. Leveraging Technology: Technology will continue to play a critical role in the future of agriculture. Women may be able to overcome some of the obstacles they face by utilizing digital platforms and tools to provide them with market access, information, and resources (Singh, 2024).

5. Community-Based Approaches: Community-based approaches that involve men and women in discussions about gender roles and agricultural practices can help challenge and change traditional norms. Engaging men as allies in promoting gender equality can lead to more sustainable and inclusive outcomes (Basu, 2022).

6. Focus on Health and Well-Being: Addressing the health and well-being of women in agriculture is crucial for their productivity and quality of life. Improved access to healthcare, sanitation, and work-life balance measures can support women's participation and performance in agriculture (Kumar, 2024).

Way Forward

1. A gender analysis is important for development policies and programs directed at agriculture. As per the recommendation of Economic Survey (2017-18) for '*inclusive transformative agricultural policy*' aimed at gender-specific interventions.
2. The government should ensure access to secure land and property rights. Availability of access to land will facilitate investment leading to increased productivity and also ensure the food security at individual Household unit.
3. Provision of credit without collateral under the micro-finance initiative of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development should be encouraged
4. The training of rural women to help them adopt modern agricultural techniques that are tailored to local conditions and that use natural resources in a sustainable manner. To educate & train women about emerging technologies Krishi Vigyan Kendras along with extension workers, in every district can be assigned an additional task.

5. It is important to have gender-friendly tools and machinery for various farm operations. Women friendly machineries may be developed and incentivise the manufacturers.
6. Legal measures should be taken to ensure equal pay for work of equal value. Awareness can be created by the extension workers and the training centres to garner negotiation skills among women.

To achieve the full economic benefit from employment, rural women should be provided a greater choice over their occupations so that they are not forced to do the work left behind by men.

Conclusion

Mainstreaming women in Indian agriculture is not just a matter of equity but also of enhancing the sector's overall productivity and sustainability. Recognizing and addressing the historical and ongoing challenges faced by women in agriculture can lead to more inclusive and effective agricultural development. By continuing to invest in policies, education, and technology that support women, India can harness the full potential of its female agricultural workforce and drive progress in this vital sector.

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