



Gender Issues in Farmer Producer Organisations: Implications for Inclusive Agricultural Development

*Pedapati Anand Tej

M.Sc. Scholar, Department of Extension Education, College of Agriculture,
OUAT, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India - 751003

*Corresponding Author's email: anandtejpedapati@gmail.com

Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) have emerged as an important institutional innovation for improving the economic position of small and marginal farmers in India. By promoting collective action, aggregation, and market participation, FPOs aim to enhance farm incomes and strengthen farmers' bargaining power. However, despite women's significant contribution to agricultural production, their participation in FPOs remains limited and often symbolic. This article examines key gender issues within Farmer Producer Organisations, focusing on women's access to membership, leadership, decision-making, and benefits. Drawing on secondary literature, government reports, and open-access research studies, the paper highlights how socio-cultural norms, unequal access to resources, and gender-insensitive institutional structures constrain women's effective participation in FPOs. At the same time, evidence from women-led and women-majority FPOs demonstrates the potential of collective enterprises to enhance women's economic empowerment, confidence, and livelihood security. The article argues that addressing gender disparities through targeted capacity building, inclusive governance mechanisms, and supportive policies is essential for ensuring that FPOs contribute to equitable and sustainable agricultural development.

Keywords: Farmer Producer Organisations, Gender issues, Women farmers, Inclusive development

Introduction

Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) have gained prominence in India as collective institutions aimed at strengthening smallholder farmers' access to markets, technology, and financial services. Promoted through various government and development initiatives, FPOs are expected to enhance farm incomes by enabling aggregation of produce, reducing transaction costs, and improving bargaining power. Over the past decade, the number of FPOs has increased significantly, reflecting strong policy support for farmer-led agribusiness models (NABARD, 2023). However, the inclusive potential of FPOs remains uneven, particularly with respect to gender. Women form a substantial share of the agricultural workforce in India and play a critical role in crop production, livestock rearing, and post-harvest activities. Despite this, their participation in formal farmer institutions such as FPOs remains limited and often symbolic. Studies indicate that women's contributions to agriculture are frequently undervalued due to gendered norms, lack of asset ownership, and restricted access to institutional support systems (Agarwal, 2018). Understanding gender issues within FPOs is therefore essential for ensuring that these organisations contribute meaningfully to inclusive rural development.

Women's Participation in Farmer Producer Organisations

Women's participation in FPOs is shaped by both structural and social factors. In many cases, women are enrolled as members to meet inclusion targets, but their involvement in

organisational activities and decision-making remains minimal. Time constraints arising from unpaid domestic and care responsibilities often limit women's ability to attend meetings, training programmes, and market interactions. Additionally, lower levels of literacy and limited exposure to agribusiness practices further restrict their active engagement (Singh & Singh, 2024). Field-based studies reveal that leadership positions within FPOs are predominantly occupied by men, even in regions where women contribute significantly to agricultural labour. As a result, decisions related to input procurement, marketing strategies, and profit distribution are largely male-driven. This exclusion not only limits women's agency but also affects the overall effectiveness of FPOs by neglecting women's knowledge and perspectives (Agarwal, 2018).

Key Gender Issues in the Functioning of FPOs

Several interconnected gender issues influence women's participation and benefits within Farmer Producer Organisations:

- 1. Limited access to land and assets:** Ownership of land is often a prerequisite for FPO membership and access to institutional credit. Since land titles are predominantly held by men, women farmers face barriers in becoming full and active members of FPOs (Singh & Singh, 2024).
- 2. Restricted access to credit and finance:** Women members frequently encounter difficulties in accessing loans due to lack of collateral and limited financial literacy. This restricts their ability to invest in productive activities and limits their economic gains from FPO membership (NABARD, 2023).
- 3. Leadership and governance barriers:** Patriarchal norms and gender biases often prevent women from contesting or occupying leadership positions within FPOs. Even when women are part of governing boards, their roles may be limited to passive participation (Agarwal, 2018).
- 4. Capacity-building gaps:** Training programmes related to agribusiness management, digital marketing, and financial decision-making are often not designed to address women's specific needs and constraints, resulting in unequal skill development opportunities (Singh & Singh, 2024).

Emerging Role of Women-Led and Gender-Inclusive FPOs

Despite these challenges, women-led and women-majority FPOs across different regions of India provide encouraging evidence of the transformative potential of gender-inclusive collective action. Such FPOs are often linked with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and focus on activities where women possess strong expertise, including seed production, value-added food processing, livestock enterprises, and local marketing. Evidence suggests that women-led FPOs demonstrate better participation, transparency, and reinvestment of profits into household welfare, nutrition, and education. These organisations also help build women's confidence, leadership skills, and social capital, thereby contributing to broader empowerment outcomes (Agarwal, 2018; Singh & Singh, 2024).

Role of Policy and Institutional Support

Policy frameworks increasingly recognize the importance of gender inclusion in farmer collectives. Institutions such as NABARD and SFAC have introduced guidelines and support mechanisms for promoting women's participation in FPOs. However, gaps between policy intent and field-level implementation remain significant. Gender considerations are often treated as secondary rather than integral to FPO development strategies (NABARD, 2023). Convergence between FPOs and women-centric programmes such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) offers opportunities to enhance outreach and effectiveness. Integrating gender-sensitive planning, leadership training, and monitoring mechanisms can help ensure more equitable outcomes.

Strategies for Enhancing Gender Inclusivity in FPOs

Based on existing literature and field experiences, the following strategies are critical for addressing gender issues in FPOs:

- Ensuring mandatory and meaningful representation of women in governing boards
- Designing women-friendly credit products and reducing collateral requirements
- Providing targeted capacity-building programmes in agribusiness and leadership
- Strengthening linkages between FPOs and SHGs for institutional support
- Promoting gender sensitization among male members and promoting agencies

Conclusion

Farmer Producer Organisations have the potential to play a transformative role in improving agricultural livelihoods and promoting rural development. However, persistent gender issues limit the ability of women farmers to participate fully and benefit equitably from these institutions. Structural constraints related to asset ownership, credit access, leadership, and capacity building continue to marginalize women within many FPOs. Promoting women-led and gender-inclusive FPO models, supported by gender-responsive policies and institutional reforms, can significantly enhance both organisational performance and women's empowerment. Addressing gender issues within FPOs is therefore not only a matter of social equity but also a prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive agribusiness development.

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