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Government initiatives for Women Empowerment in Agriculture and Rural Development in India

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Agriculture is the one corner of the Indian economy where women are not a minority but a mainstay. Even as the country's overall female labour-force participation has historically ranked among the lowest in the world, the farm has remained overwhelmingly dependent on women's labour. India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate rose from 23.3 percent in 2017-18 to 41.7 percent in 2023-24, with the rural rate climbing even faster, from 24.6 percent to 47.6 percent over the same period (PLFS; Economic Survey 2024-25). Crucially, much of this re-entry has flowed back into farming rather than out of it: the share of rural women workers engaged in agriculture rose from 71.1 percent in 2018-19 to 76.9 percent in 2023-24, even as their presence in industry and services declined. This preponderance of women in agriculture has often been described in the literature as 'feminisation of Indian agriculture'.

According to the Agriculture Census (2015–16) by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, only about 13.9% of farm landholders in India are women, which is just a small increase from 12.8% in 2010–11. Women also manage only around 11.7% of the total farmland. This means that even though women do a large share of farm work in many areas, very few actually own land. As land is not in their name, women often struggle to get bank loans, crop insurance, and access to government agricultural services, which are mostly designed for male farmers. The Economic Survey also highlights that much of women's work is unpaid. In fact, the value of their unpaid household work alone is estimated to be about 3.1% of India's GDP, and most working women are still part of informal jobs without proper security or benefits.

Women farmers produce about 60–80% of India's food, making them central to the country's food security (FAO, 2011). However, they still face major disadvantages. If women had the same access as men to land, credit, training, and technology, agricultural production in developing countries could increase by 2.5–4%, and household farm yields could rise by up to 30%. Despite this potential, gender inequality remains high. India ranked 135th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022, and the gap is especially visible in rural and agricultural sectors. Closing this gap would lead to higher productivity, reduced poverty and hunger, and stronger economic growth. Women also tend to reinvest up to 90% of their income in their families, improving food, health, and education outcomes and helping break the cycle of poverty.

Recognising their importance, the United Nations declared 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer. Yet, challenges persist globally. Women farmers still produce about 24% less than men and earn only about 78% of men's wages in agriculture. Addressing these inequalities could add nearly one trillion dollars to the global economy and reduce food insecurity for around 45 million people (FAO, 2025).

The Government of India has also introduced several initiatives to support and empower rural women

Recent Initiatives by Central Government

Technology and Mechanisation

Namo Drone Didi

The Namo Drone Didi scheme was introduced on 30 November 2023 and will continue until 2025–26, with a total budget of ₹1,261 crore. Under this scheme, 15,000 women self-help groups (SHGs) are being supported with agricultural drones. The government provides up to 80% subsidy, with a maximum of ₹8 lakh per drone. These SHGs use drones for services such as crop spraying, which can help them earn around ₹1 lakh annually. The scheme is being implemented across India under DAY-NRLM.

Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanisation (SMAM)

The Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanisation has been in operation since 2014. It provides subsidies ranging from 50% to 80% on farm machinery. Women farmers are given priority under this scheme, along with SC/ST and small and marginal farmers. The programme is implemented nationwide by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare.

Extension and Capacity Building

Krishi Sakhi Convergence Programme (KSCP)

The Krishi Sakhi Convergence Programme was initiated following a Memorandum of Understanding signed on 30 August 2023, and certificates were distributed to trained women on 18 June 2024. The programme trains rural women for 56 days in areas such as soil health, livestock management, and agroecological practices. After completing the training, these women work as para-extension workers and can earn between ₹60,000 and ₹80,000 per year. The programme began in Varanasi and is currently being implemented across 12 states.

Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)

The Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana was introduced in 2011 as a part of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. The programme aims to improve the productivity and income of women farmers by providing training, capacity-building support, tools, technology, and better market access. It is being implemented across the country.

Income, Credit and Assets

Lakhpati Didi

The Lakhpati Didi initiative was announced in 2023 and further expanded in the Union Budget 2024–25. It supports women in self-help groups to take up income-generating activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts. The goal of the programme is to enable three crore women to earn at least ₹1 lakh annually by 2027. The initiative is being implemented across India under DAY-NRLM.

Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) – Women's Component

The Agriculture Infrastructure Fund was introduced in 2020 to provide medium- to long-term loans for developing post-harvest infrastructure and farm assets. The scheme offers a 3% interest subsidy along with a credit guarantee. By February 2025, a total of 8,190 projects worth ₹2,377 crore had been approved for women farmers under this scheme.

Employment and Governance

MGNREGA

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has been in force since 2006. It guarantees wage employment in rural areas, with a provision that at least one-third of the beneficiaries must be women. The programme was initially introduced in 200 districts, beginning with Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh.

Model Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats

The Model Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats initiative was introduced in March 2025 by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Under this initiative, one Gram Panchayat in each district is selected for special training to promote women's leadership and active participation in local governance.

Table 1. Recent Government of India initiatives for women in agriculture and rural development

Sl. No.	Name of Programme	Year of Implementation	Features	Where it was first implemented
1	Namo Drone Didi	2023–24 (launched 30 Nov 2023; runs to 2025–26)	Central Sector Scheme providing drones to 15,000 women SHGs; outlay ₹1,261 crore. 80% subsidy up to ₹8 lakh per drone; ~₹1 lakh/year additional income per SHG for spraying fertilizers/pesticides.	Pan-India launch by PM Modi via video conferencing (under DAY-NRLM)
2	Krishi Sakhi Convergence Programme (KSCP)	2024 (MoU signed 30 Aug 2023; certificates distributed 18 Jun 2024)	Trains and certifies rural women as para-extension workers after 56 days of training in soil health, livestock and agroecological practices; earn ₹60,000–80,000 annually.	Launched from Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh; Phase-1 rollout in 12 states (Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, UP, MP, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Odisha, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Meghalaya)
3	Lakhpati Didi	2023 (scaled up via Union Budget 2024–25)	Supports SHG women in income-generating activities (agriculture, animal husbandry, handicrafts) to earn ₹1 lakh+ annually; target of 3 crore women by 2027.	Pan-India under DAY-NRLM (announced in PM's Independence Day address)
4	Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)	2011 (under NRLM)	Enhances women farmers' productivity and income through training, capacity building, tools, technology, and market access.	Pan-India (sub-component of DAY-NRLM)
5	Model Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats	2025 (launched March 2025)	Selects one Gram Panchayat per district for specialized training to build women's leadership and involvement in village governance.	One GP per district, nationwide (Ministry of Panchayati Raj)
6	Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) – women's component	2020	Medium-to-long-term debt financing for post-harvest facilities and farm assets with 3% interest subvention and credit guarantee; 8,190 projects worth ₹2,377 crore sanctioned to women farmers (as of Feb 2025).	Pan-India (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare)
7	MGNREGA (women's participation mandate)	2006	Rural employment guarantee with at least one-third of beneficiaries mandated to be women.	First rolled out in 200 districts; the very first district was Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh (2 Feb 2006)
8	Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanisation (SMAM)	2014	50–80% subsidy on farm machinery, with women farmers given priority along with SC/ST and small/marginal farmers.	Pan-India (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare)

State Government Initiatives

Alongside the Centre's schemes, India's states run some of the largest women-in-agriculture programmes in the world. Most are built on the self-help group (SHG) and its federations, and

several double as State Rural Livelihoods Missions under DAY-NRLM, operating at the convergence of state and central funding.

Self-Help Group Livelihood Missions

State-Level Women Empowerment Initiatives

Kudumbashree (Kerala):

Kudumbashree was launched in 1998 and became operational in 1999 as Kerala's State Poverty Eradication Mission under the Local Self-Government Department. It is organised as a three-tier network of women's groups consisting of Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), Area Development Societies (ADS), and Community Development Societies (CDS). The programme covers around 45–48 lakh women across nearly 3.17 lakh NHGs. It promotes economic empowerment through activities such as collective farming, livestock rearing, market development, and more than one lakh micro-enterprises, including joint liability groups of women farmers.

Mission Shakti (Odisha):

Mission Shakti was established in 2001 as Odisha's flagship programme for women's empowerment. It is built around women's self-help groups and has expanded to about 6 lakh SHGs with nearly 70 lakh members. The programme provides access to low-interest loans and enterprise support, enabling women to take up activities such as fish retailing and food processing, thereby generating employment in rural areas.

JEEViKA (Bihar):

The Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project, known as JEEViKA, was launched in 2007 under the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS). The programme has mobilised around 1.30 crore women into approximately 10.45 lakh self-help groups. Each participating woman, known as a 'Jeevika Didi,' can access about ₹10,000 to start small enterprises in agriculture, animal husbandry, handicrafts, or trade. Successful participants can receive up to ₹2 lakh to expand their businesses. The programme also supports women-led farmer producer organisations and agricultural value chains.

Indira Mahila Shakti (Telangana):

Indira Mahila Shakti was introduced as a policy in 2025, with its first phase beginning in December 2024. The programme is implemented through SERP and MEPMA and aims to transform over 63 lakh SHG members from basic savings activities to enterprise development and wealth creation. It targets around ₹1 lakh crore in SHG bank linkages and ₹25,000 crore in small business investments. The programme also supports skill development, branding, packaging, marketing, and the establishment of common processing centres for agriculture and related sectors.

Mahila Lakhpati (Madhya Pradesh):

The Mahila Lakhpati initiative is being implemented through the Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihood Mission in convergence with DAY-NRLM. It uses self-help groups to improve women's participation in agriculture and allied activities, with the aim of helping them achieve annual incomes of ₹1 lakh or more. The programme also focuses on skill development and improving market access.

Women-Led Sustainable Agriculture (Andhra Pradesh)

APCNF – Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming:

The Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming programme was introduced during 2015–16 under Rythu Sadhikara Samstha. It is one of the largest agroecology programmes in the world and is strongly driven by women's groups. The programme has reached around 17.7 lakh farmers across 8,168 gram panchayats and about 1.4 lakh self-help groups. Women's groups are involved in nearly 95% of small farmer households participating in the programme. Reported benefits include income increases of 38–66% and water savings of up to 50%.

CMSA – Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture:

The Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture programme was implemented from 2004 to 2014 under the rural development department and SERP. It was carried out through women's self-help groups and initially focused on non-pesticidal pest management. Over time, it

expanded to include soil health improvement and water conservation. This programme laid the foundation for the later development of APCNF.

Table 2. Agriculture & Rural-Livelihood Programmes for Women by State Government

Sl. No.	State	Programme	Year	Implementing Agency	Coverage / Beneficiaries
1	Kerala	Kudumbashree (State Poverty Eradication Mission)	1998 (operational 1999)	State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM), Local Self-Government Dept	~45–48 lakh women members; 3.17 lakh NHGs
2	Odisha	Mission Shakti (state women's SHG programme)	2001	Mission Shakti Department, Govt. of Odisha	~6 lakh SHGs; ~70 lakh members
3	Bihar	JEEViKA (Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project)	2007	Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS)	10.45 lakh SHGs; ~1.30 crore women
4	Andhra Pradesh	APCNF – AP Community Managed Natural Farming	2015–16	Rythu Sadhikara Samstha (RySS) – Farmers' Empowerment Corporation	~1.77 million farmers; 8,168 GPs; ~1.4 lakh SHGs
5	Andhra Pradesh	CMSA – Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture (predecessor)	2004–14	Rural Development Dept (SERP)	Statewide via women SHGs
6	Telangana	Indira Mahila Shakti	2025 (policy; first phase Dec 2024)	SERP / MEPMA, Govt. of Telangana	63+ lakh SHG members
7	Madhya Pradesh	Mahila Lakhpati (SHG-based livelihoods)	Under DAY-NRLM convergence	MP State Rural Livelihood Mission	SHG members statewide

A newer wave of state schemes provides direct cash to women. These are income-support measures rather than agriculture-specific programmes, but their large reach into rural households gives them real relevance to the farm economy supplementing income, easing the purchase of farm inputs, and strengthening women's decision-making in farming families.

Ladli Behna Yojana (Madhya Pradesh, 2023): The Ladli Behna Yojana was introduced in 2023 in Madhya Pradesh to provide monthly financial assistance of about ₹1,250 to eligible women aged between 21 and 60 years. This additional income helps women support activities such as backyard farming, poultry, dairy, and other small agricultural enterprises.

Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana (Maharashtra, 2024):

The Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana was launched in 2024 in Maharashtra. It provides around ₹1,500 per month to eligible women. This financial support helps households manage expenses and allows more spending on farm inputs and related agricultural activities.

Gruha Lakshmi (Karnataka, 2023):

The Gruha Lakshmi scheme was introduced in 2023 in Karnataka. It provides a monthly transfer of about ₹2,000 to the woman head of the household. This support strengthens the financial stability of rural and farming families.

Lakshmir Bhandar (West Bengal, 2021):

The Lakshmir Bhandar scheme was introduced in 2021 in West Bengal. It provides monthly financial assistance of approximately ₹1,000 to ₹1,200 to women, especially benefiting those in agricultural labour and smallholder households.

Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thogai (Tamil Nadu, 2023):

This scheme was launched in 2023 in Tamil Nadu to provide about ₹1,000 per month to the woman head of the family. It covers both rural and urban households and helps improve financial security.

Subhadra (Odisha, 2024):

The Subhadra scheme was introduced in 2024 in Odisha. It provides around ₹10,000 per year in two instalments to eligible women. This financial assistance supports and strengthens the livelihood activities of women, especially those associated with Mission Shakti self-help groups.

Table 3: Women-Focused Income-Support

Sl. No.	State	Scheme	Year	Benefit / Coverage	Relevance to Rural & Agricultural Households
1	Madhya Pradesh	Ladli Behna Yojana	2023	Monthly assistance (~Rs 1,250) to eligible women aged 21–60	Supplementary income that supports backyard farming, poultry, dairy and small agricultural enterprises; improves women's decision-making in farming households.
2	Maharashtra	Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana	2024	Monthly assistance (~Rs 1,500) to eligible women	Direct income support to rural women; frees household cash for farm inputs and allied activities.
3	Karnataka	Gruha Lakshmi	2023	Monthly assistance (~Rs 2,000) to woman head of household	Income support to the woman head of family, including rural and farming households.
4	West Bengal	Lakshmir Bhandar	2021	Monthly assistance (~Rs 1,000–1,200) to women	Basic income for women, including those in agricultural-labour and smallholder households.
5	Tamil Nadu	Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thogai	2023	Monthly assistance (~Rs 1,000) to woman head of family	Income support to women heads of households across rural and urban areas.
6	Odisha	Subhadra	2024	~Rs 10,000 per year in two instalments to eligible women	Cash support to women beneficiaries; complements Mission Shakti SHG livelihood activities.

Conclusion

India's programmes for women have shifted from welfare to economic empowerment, recognising women as farmers, extension workers, and entrepreneurs rather than just beneficiaries. The current system—built on self-help groups, trained women extension workers, technology access, and income opportunities—is moving in the right direction. However, better coordination is needed so that women receive training, credit, farmer recognition, tools, and market access together, instead of through separate schemes. In agricultural extension, women farmers are often best supported by other trained women such as Krishi Sakhis, Pashu Sakhis, Drone Didis, and community resource persons. Strengthening such support systems and designing women-friendly advisories, demonstrations, and tools can significantly improve productivity and equity, especially in dryland and rainfed areas. Women are now not only contributing labour but are also emerging as leaders in agriculture.