

Unveiling the Hidden Gem: Women's Vital Role in Modern Indian Agriculture

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Abstract-India stands as a developing nation with an agrarian economic foundation. The rural expanse encompasses around 65% of the population, of which a substantial 80% rely on agriculture as their primary income source. Particularly in developing nations, women have emerged as pivotal contributors to food production on farms. In the context of rural India, a striking 84% of women are directly tied to agriculture for sustenance, actively participating in a range of agricultural and related pursuits such as crop cultivation, livestock oversight, and post-harvest procedures. However, despite their profound engagement, women encounter glaring disparities in accessing productive resources, significantly constraining their capacity to amplify productivity.

Keywords- Women in Agriculture, Role of Women, women contributors

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of agriculture around 12,000 years ago marked a transformative shift in human existence. Unfolding over millennia, this development, often termed the "Neolithic Revolution," instigated a profound societal change. It supplanted the long-standing hunter-gatherer lifestyle with settled communities and a dependable food supply. As agriculture took root, nations took shape, harnessing the ability to cultivate crops and raise animals to meet the demands of a burgeoning global population.

Within the rich tapestry of India, agriculture is woven into the very fabric of tradition, social dynamics, and gender roles. Serving as the backbone of the nation, a significant portion of the populace relies on agriculture for sustenance. Currently, India holds the world's second-highest position in terms of agricultural productivity. Its agricultural landscape encompasses a diverse array of field crops, fruit crops, horticultural produce, medicinal plants, plantation crops, livestock,

forestry, and fisheries. As of 2021, the agricultural sector in India boasted a workforce of nearly 152 million.

The rural landscape of the country remains intimately tied to agricultural activities. Despite a steady decline in agriculture's contribution to the nation's GDP, Indian agriculture retains its status as a pivotal industry, making substantial contributions to the socio-economic growth of the nation. Leading states such as Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, and West Bengal play a pivotal role in India's agricultural prowess.

While the landscape of agriculture has evolved over time, one constant remains: the pivotal role of women as key contributors to this industry. Rural women stand as torchbearers for economic, social, and environmental progress in the "New India." In countries like India, agriculture employs a significant portion of the female workforce, yet their contributions often go unrecognized. Around 80 percent of rural women in India find employment within the agricultural sector. Empowering and integrating these women into the agricultural workforce could herald a transformative shift towards economic growth and development.

However, the female labor force in developing nations continues to bear the burden of family and household responsibilities, impeding their recognition as agricultural laborers. Despite their substantial contributions, the needs and challenges faced by women in agriculture often remain overlooked by rural development initiatives. These women bring a unique multitasking capacity that significantly impacts agricultural productivity, economic vitality, household food security, family health, and overall welfare.

Women's Contribution in Agriculture and Allied Activities

Swaminathan, the renowned agricultural scientist, asserts that the dawn of crop domestication and the inception of farming were catalyzed by women. While men engaged in hunting pursuits for sustenance, women embarked on gathering and cultivating seeds from indigenous plants, marking the genesis of agriculture for sustenance, animal feed, forage, fiber, and fuel. Women's influence extends further, encompassing the stewardship of fundamental life support systems, including land, water, flora, and fauna. Their endeavors encompass organic recycling to preserve soil health and the cultivation of varietal diversity and genetic resistance to fortify crop security.

In the context of India, women emerge as major contributors to food production in terms of value, volume, and working hours. Rural India prominently features a substantial 70% of women reliant on agriculture for their livelihood. Farid *et.al* (2009), found that a staggering 94% of female labor was devoted to cereal production, with 1.4% in vegetable cultivation and 3.72% engaged in fruit and spice crops. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Indian women constitute 21% and 24% of fishers and fish farmers respectively. Beyond traditional roles, rural women excel not only in core agricultural activities like crop cultivation but also in allied pursuits encompassing horticulture, livestock management, post-harvest operations, animal care, agroforestry, and fisheries.

Nonetheless, much of the invaluable work performed by women, such as collecting fuel, fodder, water, and nurturing backyard gardens, goes undocumented in official census data. This oversight is exacerbated by the traditional gender-based division of labor, with rural women occupying 78% of all women in regular agricultural work. Despite their pivotal role, they contend with unequal wages, earning about 30% less than their male counterparts. Studies by the Women and Population Division of the FAO underscore that in developing nations, women contribute 70% of agricultural labor, 60-80% of labor for household food production, 100% of labor for basic food processing, 80% for food storage, and 90% for water and fuel wood collection. As per Pingali *et al.* (2019), the ratio of women to men working in agricultural sector has increased over the time and made greater amount of contribution to GDP per capita.

Remarkably, women produce 60-80% of the food

across numerous developing countries, effectively shaping the survival of millions. Their strategies for livelihood and ensuring food security span a spectrum of activities, from crop cultivation to livestock rearing, home gardening, and gathering. These contributions persist despite restricted access to land, resources, and information.

Rural women undertake diverse labor-intensive tasks like weeding, harvesting, and tending livestock. They are primary gatherers of firewood and bear the brunt of water collection due to the environmental challenges of overgrazing and desertification. Livestock, a significant facet of pastoralist and mixed farming systems, profoundly impacts women's lives, improving their financial standing. Roughly two-thirds of impoverished livestock keepers are women, actively engaged in animal care, particularly in managing poultry, dairy animals, and housed animals. Women play a pivotal role in utilizing eggs, milk, and poultry meat for home consumption and income generation.

Throughout various tasks such as carrying harvested crops and tending animals, women's contributions often go uncredited. They persist in a dynamic and demanding routine, working from dawn to dusk, and often managing households alongside. Despite the essential role women play in producing half of Pakistan's food, their own food security remains precarious.

During harvest seasons, women's labor peaks, with tasks like carrying harvested crops for threshing falling predominantly to them. Carrying bundles of crops, often barefoot and navigating through sharp shrubs, underscores their dedicated efforts. Despite self-employment and their crucial contributions, rural women's work is frequently overlooked or deemed economically unproductive. This reality is juxtaposed with their pivotal role in supplying sustenance to the nation.

As a result of the growing feminization of agriculture and the implementation of pro-women initiatives, there has been a notable increase in the proportion of female-operated agricultural holdings within the country. This percentage rose from 12.78 percent during 2010-11 to 13.78 percent during 2015-16 (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2019). This shift is attributed to various efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare to enhance women's participation in agriculture.

These efforts encompass the establishment of farm women's food security groups and the execution of comprehensive studies at both macro and micro levels, focusing on key aspects related to women's roles in agriculture. Additionally, the ministry has facilitated the dissemination of Gender Sensitization Modules through training programs conducted at the National, Regional, and State levels. Moreover, the compilation and documentation of gender-friendly tools and technologies, the creation of Farm Women Friendly Handbooks, and the assembly of best practices and success stories of women farmers constitute integral components of these endeavors (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2021).

The Ministry's multifaceted approach underscores its commitment to empowering women in agriculture, ensuring their equitable participation, and fostering their socio-economic advancement. By implementing these measures, the Ministry strives to create an environment that not only acknowledges the pivotal role of women in agriculture but also supports their journey towards sustainable livelihoods and enhanced well-being.

Main Challenges Faced by Female Farmers in Agriculture Sector

The challenges faced by female farmers within the agricultural sector are multifaceted and require urgent attention:

1. **Unequal Land Rights:** Women continue to grapple with unequal land ownership rights, as they often lack direct access to arable land registered in their names. Such limitations not only curtail their livelihood options but also intensify financial pressures, especially for women heading households.
2. **Limited Access to Productive Resources:** The restricted access that women have to productive resources further exacerbates their challenges. From modern tools to essential resources, these limitations hinder their ability to maximize productivity.
3. **Unmechanized Agricultural Tasks:** Women are disproportionately burdened by labor-intensive, unmechanized agricultural tasks due to the absence of appropriate technology and equipment. These dynamic places gave extra strain on them and limits their efficiency.
4. **Decision-Making Power:** Women's influence

over decision-making processes remains scant, both within and outside the household. Lacking control over capital and decision-making authority, they often lack the resources needed for stable labor conditions and household well-being.

5. **Scarce Ownership of Productive Resources:** The ownership of vital agricultural assets like land, animals, and machinery remains predominantly skewed toward men, leaving women with limited agency and access to such resources.
6. **Climate Change Adaptation and Technology:** Poor women farmers confront difficulties in adapting to climate change due to financial barriers. Insufficient access to credit and agricultural services hampers their ability to purchase necessary technologies, impacting their productivity and limiting their capacity to invest in improved seeds and soil enhancement.
7. **High Illiteracy Rate:** Many women in the agricultural sector face high illiteracy rates, leading to a lack of awareness about their legal rights, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.
8. **Gender Wage Gap:** Women consistently earn lower wages, particularly in informal and private sectors, perpetuating gender-based income disparities.
9. **Misapplication of Laws:** Existing laws, including heritage legislation, are often misapplied, favoring men and further disempowering women within the agricultural domain.
10. **Market Inequities:** Insufficient market intelligence and access to relevant information weaken women farmers' bargaining power, placing them in disadvantageous positions during transactions with buyers.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for empowering female farmers, unlocking their potential, and fostering sustainable and equitable growth within the agricultural sector.

SUGGESTIONS

Following are the suggestions for enhancing the role of women in modern Indian agriculture:

1. **Monetary Valuation of Rural Women's Labor:** Recognize and account for the labor of working women in the rural economy by assigning monetary value to their contributions.
2. **Enhanced Facilities for Rural Women:** Provide

improved facilities for impoverished rural women, including access to land, agricultural and livestock extension services to empower them economically.

3. **Prioritized Access to Financial Resources:** Give priority to women's access to credit on favorable terms from banks and other financial institutions. This includes support for starting businesses, purchasing property, and building homes.
4. **Empower Women Through Education:** Implement measures to enhance women's literacy rates. Consider developing a dedicated education policy specifically tailored to women's needs.
5. **Inclusion in Decision-Making Bodies:** Involve women in decision-making bodies capable of introducing structural changes. This action could bring about positive shifts in gender relations within society.
6. **Equitable Wages for Agricultural Labor:** Advocate for the establishment of minimum and equal wages for women engaged in agricultural labor. Regular reviews of wage rates should be conducted by the state government.
7. **Legal Awareness and Support:** Empower women by raising awareness about their existing rights, ensuring access to judicial relief, and addressing discrimination through legal reforms. Provide legal aid, assistance, and counseling.
8. **Skill Development for Rural Women:** Develop targeted training programs to enhance the skills of female agricultural workers in rural areas, opening up opportunities for alternative vocations.
9. **Accessible Credit for Self-Employment:** Make affordable credit accessible to needy agricultural women, enabling them to initiate self-employment ventures. This initiative can create additional avenues for meaningful employment in rural areas.
10. **Diverse Employment Programs:** Introduce supplementary employment programs and opportunities for women engaged in agricultural labor in rural regions, further broadening their potential for gainful employment.

These suggestions, when implemented in tandem, can collectively foster the advancement of women in modern Indian agriculture, empowering them to contribute more significantly to agricultural productivity and rural development.

CONCLUSION

Rural women play a pivotal role in agriculture and its allied domains, encompassing everything from crop and livestock production to cottage industries. Their contributions span household upkeep, family care, and tasks like water and fuel transportation. Despite their immense involvement, their significance and dignity remain largely unacknowledged. Women's status is hindered across social, economic, and political spheres. Their wage work often clashes with traditional gender norms, leading to undervaluation and under compensation. The extensive hours women dedicate to water collection, chores, food preparation, and farming activities are influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors. Unequal market entry and limited occupational choices stem from societal constraints and a dearth of supportive facilities in the formal labor sector.

The bias against women's labor stems from entrenched perceptions of their primary role as homemakers. Consequently, women tend to be concentrated in the secondary labor sector, facing low pay, low status, casual employment, and minimal opportunities for upward mobility. A significant portion of urban women occupies low-paying positions.

In conclusion, recognizing that agriculture is a cornerstone of economic growth, empowering women with knowledge about cultivation and nutrition while facilitating market access is paramount. Bridging the gender gap within agriculture becomes an imperative for boosting productivity and ensuring food security in our quest for progress.

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