

# Feminisation of Indian Agriculture: Trends, Drivers, Challenges and Policy Imperatives

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## Abstract

India's agrarian economy has, over the past three decades, undergone a demographic shift that has received far less attention than it deserves: women have become the de facto backbone of smallholder farming across much of rural India, even as the formal architecture of agricultural support continues to treat the male landholder as the primary beneficiary. This paper examines that contradiction. It looks at two dimensions of agricultural feminisation: the numerical rise in women's share of farm work, and the deeper problem of women absorbing ever-greater responsibility for cultivation without gaining the land titles, credit access, or institutional recognition that would make that responsibility sustainable. Evidence is drawn from Census rounds, NSSO surveys, NABARD data and published scholarship. Government schemes including PM-KISAN, the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana and SHG-linked credit are evaluated on their own terms. The paper argues, in the end, that policy has been treating symptoms rather than causes, and that structural reform on land rights remains the unavoidable priority.

**Keywords:** Feminisation of agriculture, women farmers, land rights, rural labour, gender and development, India

## 1. Introduction

Agriculture contributes around 17 per cent of India's GDP today, down from 52 per cent in 1951 (Ministry of Finance, 2024). Yet it still employs the largest share of the rural workforce, and within that workforce something significant has shifted. Women now account for close to 80 per cent of food-producing labour in certain regions of the country (UN Women, 2020). They sow, transplant, weed, harvest, store and process. In many households with absent migrant husbands, they also negotiate with seed dealers, manage debt, and decide what gets planted. And yet fewer than 13 per cent of agricultural land holdings are registered in women's names (NSSO, 2014). That gap, between who does the work and who holds the assets, is what this paper is about.

The phrase 'feminisation of agriculture' originated in analyses of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; FAO, 2011) before scholars began applying

it to South Asia. In India the picture is complicated by the fact that no single cause drives the trend. Male out-migration, decades of agrarian distress, caste-based segmentation of labour markets, and the systematic male bias of Green Revolution-era technology have all played a role. Pattnaik et al. (2018) put the concern plainly: what looks like feminisation of agriculture may in practice be the feminisation of agrarian distress. This paper takes that possibility seriously. It moves through a conceptual section, an empirical review, an analysis of causes, a survey of challenges, a policy assessment, and conclusions.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

The term 'feminisation of agriculture' is used in two senses that are worth keeping separate. In its demographic sense, it simply means more women in farming, whether as cultivators, wage labourers or farm managers (FAO, 2011). This is something census data can measure. The second sense is more analytical and more troubling: women taking on expanded roles in farm management without acquiring the ownership, credit or institutional standing that male farmers are conventionally assumed to possess (Agarwal, 1994; Doss, 2018). Lastarria-Cornhiel (1997) traced three pathways through which this happens. Men migrate, leaving women to run the farm. Women are pulled into casualised agricultural wage work in large numbers. And as men diversify into non-farm income, agricultural decisions quietly pass to women within the household. All three processes are operating in India.

Bina Agarwal's (1994) argument about land and gender in South Asia set the terms for most of the subsequent debate. Her point was straightforward: land is not just an income source. It confers social standing, gives women leverage within households, and provides a degree of protection against destitution that no amount of skill or labour can substitute for. Women who farm land they do not own remain, in her account, structurally subordinate regardless of how productive they are. Shiva (1988) and Mies (1986) traced this subordination into the political economy of agricultural modernisation itself, arguing that the Green Revolution directed credit, technology and extension services to male landholders while intensifying women's unpaid subsistence work. Caste shapes all of this further: Dalit

women, concentrated in agricultural wage labour, carry compounding disadvantages of gender and social position, while upper-caste women in many regions are excluded from field labour by norms of seclusion but exercise genuine authority over household farm decisions (Kapadia, 1999; Jodhka, 2012).

### 3. Empirical Trends

Census 2011 counted 98.4 million women as main agricultural workers: 31.1 million classified as cultivators, 67.3 million as agricultural labourers, together representing 65 per cent of all female main workers in India (Census of India, 2011). By 2022-23, the Periodic Labour Force Survey found women making up 71.4 per cent of rural agricultural workers, against 57.8 per cent of rural men engaged in farming (MoSPI, 2023). Men have been moving to construction sites, factories and cities; women have stayed with the land. Official statistics, moreover, capture only part of the picture. The NSSO Time Use Survey of 2019 shows women spending four to six additional hours daily on farm and food-related tasks that fall outside the formal definition of 'work' and are therefore excluded from national accounts entirely (Hirway, 2010).

On land ownership the figures are unambiguous. The NSSO 70th Round on land and livestock holdings (2013) found women operating just 12.8 per cent of rural holdings, with average plot sizes of 0.48 hectares compared to 1.18 hectares for men. Over half of women-headed rural households, 51 per cent, were entirely landless (NSSO, 2014). Agricultural Census 2015-16 registered a marginal gain, putting women's share at 13.9 per cent, but regional disparities remain sharp: southern states show relatively higher female land ownership while Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh sit below 10 per cent (Agricultural Census, 2016). Credit access follows the same pattern. NABARD's 2016-17 survey found formal credit reaching 14 per cent of female-headed farm households versus 27 per cent of male-headed ones. Fewer than 5 per cent of participants in Krishi Vigyan Kendra training programmes were women (ICAR, 2018).

### 4. Drivers of Feminisation

The movement of working-age men out of villages is the factor most consistently identified in the literature. The Economic Survey 2016-17 estimated annual rural-to-urban migration at roughly nine million people, the great majority of them men (Economic Survey, 2017). Field research in Jharkhand (Rao, 2012) and Bihar (Datta, 2016) shows women taking over input procurement, labour supervision, and crop planning in households with migrant members, yet remaining legally invisible as farmers because land titles stay registered in absent husbands' names. These women carry all

the operational responsibilities of running a farm and receive almost none of the institutional recognition that would allow them to access credit, insurance or scheme benefits in their own right.

The agrarian crisis that deepened through the late 1990s and 2000s accelerated the process. Falling farm incomes, rising input costs, and chronic indebtedness made full-time cultivation increasingly unattractive for men with the social capital and mobility to find alternatives. The National Crime Records Bureau recorded over 300,000 farmer suicides between 1995 and 2015, a crisis concentrated among male cultivators; but the women left behind to manage indebted farms are largely absent from that analysis (Krishnamurthy, 2005; Mohanty, 2013). MGNREGA introduced an additional complication: by raising women's off-farm earning potential it improved their wage bargaining power in agricultural labour markets, but in some regions it drew women's time away from family farm work (Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya, 2017). Caste stratification shapes who end up where in all of this. Educated upper-caste men have disproportionately accessed urban employment and left farming to women in their households. Dalit men and women with fewer exit options remain in agricultural wage labour, with women facing the steepest disadvantage (Jodhka, 2012; Ramachandran, 2011).

### 5. Challenges Facing Women Farmers

The deepest problem may be one of recognition. Women who manage farms day-to-day are recorded in official classifications as 'housewives' or 'agricultural labourers' if the land stands in a husband's name, which means they do not exist, for administrative purposes, as farmers. They cannot receive PM-KISAN income transfers, cannot apply for formal crop loans as primary borrowers, and cannot register for agricultural insurance in their own right (Pattnaik et al., 2018). The legal framework has been improved: the 2005 Hindu Succession Act amendment gave daughters equal inheritance rights over ancestral property. But a 2016 Landesa study across six states found fewer than 11 per cent of legally entitled women had actually claimed those rights, held back by family pressure, low awareness of the law, and fear of damaging relationships with natal kin. Joint land titling pilots in Odisha, Karnataka and West Bengal have shown real improvements in women's household authority and reduced vulnerability to violence where titles were issued in both spouses' names (Kelkar et al., 2014; Doss et al., 2014). The evidence is reasonably strong. National rollout has not followed.

Agricultural extension, tool design and advisory platforms have been built around a male farmer and have not seriously been redesigned. KVK training attendance, mobile

advisory literacy requirements and the ergonomics of farm implements all reflect this. Rural women average 7.2 hours of unpaid domestic and care work daily alongside 3.8 hours of farm labour, according to the NSSO Time Use Survey 2019, a workload that simply leaves little time for cooperative meetings, bank visits or training sessions (Chen, 2001; Hirway, 2010). Women subsistence farmers in dryland and rain-fed regions carry a further exposure: smaller and more marginal plots, lower access to weather-indexed insurance, constrained mobility during extreme weather, and systematic exclusion from climate adaptation programmes (IPCC, 2014; Kelkar, 2009).

## 6. Policy Responses and Their Limits

The National Policy for Farmers (2007) committed to a one-third female beneficiary share across agricultural schemes. PM-KISAN, which transfers Rs 6,000 annually to registered farm households, had women as only 22 per cent of recipients in 2022-23 (PIB, 2023). The gap is a direct consequence of the scheme's dependence on land ownership records rather than on who is actually farming. MKSP, the government's most sustained gender-specific agricultural programme, was launched in 2011 under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission and reached approximately 4.9 million women farmers across 18 states by 2023 through SHG-based training, input support and market linkages (DAY-NRLM, 2023). NIRD evaluations (2019) found genuine improvements in collective capacity and crop diversification, while noting limited impact on the structural barriers of land tenure and formal credit access that underlie most other problems.

The SHG-Bank Linkage Programme has expanded substantially: over 12 million SHGs with around 140 million women members held combined savings of Rs 47,608 crore by 2023 (NABARD, 2023). For many rural women this is their only workable credit channel. But Ramachandran and Swaminathan (2002) observed early on that SHG credit in structurally precarious farming conditions tends to flow toward consumption rather than productive investment. The Andhra Pradesh microfinance crisis of 2010 remains a warning about what happens when credit intermediation is not accompanied by basic financial protections (Karim, 2011). Land reform is the most evidence-backed and consistently under-implemented priority in this area. Where joint titling has been tried it has worked; what is missing is the political will to require it nationally rather than pilot it regionally.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Women run a substantial share of India's farms today. Many do so without a land title, without a Kisan Credit Card, without crop insurance, and without any formal

acknowledgement that they are farmers at all. This situation has persisted through successive agricultural policy cycles and will not correct itself through awareness campaigns or marginal adjustments to existing schemes.

A few priorities stand out. On administrative recognition: survey and census instruments need to capture women's farm management roles accurately, and scheme benefits need pathways to reach women who farm land registered in others' names. On land: joint spousal titling should be mandatory in all new land allocation programmes, and the 2005 Succession Act amendment needs legal aid infrastructure to make it real in practice, not just on paper. On extension: KVK programmes should carry an enforceable 50 per cent female participation requirement, and agricultural research institutions should incorporate gender-sensitive tool and variety design into their mandates. On credit: group-guarantee Kisan Credit Card instruments for women without individual collateral are technically feasible and should be piloted at scale. On time: investment in rural water supply and childcare at MGNREGA worksites is directly connected to women's capacity to engage with agricultural institutions, even though it rarely appears on the agriculture ministry's budget. On climate: adaptation programmes need gender-disaggregated vulnerability mapping, and insurance products need to be accessible to women who do not hold title to the land they farm. Agricultural feminisation in India has been running for thirty years. The labour contribution is not in dispute. What remains unresolved is whether that contribution will continue to be extracted without recognition or whether it will eventually be met with the land rights, credit access and institutional standing that make farming viable. That choice is a policy choice, not an economic inevitability.

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