



WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

Challenges and the way ahead

A REPORT BY
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*Pre-monsoon rain has come beating down on the field
Under the jasmine tree, the ploughman is working with the drill-plough*

*One field after the other, to which field should I go
I tell you, son, we shall plant jasmine on the bund*

*I shall go to your field and stand there
I ask you, son, when did you do this work*

*I shall go to the field, I shall take a jug for water
Before the bullocks, my ploughman is thirsty*

These couplets were composed and sung by **Jai Sakhale** from Mulshi, Maharashtra. (Recorded as part of the Grindmill Songs project by the People's Archive of Rural India¹, they hint at the tribulations, struggles and the often invisible work of women in agriculture in India)

This report draws from a panel discussion titled 'Women in Agriculture: challenges and the way ahead' organised on 10 July 2019 in New Delhi.

Speakers at the event included:

Jayati Ghosh (Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Jagmati Sangwan (Former General Secretary, All India Women's Democratic Association (AIDWA))

Jaya Mehta (Joshi Adhikari Institute of Social Studies)

Dipa Sinha (Assistant Professor, Ambedkar University of Delhi)

Namita Waikar (Managing Editor, People's Archive of Rural India)

Vikas Rawal (Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Vandana Shiva (Navdanya)

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INTRODUCTION

Women working in agriculture in India are at a disadvantage along several axes. Many do not have land rights, and by extension they do not have access to agricultural infrastructure and services such as formal credit, input subsidies and irrigation. As Jayati Ghosh noted, there is a gender pay gap for agricultural workers partly due to differential tasks undertaken by women, but which also exists even for the same tasks. Cultural factors further constrain women's activities in agriculture, limiting, for example, their participation in large marketplaces and in tasks like ploughing. Existing social protection systems are inadequate to support women farmers through the agricultural crisis now ravaging the country, and these systems are now shrinking further.

73.2%
**OF FEMALE WORKERS
IN RURAL AREAS WORK
IN AGRICULTURE**

These conditions are alarming because most working women in India are employed in agriculture – 73.2% of female workers in rural areas work in agriculture². Farmers' organisations have mobilised women farmers around these issues in the backdrop of the crisis and the suffering it has caused. This panel examined the character, causes and solutions to the agricultural crisis in India, with specific focus on women involved in agriculture.

The report explains the history of the feminisation and defeminisation of Indian agriculture. It delineates the problems faced by women in agriculture, including not only the lack of recognition, land rights and social protection, but also the fact that agriculture, food and nutrition are sought to be delinked in policy, and that newer challenges like digitalisation and financialisation are now on the anvil. The report also outlines suggested solutions for the crisis: re-linking issues to understand agriculture holistically, but organising struggles along specific issues; demanding land rights but also exploring cooperative farming to make agriculture viable for women who tend to be small farmers or landless labourers; and thinking of newer ways to redesign social protection systems that will ensure the welfare of India's food producers.

BACKGROUND

Over the last three decades and until fairly recently, the share of women working in agriculture steadily increased³. This phenomenon was termed as the feminisation of Indian agriculture. The causes for this rise differed across regions and crops. For instance, in Punjab and Haryana this occurred because men had started leaving for work outside villages. In this case, it was not so much that agriculture was absorbing more women, but that the share of the labour of women in agriculture was rising.

This was partly because the agricultural work done by men – like ploughing – was mechanised early on, and the agricultural work done by women – such as harvesting and threshing – was mechanised subsequently⁴. Some tasks, like transplanting, were shared between men and women. When the men moved out, these tasks were taken up by women. In other regions such as in Tamil Nadu, there was a phase of increased absorption of female labour in agriculture.

Vikas Rawal highlighted two trends that stand out in the period of feminisation of agriculture:

- Women continued to be employed predominantly in tasks that were not paid. They were not recognised in the family as being primary agricultural labourers.
- Certain tasks remained out of bounds for women. In South Asia, women in general do not touch the plough. Even as men moved out of agriculture, they continued to plough fields. Certain other tasks were kept away from women for other patriarchal reasons: marketing of produce continues to be almost entirely driven by men. The mandis or markets are dominated by men⁵.

Along with feminisation, greater casualisation of agricultural labour also took place. Both these phenomena are interrelated, as casualisation was an instrument for mobilising women workers, because they were cheaper to hire. Besides, women had the responsibility for household work, so the deployment of this labour had to be flexible. This was why piece rates became pervasive, and why women were employed in tasks paid on piece rates, such as cotton picking.

The National Sample Survey (NSS) of 2011-12 shows that 244 million workers or over 50% of India's workforce is engaged for livelihood in agriculture⁶. There are 156 million men and 88 million women working in agriculture, and agriculture has started to become an unviable source of livelihood for the majority of these workers: so we are in the midst of an agricultural crisis.

There are now indications of a strong decline of the employment of women in agriculture. Some of it is a real decline and some a shift back into unrecognised work.

Over the last ten years or so, and particularly in the last five years, the number of tasks done mainly or exclusively by women have shown a decline in labour absorption due to mechanisation. Two activities in which mechanisation caused the biggest decline in women's agricultural employment are harvesting and weeding. The mechanisation of harvesting took off after straw reapers were introduced into the market in the early 2000s. Although combine harvesters already existed, farmers were reluctant to use them because they did not allow for easy collection of valuable straw. Straw reapers fixed this problem and so combine harvesters were widely adopted. Similarly, sophisticated herbicides are also widely used today.

There are still two operations done manually, considerably by women: transplanting of rice, as the machines to do this are still too expensive; and picking cotton, fruits, vegetables and other produce, because these activities have seen a complete transition to piece rate labour.

These observations are consistent with large scale data. Significantly, there was a seven-year long drought in the availability of data before the results of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) were released⁷. It reveals that out of rural women aged 15-59 years, 24% work in agriculture. However, there are some issues with PLFS questions and implementation. The survey removed questions on special activities, such as collection of firewood and fodder, which are dominantly unpaid activities carried out by women who are then less able to take on paid employment. There are inconsistencies with the way the survey has recorded the "current daily status of work", that is, the work done in the seven days before the survey. More, and better, primary data are required to meaningfully analyse women's work in agriculture in recent years.

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**PROBLEMS FACED
BY WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE**

RECOGNITION, UNPAID WORK AND ACCESS TO INFRASTRUCTURE

One of the biggest challenges women working in agriculture face is that of not being officially recognised as farmers or agricultural workers. Jagmati Sangwan pointed out that even within the official administration, there often is a perception that women cannot be farmers.

The gender pay gap in agriculture is stark. Some of it exists because of task segregation, and some because of the fact that women end up engaging in flexible work due to household responsibilities. Aside from these factors, even when women's work is recognised, it can be unpaid. A large proportion of recognised women workers is defined as unpaid workers in family enterprises. The nature of unpaid work has become more focused on particular types of work, such as care work, collecting firewood, vegetable gardening, and most importantly, collection of water – which by itself has shown a remarkable increase in time. Prevailing drought conditions in many regions mean that even if paid work is available, women do not have the time to avail it, because they have to spend a significant amount of time to collecting water.

The lack of official recognition, along with cultural constraints, deprives women not only of access to government schemes meant for farmers' benefit, but also of institutional credit, access to farming inputs, and market linkages.



LAND RIGHTS

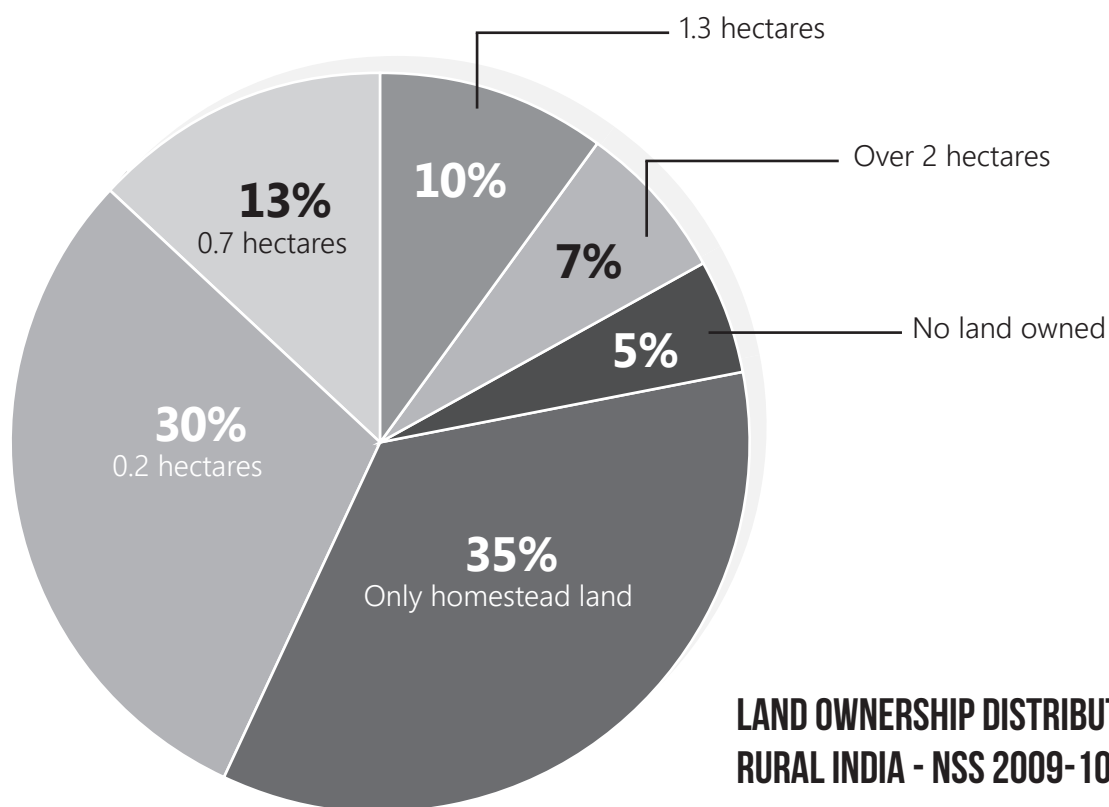
It is common for women farmers to not have official rights over their land. This makes their livelihoods insecure. The issue of land rights has not been addressed in proportion to its importance by either women's movements or labour movements. The 2018 long march from Nashik to Mumbai organised by the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), however, did feature the issue of land titles, mainly raised by women farmers.

Even when women have land titles, they find it difficult to maintain actual control over their land. The 2005 amendment to the Hindu Succession Act gave women equal rights in ancestral property. This amendment has not yet been notified in a few states, and in others, creative ways are used to bypass it⁸. Women who struggle for land rights face violence in response – including witch hunting campaigns and honour killings⁹. The lack of availability of data on gender break up of land rights across the country makes the struggle even more arduous.

LAND AVAILABILITY

Jaya Mehta pointed out that the total land availability itself was not enough to sustain an agricultural population of India's size. The land available for household operational farming has gone down from 125 million hectares in 1991-92, to 94 million hectares in 2012-13. There were 108 million holdings in agriculture in this land, which means the average land per holding is 0.8 hectare.

About 5% households in rural areas do not have any land. 35% have only homestead land. The next 30% households that have land own an average size of 0.2 hectares, and 13% households own 0.7 hectares on average. 10% households have 1.3 hectares. Only 7% households own greater than 2 hectares of land. A minimum of 2 hectares of land is required to be able to optimally use the labour available in the household. This means that 93% of holdings are so small that household labour is not able to be usefully employed in its own farms. There can be no resolution of the agrarian crisis unless we address unavailability and lopsided distribution of land.





DELINKING AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND NUTRITION

Vandana Shiva spoke about how there is an attempt to delink food and agriculture, as if agriculture had nothing to do with feeding the world and everything to do with speculating for profit. Policies are designed to push agriculture towards the production of commodities for biofuel and animal feed instead of food. The sugar belt in India, particularly, is being pushed towards producing biofuel. This pivot will result in a weakening of the agrarian base of the country, and women farmers will be worst hit.

Dipa Sinha added that the linkages between food and nutrition are also being broken. Nutrition is increasingly being medicalised, and as an activity only for scientists and doctors. It is important, even from a purely nutritionist point of view, to reclaim the link. For example, local food should be promoted not just to help farmers but because it is also healthy. Packaged, ultra-processed food is being pushed because food distribution is being taken over by large corporations. This is leading to undernutrition as well as obesity, in addition to both communicable and non-communicable diseases like encephalitis, diabetes and hypertension. Diabetes and hypertension have begun to affect even the poor, as they are linked to eating inadequate and unvaried food.

The link between agriculture, food and nutrition is not recognised even in the way the administration is structured. The government works in silos in this area: the Ministry of Women and Child Development looks at nutrition, and is not linked to the ministries of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs (which houses the Department of Food and Public Distribution).

The issue of delinking these three areas affects women farmers because most small farmers are women, and are mostly engaged in food cultivation. This includes pulses, millets, and rainfed crops. There are attempts to solve malnutrition through packets of processed food¹⁰. Recognising women as farmers, and building infrastructure through this recognition, ensures that we do not see the welfare of food producers as an issue separate from nutrition.

DIGITALISATION AND WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

The newest and possibly the most dangerous challenges to women in agriculture are now digitalisation and financialisation, as Vandana Shiva pointed out. Digitalisation is driving further consolidation in an already concentrated agricultural inputs market. An illustration is the merger of the giants Bayer and Monsanto. The digital platformisation of agricultural markets means that space is now being opened up for large capital and venture-capital backed enterprises to enter this sector in India. Intermediaries like small traders in the agricultural supply chain will quickly be eliminated as digital platforms take over, putting even more livelihoods at risk. Farmers' own data are being sold back to them as a commodity. These developments are taking place even as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGN-REGS) is being progressively starved of funds, leaving women farmers and labour more vulnerable than before.

Zero Budget Farming was proposed as a solution to farmer indebtedness in the Union Budget 2019-20¹¹. The panellists believed that this label was being floated in order to confuse and not make clear choices in agricultural funding. The involvement of actors such as BNP Paribas and the Walmart Foundation in some state-level zero budget programmes is also of concern¹². Public Distribution System (PDS) subsidies are sought to be replaced by digitalisation of delivery, the state is withdrawing from its responsibilities of ensuring the physical production, movement and distribution of basic food items. Zero budget does not imply zero cost, and at the moment it is an ill-defined term that does not hold much promise.

Agriculture is also sought to be financialised in another way – by opening up commodity trading. This will delink food and agriculture even further, as production will be affected by speculation made by those immunised from the consequences of production¹³. This is a method of conducting farming without farmers.

INTERMEDIARIES LIKE SMALL TRADERS IN THE AGRICULTURAL SUPPLY CHAIN WILL QUICKLY BE ELIMINATED AS DIGITAL PLATFORMS TAKE OVER, PUTTING EVEN MORE LIVELIHOODS AT RISK.

SOLUTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Farmers' movements like the Tebhaga movement, a peasant agitation organised in 1946-47 in Bengal, to reduce the share paid by sharecroppers to landlords, show that when struggles are related to food, women are at the forefront. The centrality of women's movements to any solution to women farmers' issues is evident. The panellists recommended solutions at the levels of economic policy, social policy and strategies for movements.

COOPERATIVE FARMING

Movements for land titles are not sufficient by themselves to solve the problem of land availability. A lot of women farmers are net buyers of food, and so if the popular demand of proper prices for food is agreed to without the PDS being fixed, they will be worse off.

If there is not sufficient land available, how do we visualise a large population being engaged in agriculture for their livelihood? Jaya Mehta suggested that, since 93% households have 53% of land, collectives should be formed to pool labour and land. A further step is coordination between labour collectives and cooperatives of marginal and small farmers. The design of the cooperatives is crucial: in cooperatives with unequal partners, powerful partners tend to take over, and so a basic principle on which these cooperatives have to be formed is equal partnership. State support will be required as input and output linkages such as seeds, fertilisers, storage, transportation and marketing have to be reserved for this cooperative collective sector of agricultural labour and small and marginal farmers. Currently, all linkages are dominated by domestic corporates and Multinational Corporations (MNCs).

To be viable, cooperativisation has to be a nationwide movement. It had to expand its domain of production and participation, and flow out of ag-

riculture to transform the entire production structure in the economy.

The economist Bina Agarwal has referred to women as disinherited peasants and disadvantaged workers¹⁴. Because of women's unenviable circumstances as peasants, they are more amenable to collective work. Villages from which men have migrated out, and have left farming to women, with land in their possession, are villages where cooperatives and collectives can be initiated.

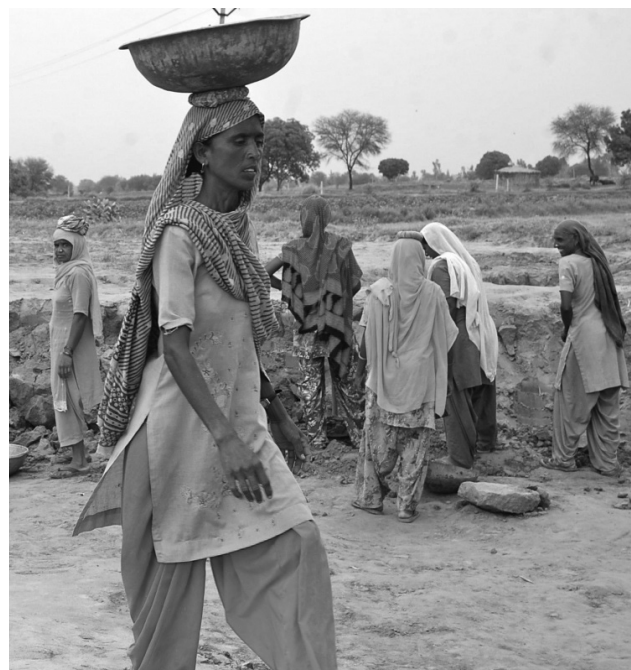
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One example of where women's collectives have taken off is the Kudumbashree mission in Kerala. Because of outward migration, increase in agricultural wages, a high level of education and other social facilities, land as a productive factor is not very popular in Kerala. A lot of land was held as real estate, and a lot of land was also fallow. In 1998, Kudumbashree was in-

augurated, having been planned along with the introduction of women's self-help groups in the rest of the country. It began with thrift, savings, and income generating activities. Neighbourhood groups of Kudumbashree had close coordination with local self-government, and started working on social and planning activities. The women of Kudumbashree belonged to landless families or families with small amounts of land. They pooled land, leased it collectively, and engaged in col-

lective farming. The initiative had state support and today 320,000 women are organised into 59,478 collectives and farm upto 43,375 hectares across 14 districts in Kerala¹⁵. The inputs and marketing for the farmers are taken care of by the Kudumbashree mission.

One important effect Kudumbashree has had is that it has changed its members' attitudes and given them the confidence to handle contingencies collectively. While conditions are not similar in other states, and their solutions will have to take this into account, the example shows that disadvantaged women can become the vanguard for the cooperative and collective movement in the country.



LINKING ISSUES

It is imperative for movements to re-connect the issues of agriculture, food and nutrition. The right to food should be seen as the right to food and nutrition; Dipa Sinha explained, for example, how the Right to Food campaign was attempting to frame demands around the PDS more creatively, even considering a decentralised PDS. Redesigning PDS for local first use would change the Food Corporation of India's procurement operations as well as provide choice in the PDS basket of entitlements. Such a change would have to be undertaken slowly and carefully, as many states are food deficit.

Similarly, school mid-day meal schemes can include more creative menus using locally procured ingredients. The scheme can be linked to women's livelihoods. For example, Brazil's Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) programme had a rule that 30%

of what went into school meals had to be procured from within a 5 km radius. This requirement created a lot of local infrastructure such as cold storages because there was a market, which was the local child care centre¹⁶. This linked the issues of family farm viability and hunger, while making strides in solving both.

The struggle for land rights as well has to include land rights beyond inheritance. Control over common property resources has to be fought for, such as through the Forest Rights Act. Women who work in sectors allied to agriculture, such as fisheries, will have other customary rights issues that are not tied to land, and that should be raised through movements.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection for women in agriculture includes schools, healthcare and pensions. The existence of these systems is crucial for women who are not recognised as workers. The draft 2018 Social Security Code released by the Labour Ministry is worker-centric and contains provisions on contributory pensions, health insurance etc., but a worker is defined so narrowly that women workers get left out. Investments are needed in different kinds of social protection for women in agriculture:

Nutrition: Undernutrition is a persistent issue among women farmers, due to hard work and drudgery. Economists note that investing in women's nutrition has a life cycle effect: it prevents undernourishment of children. The demand for the existence and betterment of universal public services should, therefore, unite labour movements and women's groups. To this end, the framing of yield-per-acre can also be changed to nutrition-per-acre.

Child care: Currently, child care is the responsibility only of women. The recent case of children dying of encephalitis in Bihar in June 2019 is an example of the linkages between agriculture and nutrition: as children were going to bed hungry and then accompanying their mothers on litchi picking work – which is piece rate work – their conditions worsened due to the effect of litchis on low blood sugar. Child care ought to be a community and state responsibility, and should be demanded as such.

These investments are expensive and not zero budget, but they provide very high returns. The withdrawal of social protection investments has been a big challenge for rural women, accompanied as it has been by privatisation, the insurance model in welfare, and cash transfers replacing subsidies in kind.



ISSUE-BASED STRUGGLES

Jayati Ghosh pointed out that movements would have to be built around specific issues. This does not mean neglecting the interrelations among all issues in agriculture. This method would create the largest number of allies. Namita Waikar talked about the demands raised by women in the marches in Maharashtra and Delhi that included recognition and land titles. It is important to continue highlighting women's issues in the broader farmers' movements.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONTINUE HIGHLIGHTING WOMEN'S ISSUES IN THE BROADER FARMERS' MOVEMENTS.

Jagmati Sangwan spoke about how women farmers need organisation and consciousness, and when making contentious demands like land rights provokes violent retaliation, consciousness can be built through organising women around other related issues. Women's economic independence also helps when they struggle against repression.

Agrarian distress is likely to worsen with newer challenges as well as with the intensification of older challenges. Women, already at a disadvantage, will face the brunt of this distress unless large-scale policy changes are implemented. Women's and labour movements need to think creatively about framing issues, mobilising together, and making demands such that the linkages between agriculture, food, nutrition and work are leveraged instead of being broken.

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The report, drawing from a panel discussion organised on 10 July 2019, assessed the challenges faced by women in agriculture in India. After seeing a long period of feminisation, Indian agriculture is now in a phase of defeminisation. It is also staring at an unprecedented agrarian crisis, one that is hurting women farmers and agricultural workers the hardest.

The following challenges of women in agriculture are outlined: the lack of official recognition as farmers or workers and related issues such as the inability to access credit, government schemes and market linkages; the absence of formal land rights for women; the fact that enough land is not available to make farming viable for all farmers including women farmers; the conscious delinking of agriculture, food and nutrition that treats welfare as separate from production; and the emerging challenges of digitalisation and financialisation of agriculture.

The solutions proposed in the panel are explained in the report: creating land and labour cooperatives of small and marginal farmers and reserving input and output linkages for this sector; re-connecting the issues of agriculture, food and nutrition to think of creatively redesigning and expanding social protection schemes; and waging specific issue-based struggles related to women's problems in agriculture, to create broad coalitions of actors.