



## Role of Rural Women Farmers in Economic Development in India

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7750401>

### Introduction

Women are the backbone of any developed society. The central role of women in any society ensures stability, progress, and long-term development of a nation. Rural women farmers play an important role on the economic development of India because 73.2% of rural women workers are farmers. Women farmers perform most of the big farming jobs. These women farmers in the rural area do work on land but they legally don't own the land. The women in rural areas have multiple responsibilities like doing household chores, then taking care of their children and then also taking care of the land that is owned by their husband, father, father-in-law, or any male relatives. In developing countries like India, the agricultural sector contributes to employ & absorb the female workforce but most of the times fails to give them the proper recognition of an employee or hired labour because in the agricultural sector, primary focus is given to only one gender. Male is the dominant decision maker of this industry and the benefit seeker of the policies. The agricultural sector as a whole has developed and emerged immensely by empowering men with technology. But this emergence is incapable of lifting the status of women labour as an integral part of the industry. In a developing country like India, agriculture contributes 13.5% to the GDP of the economy. It provides 55% employment in the country, out of which a good number of the workforce is shared by women. The role of women in the agricultural sector can't be ignored as they consist of 33% agricultural labour force and 48% self-employed farmers. Rural women often manage complex households & pursue multiple livelihood strategies. Their activities typically include producing agricultural crops, tending animals, processing and preparing food, working for wages in agricultural or other rural enterprises, collecting fuel and water, engaging in trade and marketing. Many of these activities are not defined as "economically active employment" in national accounts but they are essential to the wellbeing of rural households.

### Women in agricultural production

In rural India, the percentage of women who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is as high as 84%. Women make up about 33% of cultivators and about 47% percent of agricultural laborers. These statistics do not account for work in livestock, fisheries and various other ancillary forms of food production in the



country. In 2009, 94% of the female agricultural labour force in crop cultivation were in cereal production, while 1.4% worked in vegetable production, and 3.72% were engaged in fruits, nuts, beverages, and spice crops. Women's participation rate in the agricultural sectors is about 47% in tea plantations, 46.84% in cotton cultivation, 45.43% growing oil seeds and 39.13% in vegetable production. While these crops require labour- intensive work, the work is considered quite unskilled. Women also heavily participate in ancillary agricultural activities. According to the **Food and Agriculture Organization**, Indian women represented a share of 21% and 24% of all fishers and fish farmers, respectively.

### Women in agricultural production

**Women as livestock keepers:** The women are playing a very worthy role in managing the livestock diversity from many centuries because they are saddled with the task of taking care of their families' livelihoods while men are absent and looking for wage labour in the cities. Apart from this, women always try to make an active and conscious contribution to the management of animal genetic resources. Women select animals that are friendly, easy to handle and worry-free. They prefer such animals over those that may have high production potential, but require more time, attention and inputs. An estimated two-thirds of poor livestock keepers, totalling approximately 400 million people, are women (Thornton et al, 2002). They share responsibility with men and children for the care of animals, and particular species and types of activity are more associated with women than men. For

example, women often have a prominent role in managing poultry (FAO 1998; Gueye 2000; Tung 2005) and dairy animals (Okali and Mims 1998; Tangka, Jabbar and Shapiro, 2000) and in caring for other animals that are housed and fed within the homestead. When tasks are divided, men are more likely to be involved in constructing housing and



herding of grazing animals, & in marketing of products if women's mobility is constrained. The influence of women is strong in the use of eggs, milk & poultry meat for home consumption and they often have control over marketing and the income from these products. Perhaps for this reason poultry and small-scale dairy projects have been popular investments for development projects aiming to improve the lot of rural women. In some countries small-scale pig production is also dominated by women. Female-headed households are as successful as male-headed households in generating income from their animals, although they tend to own smaller numbers of animals, probably because of labour constraints. Ownership of livestock is particularly attractive to women in societies where access to land is restricted to men (Bravo-Baumann 2000)

### **Women as livestock keepers**

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**Women in fisheries and aquaculture:** In 2008, nearly 45 million people world-wide were directly engaged, full-time or part-time, in the fishery primary sector (FAO fishery database). In addition, about 135 million people are estimated to be employed in the secondary sector, including post-harvest activities. While comprehensive data are not available on a sex-disaggregated basis, case studies suggest that women may comprise up to 30 percent of the total employment in fisheries, including primary and that in 2008, 5.4 million women worked as fishers and fish farmers in the primary sector. Women have rarely engaged in the commercial offshore and long -distance capture fisheries because of the vigorous work involved but also because of women's domestic responsibilities and social norms. Women are more commonly occupied in substance and commercial fishing from small boats and canoes in coastal or inland waters. Women also contribute as entrepreneurs and provide labour



before, during and after the catch in both artisanal and commercial fisheries. For example, in West Africa, the so called “Fish Mamas” play a major role. They usually own capital and are directly and vigorously involved in the coordination of the fisheries chain, from production to sale of fish. This represents 12% of the total. In two major producing countries, **China and India, women represented a share of 21% and 24%,** respectively of all fishers and fish farmers.



### **Women in fisheries and aquaculture**

**Women Farmers in Modern Contract Farming:** The emergence of modern supply chains is profoundly changing the way food and high-value agricultural products are produced and traded in developing countries, with important effects for rural women. While export-oriented value chains offer important employment opportunities for women female farmers are largely excluded from contracting with agro-industrial firms for the delivery of high-value produce. Women comprise less than 10 percent of the farmers involved in smallholder contract-farming schemes in the Kenyan fresh fruit and vegetable export sector (Dolan, 2001). Eaton and Shepherd (2001) find that in large contract-farming schemes involving many thousands of farmers in China, contracts were exclusively with men. In the French bean export sector in Senegal, only 1 out of the 59 contracted farmers is a woman. The exporting companies confirm that they strongly prefer contracting with men because women lack secure access to productive resources and so cannot guarantee delivery of a reliable flow of produce. For example, women lack statutory rights over land and have less authority over family labour compared to their husband and male siblings. High-value contract-farming has direct implications for the allocation of productive resources within the household. It has been argued that contract-farming with the modern agroindustry – and the exclusion of women from contracts – could give rise to intra-household conflicts over the allocation of land and labour resources between contract requirements and women’s priorities with regard to food production (Sing, 2003). High-value contract-farming might result in decreased access to resources for female farmers concerned with substance food production, and ultimately lead to the deterioration of the food security situation of rural women and children (Bravo-Baumann, 2000). Convincing quantitative evidence on this issue is lacking. While



men control the contracts as contracting party – the majority of the farm work done on contracted plots is performed by women as family labourers and necessarily reduces labour for food production. For example, Porter and Philips-Horward (1997) observe that in 70 percent of the cases of sugar contract-farming in South Africa the principal farmer working all year round on the sugar cane plots is a woman. Sing (2002) reports that women work longer hours than men in vegetable contract-farming schemes controlled by male farmers in the Indian Punjab. Eaton and Shepherd (2001) observe that in a large contract-farming scheme involving thousands of farmers in China women – while being completely excluded from signing contracts themselves – perform the bulk of the work related to contract farming. Dolan (2001) argues that specifically the growth of high-value horticulture supply chains has been detrimental for rural women in Kenya because land and labour resources that were traditionally used by women to cultivate vegetables for home consumption and sale in local markets have been appropriated by men for export vegetable production under contract. Others do not find conflicts over productive resources between high value contract production controlled by men and basic food production by women, or that this reallocation of resources – especially female labour – leads to adverse food security effects and deteriorated child nutrition. On the contrary, Minten, Randrianarison and Swinnen (2009), although not explicitly addressing gender issues, find that high-value vegetable contract-farming in Madagascar leads to improved productivity for food (rice) production through technology spillovers, thereby improving the availability of food in the household and shortening the lean period or “hunger season”. Analysis of the French bean export sector in Senegal also suggests that gender conflict over land and labour resources is quite limited. Beans are exported from Senegal only during the off-season (from November till April) and households only allocate part of their land and labour resources to contracted bean production and only during a confined period which does not coincide with the main “rainy” agricultural season when staple food crops and other subsistence crops are cultivated.

**Participation and Role of Rural Women in Decision Making Related to Farm Activities: A Study in Burdwan District of West Bengal:** The study for this paper was conducted in Katwa block-1 of Burdwan district in West Bengal. In this region women plays a very important role in both farming and decision making in term labour contribution. Usually, rice is cultivated by the farmers followed by potato, jute, vegetables and mustard. A total sample of 200 were picked up in which there were 100 men and 100 women from 4 villages which have higher concentration of women working in the agricultural sector. Respondents were classified based on caste in Forward caste, Other Backward Caste (OBC), Schedule Caste (SC), Schedule Tribes (ST), and Minority. Respondents with



their unmarried children were considered as nuclear families and respondents with their married children living together was considered as joint families. The age of respondents was studied at three levels i.e., 20-35 yrs., 35-50 yrs., and >50 yrs. While the education level was distributed as illiterate, primary level and middle level or above. A stratified random sampling technique was used for this purpose. In order to quantify the extent of farmer's role in decision making in various areas, they were asked to mention their degree of involvement in decision making and responses were considered on five-point scales. The decision scores were worked out separately for production decisions.

Decision	Score
No Involvement (NI)	0
Opinion was sought (OS)	1
Opinion was considered (OC)	2
Joint Decision (JD)	3
Independent Decision (ID)	4

In this paper the sample have been analysed and calculated using some econometrics tests. The classification of sample households based on family type shows that among the women households, 67% belonged to nuclear families and 33% belonged to the joint families. On the other hand, among the man households, 77% belonged to the nuclear families & 23% from joint families. Similar pattern was also observed in NABARD model 3 where nuclear families appeared in largest proportion (72%). And because it is difficult to maintain a large family with meager income so a joint family would be an added burden. And it was also observed that there was no significant difference between women and men respondents in relation to their farming activities. 70% of the women respondents belonged to the SC or ST (Hindu) and 28% from OBC (Hindu). So, we can say that most of the women respondents were from Hindu SC and ST. 64% of the men respondents belonged to the Hindu SC or ST and 25% belonged to the OBC (Hindu). So, we can also analyse that most of the respondents were from Hindu SC and ST. So, from the above given data we can say that most of the respondents involved in agricultural activities are from Hindu SC, ST or OBC. Also, we can observe from the data that almost no Muslim women participate in agricultural activities. And the poor Muslim men work as an agricultural wage labourer.

**Table: Distribution of respondents according to their demographic characteristic**

Characteristics	Category	Respondents	
		Women	Men
Age (Years)	Young (20 – 35 yrs.)	57 (57)	62 (62)
	Middle (36 – 50 yrs.)	40 (40)	33 (33)
	Old (above 50 yrs.)	3(3)	5 (5)
	Mean ( $\pm$ S.E.)	31.7 ( $\pm$ 0.9)	30.2 ( $\pm$ 0.9)
Family size	Nuclear family	67 (67)	77 (77)
	Joint family	33 (33)	23 (23)
Castes	Forward caste (Hindu)	1 (1)	4 (4)
	Forward caste (Muslim)	0 (0)	2 (2)
	OBC (Hindu)	28 (28)	25 (25)
	OBC (Muslim)	1 (1)	5 (5)
	SC & ST (Hindu)	70 (70)	64 (64)
Education	Illiterate	35 (35)	28 (28)
	Functionally literate	30 (30)	15 (15)
	Primary	20 (20)	24 (24)
	Middle	10 (10)	19 (19)
	High school	5 (5)	10 (10)
	College	–	4 (4)

We can also observe that 56% of the women and 72% of the men respondents were literate. And all of the literate respondents participated in farming activities. The women respondents were engaged in various occupations such as agriculture, agriculture labour, agriculture and agriculture labour, agriculture and others, and others. 38% of the responding women were agricultural labours and then 30% were in agriculture and others activities. Therefore, there were significant differences among the responding woman in relation to their occupation ( $\chi^2 = 19.36$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ); and it may indicate that women enter to labour force for want of money. It was also observed that 20% of the responding women had no rights in decision making in the area of farm production. Most of the times rural women had to take joint decisions. Only 13.18% of the time the respondent took the decision independently. Among the responding women, decision score was highest in crop and variety to be sown (2.6), followed by sale of farm products (2.3) and savings (2.1); and there were no significant variations among the decision-making areas ( $F=0.00$ ;  $df = 10, 54$ ;  $P > 1.000$ ). So, we can analyse from this that women are mainly involved in small agricultural decisions as they only decided which crop needs to be sown, then followed by sale of farm product and at last saving whereas men made all the main decision like area of land preparation and sale of farm product and they also used to make the decision of buying farm machineries and fertilizers. So, we can analyse from here that the decision-making power was more in the hand of rural men instead of rural women. From this study we can see that in rural families, type and size of the family, caste, size of land holding, socio-



economic status of the families, education level of rural women has significant influences on the involvement in decision making regarding agricultural activities.

**Table: Participation of rural respondents (percentage) in decision making process in relation to farm production**

Decision making areas	Decision making by woman respondents						Decision making by man respondents					
	NI	OS	OC	JD	ID	Score	NI	OS	OC	JD	ID	Score
Plot selection	10	15	25	35	15	1.9	0	5	20	35	40	3.1
Crop & variety to be sown	5	10	25	40	20	2.6	5	10	25	40	20	2.6
Land preparation	20	15	35	15	15	1.9	0	5	15	25	55	3.3
Fertilizer application	30	10	15	35	10	1.9	0	5	15	35	45	3.2
Pesticide application	30	10	15	35	10	1.9	0	10	20	30	40	3.0
Labour hiring	15	15	20	35	15	2.2	5	10	15	25	45	3.0
Harvesting	20	15	25	30	10	2.0	0	10	15	45	30	3.0
Sale of farm produce	15	10	20	40	15	2.3	0	5	10	35	50	3.3
Purchase and sale of farm machinery	25	10	20	30	15	2.0	0	5	15	35	45	3.2
Purchase & sale of land	30	10	20	30	10	1.8	0	10	20	30	40	3.0
Saving	20	15	15	40	10	2.1	5	15	20	30	30	2.7
Mean	20.00	12.27	21.36	33.18	13.18	2.10	1.36	8.18	17.27	33.18	40.00	3.00
± S.E.	± 2.52	± 0.79	± 1.79	± 2.16	± 1.02	± 0.10	± 0.71	± 1.02	± 1.24	± 1.82	± 3.02	± 0.10

NI: No Involvement, JD: Joint decision, OS: Opinion sought, ID: Independent decision, OC: Opinion considered

**Table: Relationship of personal, socio-economic characteristics of respondents with extent of participation in decision making**

Sl. No.	Characteristics	Category	Woman respondents	Man respondents	Correlation coefficient (r)
1	Age	Young	1.2	1.8	0.9947*
		Middle	2.1	3.2	
		Old	3.0	3.9	
2	Family size	Nuclear	2.7	3.8	1.000*
		Joint	1.5	2.2	
3	Education	Illiterate	1.2	1.9	0.9000*
		Functionally literate	1.8	2.5	
		Primary	2.1	3.1	
		Middle	2.4	3.1	
		High school	3	3.4	
4	Caste	College		3.9	0.9871*
		Forward caste (Hindu)	3.5	4.2	
		Forward caste (Muslim)	1.5	3.8	
		OBC (Hindu)	2.9	3.0	
		OBC (Muslim)	1.0	2.0	
		SC & ST (Hindu)	1.5	1.9	

\*Significant



The purpose of this paper is to identify the participation of rural women in decision making in agricultural sector. In this paper we have analysed the participation based on the caste, the family size, the literacy of the women and the socio-economic status of the family. So, we can say that women in the rural society do a lot of hard work and are involved in agricultural activities but they are not involved in the major decision in an agricultural sector.

### Women Participation in Agriculture

#### Conclusion

Rural women are major stakeholders in growth and development of agricultural sector for the New India. Acknowledging and mainstreaming of rural women via ensured access to resources, technology, education, health facilities,

ownership rights and skill development will improve agriculture productivity and help in building an empowered nation. But the role of women farmer in the rural society is to do farming as a household chore for which they don't even get remunerated. It is dubbed by the society as responsibility towards her family. It is because of these social hurdle or taboos that a rural women farmers' work is not accounted as a work. It is not accounted because it is a household chore for her. If the Rural Women have the right in decision making and her part in agricultural activities is not included in household chore then the role of rural women farmer on the economic development of India would be way more visible.

