

How to Empower Women Farmers to Unlock Agri Economy

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THE SETTING:

In Zaheerabad, Telangana, Misbah's story is nothing short of inspiring. A farmer by profession and a tractor-driving instructor. After getting married, she convinced her husband to move to Zaheerabad, where she joined a tractor-driving programme. Among 80 men in the programme, she was the only woman.

Reflecting on her experience, Misbah said, *"My classmates were curious and teased me about my plans after the training. But with my husband's support I persisted, moving from student to trainer over time."*

Her journey encouraged 40 other women to join the programme. Misbah found fulfilment in knowing that her courage not only allowed her to learn a skill typically associated with men but also inspired others. She realised the immense influence women like her could have in rural communities. *"This realisation fuelled my belief that women can achieve anything they set their minds to."*

In India's rural villages, many women are often overlooked when it comes to securing a plausible income from their family's farmlands. This is in spite of being actively involved in farming. They are the unsung heroes of India's agri economy, carrying a great part of that burden of their

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families' farmlands, as their spouses are compelled to move to urban centres in the quest to improve their family's economic situation.

As one of the country's most important sectors, agriculture has witnessed remarkable growth over the past decade, contributing around 20% to the country's GDP. It provides employment to over 45% of the country's workforce, with women making up nearly half of that workforce. Having said that nearly 80% of India's employed women are engaged in agriculture.

In addition to augmenting household incomes, these women are also tasked with fulfilling primary responsibilities,

like managing their family meals, household chores and caring for their children and the elderly.

Despite their pivotal role, prevalence of gender stereotypes, social restrictions and traditional role expectations, hamper women's access to knowledge and technology in farming, resulting in low productivity. According to the PLFS 2021-2022, the literacy rate of rural women of age 7 years and above is at 68.9% compared to rural men at 83.5% and urban women at 84%. According to the Agricultural Wages in India (AWI) report of May 2020, it is also alarming that in spite of increasing participation of women in farming, the wage gap between men and women is not on par.

Regardless of these challenges, women farmers are a source of immense inspiration as they serve the nation with a spark in their spirit.

Given this, what actions can policymakers take to greatly encourage women in farming, while establishing the country as the global hub for food? Especially in the context of the government support for agriculture as well as emerging agricultural technologies. What could the next set of reforms be, to take forward the already established momentum of feminisation of agriculture?

Evolving women self-help groups (SHGs), into Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs)

'Sabka saath sabka vikas' through women SHGs can attain various objectives, including empowerment women by nurturing their knowledge and skills. SHGs can help strengthen their physical and emotional resilience, including that of their families, through education, nutrition and inculcating birth control measures. The government's 'Sabka Saath' initiative is laudable. 84 lakh SHGs with 9 crore women have been integrated into the transformation of the socio-economic fabric of our country. From there on, transforming these women-led SHGs, into women-led FPOs (Farmers Producer Organisation), could go a long way in further creating 'lakhpati didis'. They can collectively guide participants on crop choice, access to microfinance and effective product marketing, gradually morphing into micro-enterprises producing packaged foods, for better earnings, while driving positive change in the lives of rural women. The government's emphasis on agriculture, commitment to modernising storage, supply chains, and branding in the farm sector aligns

with this approach, driving value addition and income enhancement through farming, benefiting both farmers and consumers.

Programmes providing access to critical farm equipment

A lot more women are interested in operating their equipment. Government initiatives like SMAM signify a step in the right direction. Under this central governments scheme, farmers are provided with the benefit of subsidies ranging from 50-80% for buying agricultural machinery, with priority given to women farmers. With implementation in all states, it is important for the government to ensure greater access to affordable finance to acquire this farm equipment while establishing custom hiring centres to sample them. Having said that, India also needs to look at farm mechanisation beyond tractors, for affordable solutions catering to varied types of crops, across the lifecycle of the crop. e.g. Better penetration of Rice Transplanting technology can drastically reduce drudgery, over backbreaking manual transplanting, often seen in paddy states like Orissa, Telangana and Tamil Nadu. State governments too can play a role here.

Develop and drive solutions for women, by women

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) contributes to food security through its research. They provide the much-needed support to adopt technology on farms, drive rural innovation, improve farming practices, promote climate-resilient and sustainable farming, while also supporting agri-tech startups. ICAR's network of 113 institutes and 74 agricultural universities across India, makes them one of the largest national agricultural systems globally.

However, more needs to be done to ensure that these centres work towards enrolling more women and fast-track the development of women-friendly farming solutions, with a tailored approach, to impart the required education and sensitivities related to women in farming. Integration of new-age technologies like AI, ML, IoT and app-based solutions too, can help mark a transformative shift for women in farming.

The private sector too can play a major role in delivering affordable and accessible farm solutions developed for women farmers. Innovations are needed among rural women, to feel inclusive, contributing further to agriculture and the Prime Minister's vision of a 'Viksit Bharat'.

In conclusion, India ought to focus on developing core competencies around gender issues in agriculture and more so rural India, with inclusion of the women perspective as an integrated component in policy and research. Progress and growth of women in farming must be closely linked to overall development goals of the country, besides enhancing India's reputation, as it becomes the breadbasket of the world.

