

Rural Women: Key to New India's Agrarian Revolution

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Rural women are torchbearers for social, economic and environment transformation for the 'New India'. In India, Agriculture employs about 80 percent of rural women. Empowering and mainstreaming rural women workforce in agriculture can bring paradigm shift towards economic growth. It will enhance food and nutrition security and alleviate poverty and hunger. It's a win-win strategy for achieving Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

India is celebrating and commemorating the progressive 75 years of India after independence with 'Azaadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' and promulgating mission of warranting women as "Empowered women-Empowered Nation". India is an agrarian economy with about 54.6 percent of total workforce engaged in agricultural and allied sector activities (Census 2011). Women are extensively engaged in the activities pertaining to agriculture and allied sector. The workforce participation rate for rural females is significantly higher at 41.8 percent against urban women participation rate of 35.31 percent (MoSPI, 2017).

In India, reforms are underlined for holistic development of women, enabling socio-economic and health security. Since Independence, several government flagship schemes and programmes are initiated to improve rural women stature in society by creating livelihood opportunities and engagements in paid employments. Various schemes, such as the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Program (PMEGP), National Livelihoods Mission, Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana

(PMMVY), etc. has made significant contributions in creating gender parity and socio-economic empowerment of women in India.

Now, rural women have availing access to education, productive resources, capacity building, skill development, healthcare facilities and diversified livelihood opportunities through government beneficiary schemes.

Rural Women Workforce in Agriculture Sector

In rural communities, agriculture and allied sector is the primary source of livelihood that includes 80 percent of all economically active women, out of which 33 percent constitute agricultural labour force and 48 percent are self-employed farmers. Rural women are engaged at all levels of agricultural value chain; i.e., production- pre-harvest, post-harvest processing, packaging, marketing to increase productivity in agriculture. 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. They are the momentous demographic group for sustainable food system (FAO, 2011). It is projected that women-oriented reforms, ensuring equal access to resources, skill development and opportunities



in agriculture would increase agricultural output in developing countries between 2.5 and 4 percent (FAO,2011).

In recent announcement under AatmaNirbhar Bharat, earmarking funds were allocated to mainstream the women engaged in agriculture development and equal provision of rural services.

Gender Mainstreaming in Agriculture

As per the Prime Minister's vision of AatmaNirbhar Bharat, the Government of India has prioritised agenda of 'Gender Mainstreaming in Agriculture' to provide access to resources/schemes to rural women engaged in agriculture and allied sector. Special beneficiary-oriented schemes are laid by Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare to mainstream the participation of rural women. These special schemes provide for States and other implementing agencies to incur at least 30 percent expenditure on women farmer.

For skill development and capacity building amongst women farmer, various skill-training are being imparted under schemes of Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and Ministry of Rural Development. These include Support to State Extension Programmes for Extension Reforms (ATMA Scheme) under Sub-Mission on Agriculture Extension (SMAE). Skill training courses in agriculture and allied areas (of minimum 200 hours duration) are also being conducted for women farmers through National Training Institutes, State Agricultural Management and Extension Training (SAMETIs), Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and State Agricultural Universities (SAUs), across the country (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2021).

With increased feminisation and pro-women initiatives, the percentage of female operational holdings in the country has increased from 12.78 percent during 2010-11 to 13.78 percent during 2015-16 (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2019). Several farm women's food security groups, undertaking macro/micro level studies in critical thrust area related to women in agriculture, delivery of Gender Sensitisation Module on Gender Learning through training programmes at National/Region/State Level, compilation and documentation of gender friendly tools/technologies, Farm Women Friendly Handbook and compilation of best practices/success stories of the women farmers, etc are

undertaken by Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2021).

Empowering Women Farmers: Skill and Capacity Building

Several Inter-ministerial initiatives of Government of India have helped women farmers in receiving access to resources to enhance their livelihood, social and economic gains. The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and Ministry of Rural Development through various schemes have encouraged participation of rural women farmer.

The Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) scheme was launched by Ministry of Rural Development to impart skill development and capacity building programmes for rural women. This scheme was introduced as a sub component of DAY-NRLM (Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana — National Rural Livelihoods Mission) and implemented through State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM) across India. Under DAY-NRLM scheme, trainings on use of latest agriculture, allied techniques, agro-ecological best practices are being imparted to women farmers through the community resource persons and extension agencies. Specific women farmer training programmes on topics like household food security by kitchen gardening and nutrition gardening; design and development of low/minimum cost diet; designing and development for high nutrient efficiency diet; Processing and cooking; Gender mainstreaming through SHGs; Storage loss minimisation techniques; Value addition; Women empowerment; Location specific drudgery reduction technologies; Rural Crafts; and Women and child care are organised through extension bodies (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, 2021). These training programmes have opened avenues for new livelihood opportunities for rural women.

Parallel research projects on introduction of new interventions in streamlining women engagement in farming sector, technology testing and refinement, gender sensitive extension approaches, and reduction etc. are led by ICAR-Central Institute for Women in Agriculture, Bhuvneshwar for enhancing participation of women in agriculture.

Over the years, rural women participation in training sessions has been increased to many

folds. Also, gender-specific interventions and its adoption are encouraged through these trainings and awareness camps. About 58,295 Krishi Sakhi were trained by 735 State Level Resource Persons under Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) and 1.23 lakh women farmers participated in special women farming training conducted by KVK (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, 2021a).

Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) implemented by Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship provides several short duration skill training programmes viz. Short-Term Training (STT) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), etc. for rural youth and women to earn their livelihood. Government schemes viz. The Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) is a placement linked skill development program for wage employment for rural youth.

Also, Farmers Producer organisation (FPO) and women self-help groups (SHG's) played significant role in dissemination of these programmes amongst rural women. The Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK) developed by Ministry of Women and Child Development has empowered rural women through community participation and raising awareness on girl education, maternal care and health etc.

Biotech-Krishi Innovation Science Application Network (Biotech-KISAN) Programme was initiated by The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) provide scientific solutions to farmers in north east region to link available innovative agriculture technologies to the farm with the small and marginal farmers, especially women farmers of the region (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2021).

Reforms for Social Empowerment: Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas

The participation of rural women in workforce can be encouraged by providing safety, security, good health, education, skill development and equal rights. Prime step for empowering women is conservation of sex ratio percentage in the population and preventing female-infanticides in the country. In this pursuance, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme has provided a significant mass-mobilisation drive towards elimination of gender discrimination and improved sex ratio at birth. Girls' rights and opportunities for higher education were

promoted under Sukanya Samridhi Yojana. Various schemes/programmes for holistic empowerment of women and development of children viz. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), Scheme for Adolescent Girls, Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra scheme, National Creche Scheme, Rastriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), Swadhar Greh, UJJAWALA scheme, Schemes of One Stop Centre (OSC), Women Helpline (WH) and Gender Budgeting Scheme are implemented by the Ministry of Women and Child Development across the country. These schemes are now integrated into new umbrella scheme as "Mission Shakti" (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021). Schemes implementation strategy under Mission Shakti will include components such as National, State and District level Hubs for Empowerment of Women, Women Help Lines, One Stop Centres, Sakhi Niwas or Working Women Hostels, Shakti Sadans or homes for destitute and troubled women, crèches, etc.

Initiatives like Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), Swachh Vidyalaya Abhiyan, setting of toilet under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, etc. are building confidence amongst rural women. Thirty-three percent reservations for participation in politics is the key reform for political women empowerment and facilitate them to emerge as great leaders. Today, local women occupy as much as 43 percent of the seats at village and district levels.

Financial Empowerment

India has taken a significant initiative in extending banking outreach to rural areas. The financial inclusion and accessibility to banking through Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has boosted confidence and prospects of rural women participation in economic activities. Jan Dhan campaign has ensured access to financial services, viz, banking/ savings and deposit accounts, remittance, credit, insurance, pension in an affordable manner to rural women. These financial accessibility measures have ensured transparent mode of transaction and timely access to financial services through direct benefits transfer (DBT) facility provided under various Government of India schemes. Over 7 years of the implementation of this scheme, 43.04 Crore accounts has been opened in the country. Further, this constitute 55.47 percent (23.87 crore) women account holders and 66.69 percent (28.70 crore) are Jan Dhan accounts in rural and semi-urban areas (Ministry of Finance, 2021)

This financial inclusion has helped rural population to fight the crisis during COVID-19 pandemic outbreak with uninterrupted access to financial aid. Other initiatives like Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY), Stand-Up India Scheme, Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) are the additional supporting steps towards financial empowerment and entrepreneurship development of rural women. Over 9 crore women have benefitted jointly from Mudra and Stand-Up India (Ashish Kumar, 2019).

Towards Millennium Development Goals@2030

India's performance has improved from 0.665 in 2018 to 0.668 in 2020 (Global Gender Gap Index Report 2020). Initiatives for mainstreaming women participation in economic activities could work as catalyst in achieving goals as set under United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. Promotion of gender equality and access to Government schemes/programmes will encourage women participation in agriculture sector. This will help in alleviating extreme poverty and hunger and support in improving the country's economy.

Further, adequate investment in pro-rural women schemes and more community level participation will expedite the empowerment in a mission mode for better future prospects. Skill development and access to education, health care and digital ecosystem can play a significant role in lives of rural women. Proper training and capacity building on new agricultural technologies can help women farmer.

Conclusion

Rural women are major stakeholders in growth 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.

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