Empowering the Silent Backbone: A Review of Rural Women's Participation and Decision-Making in Indian Agriculture

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***Abstract*—This review critically examines the unappreciated role of rural women in India's agricultural sector, emphasizing their involvement in household management and community development particularly in decision-making. Drawing from a wide range of empirical studies and policy reports, it underscores their diverse contribution i.e. from sowing, livestock care, and post-harvest processing to market activities. Despite their pivotal role in all stages of farming, women's labour is largely unpaid, undocumented and undervalued reinforcing gender inequalities in access to land, training, credit and institutional support. A key focus of the review is the limited decision-making power rural women hold, especially in areas such as land ownership, resource allocation and technology adoption. Social barriers like patriarchal norms, illiteracy and lack of awareness continue to suppress their agency. The burden of balancing domestic duties with agricultural labour further affects their physical and emotional well-being. Government programs like the Mahila Kisan Sahakian Pariyojana (MKSP) aim to build women's capacities, but structural barriers such as insufficient training, weak extension systems, and inadequate institutional representation still persist. The review concludes that real empowerment of rural women requires gender-sensitive policies, better access to healthcare and education, and accurate representation in agricultural statistics. Without this, sustainable rural development and food security will remain elusive.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Rural women form the silent backbone of Indian agriculture, playing indispensable roles in crop production, livestock care, post-harvest processing and resource management. Yet, their contributions remain largely invisible in policy frameworks, institutional records, and decision-making platforms. This review seeks to uncover and critically examine the participation and decision-making capacities of rural women in the agricultural sector. one of the most vital yet gender-skewed domains in India's rural economy.

Swami Vivekananda famously asserted, "There is no prospect for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is addressed. A bird cannot fly on one wing." Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized that societal progress is impossible without the awakening of women. These visionary statements highlight the foundational role of women in nation-building. an idea that is especially relevant in the context of Indian agriculture.

Although rural women constitute a significant share of the agricultural workforce, their labour is often unpaid, undervalued and excluded from economic statistics (Jaim & Hossain, 2011; Kannuri & Jadhav, 2021). This marginalization is compounded by limited access to land, credit, and training and thus severely constrained their decision-making roles. The present review evaluates this paradox of high participation but low recognition and aims to identify pathways for genuine empowerment through gender-sensitive agricultural reforms and inclusive rural development.

II. HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Swami Vivekananda rightly emphasized the indispensable role of women in societal progress, stating that "a bird cannot fly on one wing." Likewise, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru believed in awakening women to awaken the society. Historically, women

have played a foundational role in agriculture. As Girade (2012) noted, it was women who initially domesticated plants while men were occupied with hunting. Pre-independence India subjected women to patriarchal traditions such as child marriage, purdah, and widowhood, thereby eroding their agency. These societal structures persisted into the post-independence period, continuing to marginalize women despite their significant unpaid contributions to household and agricultural work (Sharma, 2007).
Their marginalization was not just economic but also social and cultural. Women were historically restricted from owning property, attending school, or participating in community decision-making. Such exclusion was institutionalized through laws, customs, and religious sanctions. The persistence of these practices has had a generational impact, entrenching gender inequality even in modern rural contexts. This historic imbalance has had long-term implications on women's capacity to access land, credit, and training opportunities in agriculture.

III. WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: PARTICIPATION PATTERNS

Agriculture remains a key employment sector for women, especially in Asia with women comprising between 60 to 98 percent of agricultural workers in countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal (Jaim & Hossain, 2011; Roy et al., 2017). In India, around 84% of women workers are involved in agriculture compared to 67% of men (Kannuri & Jadhav, 2021). Women typically engage in labour-intensive tasks like weeding, seedbed preparation, sowing, harvesting, and post-harvest processing (Mondal, 2022). Despite their contribution, women's labour is often undervalued as unpaid family labour, resulting in their economic invisibility (Roy et al., 2017).

Moreover, women are involved in subsidiary activities such as poultry farming, sericulture, mushroom cultivation, and food processing which further diversify their economic contribution. These roles are often masked under informal or household-level work, leaving women excluded from formal agricultural records. In tribal and hilly regions, women also play a key role in collecting non-timber forest products like fruits, herbs and firewood contributing to both subsistence and income generation.

IV. GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS AND POLICY GAPS

Government initiatives such as the Mahila Kisan Sahakian Pariyojana (MKSP)- part of DAY-NRL aimed to train women in agro-ecological practices and build their capacity (Patel & Sethi, 2021). However, systemic gender bias in Indian agricultural policies fails to recognize women as farmers, thereby limiting their access to credit, land, insurance and government schemes. Despite contributing significantly to the agricultural economy, women continue to be identified merely as "wives of farmers" in land titles and official documents.

The National Policy for Farmers (2007) acknowledged the need to recognize women as farmers, yet implementation has been slow and uneven across states. While women's self-help groups (SHGs) and federations have gained traction, they often lack the financial support and infrastructural backing needed for long-term sustainability. Capacity building remains largely limited to rudimentary skill development rather than fostering entrepreneurship and leadership.

V. CONTRIBUTIONS ACROSS AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Women contribute at all stages of the agricultural value chain. Studies by Shyamlal (2002) and Chauhan (2005) highlighted women’s involvement in planting, weeding, harvesting, and agro-processing. Jain (2009) and Arokia Doss (2011) documented rural women's extensive involvement in both farm and non-farm tasks like dyeing, sewing, and embroidery. Yet, their lack of access to training programs restricts their knowledge of modern farming techniques (Rekha, 2012).

Rural women also undertake pre-sowing tasks such as seed selection and treatment, post-harvest tasks like drying, cleaning, storing grains and marketing activities including selling produce at local markets. Their role in household kitchen gardens is crucial for food security. However, technology adoption among rural women is minimal due to illiteracy, digital divide, and lack of extension services tailored to their needs.

VI. DECISION-MAKING PATTERNS

Despite their active labour, rural women have limited say in farm-related decision-making. Sharma (2004) and Bahaduria (2004) noted that women rarely decide on irrigation, pesticide use, or livestock sales. Ravichandran (2014) and Sumanthi (2018) showed shared decision-making in household expenses, yet major agricultural and financial decisions remained male-dominated. Education and financial independence influence women's participation in decision-making (Kaur, 2011; Dutta, 2014).

Women's decision-making roles are often confined to micro-level issues such as food preparation, child education, or household budgeting. Patriarchal norms, limited exposure to information and lack of property ownership weaken their agency in macro-decisions related to land, inputs, investments and market access. Where women do participate, it is mostly in households where male members are absent or have migrated for work, thereby opening decision spaces for women by default rather than design.

VII. BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS

Rural women face significant barriers such as limited access to loans, poor healthcare, irregular training and physical health issues like back pain and respiratory problems (Sailaja, 2002; Chauhan, 2005; Gurjar, 2015). Environmental challenges like floods and droughts exacerbate their vulnerability (Phila chon, 2014). Dual responsibilities in domestic and agricultural tasks limit their social mobility and increase their burden (Baruah, 2018).

Additional constraints include:

- Lack of ownership and inheritance rights: Patriarchal norms hinder women's land ownership, affecting their access to institutional credit and subsidies.
- Gender-blind extension services: Most training programs are designed for men and scheduled at times inconvenient for women.
- Social stigma: Women working independently in markets or dealing with male-dominated institutions face social scrutiny.
- Digital divide: Limited access to mobile phones, internet and digital literacy hampers women's access to agricultural innovations.

VIII. EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES AND SUGGESTIONS

To improve their empowerment, scholars like Awasthi (2020) and Gurjar (2015) recommended promotion of rural women's political participation, leadership training, access to modern technology, and community-based extension services. Regular training and awareness programs should be conducted in rural areas to improve women's technical skills and decision-making capabilities.

Further recommendations include:

- Gender-inclusive land reforms: Ensure joint land titles for women and men.
- Customized training modules: Design programs based on women's time availability, literacy levels, and regional needs.
- Market linkages: Facilitate women's participation in cooperatives and value chains to improve profitability.
- Social protection measures: Implement maternity benefits, childcare facilities, and health insurance for women agricultural workers.
- Digital empowerment: Promote digital literacy and access to mobile-based agricultural advisories and e-marketing platforms.

IX. CONCLUSION

This review has underscored the indispensable yet often overlooked role of rural women in Indian agriculture. From seed selection to post-harvest activities, from livestock management to market engagement, women contribute extensively across the agricultural value chain. However, their work remains largely informal, unpaid, and unrecognized in national statistics and policy documents. Despite constituting a significant proportion of the agricultural workforce, rural women are still referred to as "farmers' wives" rather than as farmers in their own right.

A persistent and structural gender gap continues to hinder their access to land ownership, institutional credit, agricultural training, technology, and markets. Patriarchal norms, illiteracy, time poverty due to dual responsibilities, and limited political and institutional representation further restrict their ability to participate meaningfully in household, community, and agricultural decision-making processes. As a

result, rural women remain disempowered and marginalized within a sector they actively sustain.

While programs such as the Mahila Kisan Sahakian Pariyojana (MKSP) have initiated important steps toward capacity-building and inclusivity, their impact is limited by inadequate implementation, gender-blind extension services, and fragmented support systems. Empowerment must therefore go beyond skill development and visibility—it must encompass ownership, autonomy, and agency.

To truly empower rural women and enable them to emerge from the margins, a multi-pronged strategy is needed. This includes:

- Recognizing women as farmers in legal and policy frameworks through joint land titles and gender-disaggregated data;
- Redesigning extension and training services that are accessible, gender-sensitive, and aligned with local socio-cultural realities;
- Strengthening institutional mechanisms such as SHGs, cooperatives, and panchayats to ensure representation and leadership of women in governance and resource management;
- Enhancing access to education, healthcare, and digital tools, particularly for younger and tribal women, to bridge the rural gender divide.

Investing in the empowerment of rural women is not just a matter of equity it is a precondition for achieving sustainable agricultural development, food security, and poverty alleviation. Women are not merely contributors to rural life; they are central actors whose leadership can shape a more resilient, inclusive, and productive agricultural sector.

As India envisions a future driven by rural transformation and agrarian innovation, the time has come to shift from rhetoric to reality. Empowering the silent backbone. rural women is not an option but a necessity. Their empowerment must be at the heart of policy discourse, academic research, and grassroots action to ensure that they are not only participants in agriculture but also decision-makers, innovators, and change agents in shaping its future.

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