

Unseen Workers: Women in Indian agriculture*

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It is safe to say that Indian agriculture could not survive and would not have survived without the huge contribution of women workers. Their role has been absolutely pivotal – as farmers, as co-farmers, as unpaid workers on family farms, as paid workers in different tasks associated with cultivation and harvesting as well as initial processing for market. Around three-fourths of all women workers in rural India are in agriculture, and many more contribute to it through their unpaid activities even though their work is not officially or statistically recognised. They are especially prominent in production of some food grains and particular cash crops, including in plantation-based work.

Across India, women work in land preparation; seed selection and seedling production; sowing; applying manure, fertilizer and pesticides; weeding; transplanting; threshing, winnowing and harvesting. They also engage in important on-farm activities that are not solely cultivation-oriented. In animal husbandry, they are often directly involved in and responsible for animal care and livestock rearing, grazing, fodder collection and cleaning of animal sheds, as well as initial processing of milk and livestock products. The tasks of keeping milch animals, small ruminants and backyard poultry (which can be important sources of supplementary income for poor farm families and agricultural labourers) are typically performed by women in the household. The majority of workers involved in collection of non-timber forest produce are women, particularly in tribal-dominated areas. Women are also dominantly involved in fish processing among fishing families. Women are critical in augmenting family incomes through tasks such as collection of fuel, fodder, drinking water and water for use by household members and domestic animals.

Given all this, it is amazing to see how invisible their work is in the public domain. Although around 80-100 million Indian women have worked in agriculture over the past two decades, it is hard to find much evidence of this in policy making or even in public attitudes to agriculture. The enormous invisibility of women working in the rural areas is of course a reflection of patriarchal customs and social norms and prejudices, but it also has massive implications for the production conditions and the viability of cultivation. And matters are made even worse because these social factors are unfortunately reinforced by public policies that are either gender-blind or downright discriminatory in how they treat women in the food system overall.

Despite the importance of women in agriculture and especially in food cultivation, they are scarcely recognised as farmers. In social terms, there are all sorts of restrictions that persist to different degrees in different parts of rural India, such as cultural restrictions on women's ability to plough, which in turn affects their ability to use mechanical instruments like tractors. Women own only a tiny fraction of the private agricultural land in India, and even when pattas are distributed jointly to husbands and wives, field studies find that the women have little to no control over the actual holding.

This lack of control over land assets has other effects on their recognition as farmers and their subsequent costs. Because they rarely have land titles in their own names, women are typically denied access to institutional credit, and do not benefit from

publicly provided agricultural extension services and inputs. Their access to marketing channels is also usually more constrained, both for reasons of physical difficulty of movement and restraints on their mobility as well as for social reasons. All this increases their costs substantially and reduces their opportunities for higher margins over costs, forcing many of them to increasingly insecure subsistence farming.

In periods when all farmers are squeezed by rising costs of inputs, reduction of subsidies that add to costs, and reduced public investment in rural areas, even as they are being asked to compete with subsidised imports that bring about output price volatility, women cultivators are particularly badly affected. This also has an impact on the demand for agricultural labour, and since women are also heavily involved in this type of activity, it necessarily affects them negatively as well. Further, the livelihood crisis of the farming community has disproportionately adverse effects on women and girls, given the existing gender inequalities in society.

This may explain why, in the recent period there has been a squeeze on the number of women who are described as cultivators. According to the [Census of India](#), the total number of women cultivators fell from 42 million in 2001 to 36 million in 2011, with a ten per cent decline in the number of main cultivators (those working for 183 days or more per year) and a twenty per cent fall in the number of marginal women cultivators (those working for less than 183 days per year). Meanwhile, the employment programme (MNREGA) that had greatly benefited women workers by providing at least some employment at higher than prevailing market wages for women, [is being sharply reduced](#). This has already had an impact on gender wage gaps in rural areas as well as on stagnant or declining real wages, after a period of rising real wages for both male and female workers.

Other policies and patterns of public spending also have negative effects on women working in agriculture. Most women involved in farming – whether on family farms or as paid labourers – also have to provide their unpaid labour for social reproduction, euphemistically called “household tasks”, which are socially essential but unrecognised and unremunerated. Public policies that ignore or undervalue such work tend to add to this double burden, in what can become unsustainable ways. If basic amenities are not provided, women are the ones forced to walk long hours to collect water and fuel; if social services are not affordable and of reasonable quality, women and girls in the household are forced to spend more time providing such services and care themselves; they in turn are the ones more likely to be excluded from accessing health care or education if these are seen as too expensive.

Instead of addressing these issues, public policies have tended to use gender discrimination to provide public services on the cheap, by running essential and basic health services on the underpaid work of ASHAs, anganwadi workers and helpers and the like. Now even these paltry systems are in disarray because of government spending cuts that have left such workers without their pitiful amount remuneration for several months. So women involved in agriculture have to also confront the implications of those cuts by increasing their own unpaid work, often to the detriment of their productive engagement in agriculture and related activities.

For this to change, public policy itself must be made more gender sensitive, rather than relying on and accentuating existing forms of gender discrimination. So what is

required is exactly the opposite of what the current government appears to be doing: more recognition of and facilities provided to women farmers along with policies to make food cultivation remunerative, especially small holder cultivation; more emphasis on efficient and accountable public distribution systems and other measures that make affordable food accessible to all, including women and girls; more public services in nutrition, health and sanitation that provide well paid and decent work to women as well as men; controls on corporate power in food systems that reduce the earning of farmers and that alter consumption patterns in unhealthy ways.

For such changes to become plausible, there needs to be a fundamental change in mindset and approach among our policy makers. In particular, two lessons must be learned: the economy (and within it, manufacturing) cannot grow sustainably without vibrant agriculture; and the conditions of agriculture cannot improve without improving the conditions of women who work in it.

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