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Women-Led FPOs: Catalyzing Rural Entrepreneurship and a New Vision for Indian Agriculture

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Women play a pivotal role in agriculture, yet their contributions often remain undervalued and underrecognized. Despite being the backbone of the rural workforce, women face significant barriers in accessing land, credit, inputs, and extension services. Women-led Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) have emerged as transformative platforms that empower rural women, promote gender equity, and foster inclusive agricultural development. This document explores the evolving landscape of women-led FPOs in India, highlighting their impact on rural entrepreneurship, value chain participation, and agricultural innovation. Drawing on case studies from across the country, the paper illustrates how these collectives enhance women's economic independence, leadership, and decision-making power. By addressing structural inequalities and leveraging the strength of collective action, women-led FPOs are not only uplifting rural communities but also shaping a new vision for sustainable and equitable agriculture in India.

Keywords: Women FPOs, Agriculture, Sustainability, Entrepreneurship

Introduction

Women are the backbone of the agricultural workforce, yet their labor often goes unpaid and unrecognized globally (Banik et al., 2022). In India, women play a vital role in agriculture, undertaking the majority of farm activities and consistently demonstrating high levels of physical and intellectual productivity. Their involvement in agriculture varies across countries, with women producing about half of Asia's food supply. In developing nations, women contribute to 60–80% of food production and account for nearly half of global food output (Banik et al., 2023). Despite their central role in ensuring household food security, women still struggle for rightful recognition and access to resources. Deep-rooted cultural and societal norms often deny women equal access to land, credit, inputs, and services. Fewer than 2% of landowners are women, and land reforms frequently favor male heads of households, leaving women—especially married women—excluded from joint ownership rights.

Access to Resources

Women face greater barriers than men in accessing land, credit, inputs, and services, largely due to entrenched cultural and social norms. Although both male and female farmers experience challenges, women are disproportionately disadvantaged. For instance, they own less than 2% of land despite the increasing number of female-headed households. Legal and customary barriers prevent women from using land as collateral, limiting their access to credit—only 10% of credit is extended to women. Their access to improved seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides is also minimal, as they are often excluded from cooperatives and extension programs that distribute subsidized inputs. Financial limitations further restrict their ability to purchase agricultural tools. Women also have less access to training and education—two-

thirds of the world's one billion illiterate people are women and girls. Only 5% of extension services are directed at rural women, and just 15% of extension agents are women. Moreover, these services usually prioritize cash crops rather than the food and subsistence crops that women predominantly manage. Collecting gender-disaggregated data is crucial to design food security strategies that address these inequities.

Women-Led FPOs

Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) are collectives formed by farmers to improve their economic and social status, typically registered as cooperatives or companies. Women-led FPOs offer a transformative platform for integrating women into agriculture by promoting gender equity, entrepreneurship, and leadership (Banik et al., 2024b). These organizations, where women hold key leadership roles and make up a majority of the membership, serve to enhance women's visibility, voice, and value in agriculture and rural development. Despite the presence of over 21,000 all-women cooperatives in India with 200,000 members, this still represents a small fraction of the 29 million cooperative members overall. The National Association for Farmer Producer Organizations (NAFPO, 2021) highlighted the underrepresentation of women in FPOs and warned that without targeted support, these organizations could mirror male-dominated cooperatives. NAFPO recommended using Self-Help Group (SHG) networks to establish women-exclusive FPOs, aiming for 70–80% women participation in livestock-based FPOs and 20–30% in others, with a broader goal of 40% women-led FPOs to empower rural women. The India Development Review (IDR, 2021) emphasized the risk of excluding women from entrepreneurial benefits if policies don't actively promote their involvement in FPOs. As FPOs become central to agricultural value chains, changing the perception that only men are farmers is essential—and can be achieved by encouraging and promoting women-led FPOs.

Importance of Women-Led FPOs

Although women are involved in every aspect of agriculture, their contributions are often dismissed as mere household chores. This lack of recognition excludes them from being seen as farmers or entrepreneurs, both socially and economically. The absence of financial independence further limits their opportunities. Organizing women into FPOs provides a powerful mechanism for overcoming these barriers. It gives women centralized access to tools, training, and markets, enhancing their productivity and enabling them to gain recognition as key contributors to the rural economy. The expansion of women-led FPOs is a significant step toward acknowledging and empowering women in agriculture.

Case studies of some successful women-led FPOs in India

Name of the FPO	Place	Year of establishment	Members	Financials	Activities performed
1. Samarpan Jeevika Mahila Kisan Producer Company Limited	Bihar	2013	2288	INR 1.74 Crore Annual Turnover (2020-2021)	It acquires high-quality seeds from well-known companies and subsequently packages them using its own automated machinery into Nutri Garden Seed Kits. Facilitates collective purchasing for farmers and directly supplies to institutional buyers and traders, thereby cutting out intermediaries. It generates a dealer margin by making advanced orders for agricultural inputs from the companies.
2. Vanopag Farmer Producer Company Ltd	Hazaribagh, Jharkhand	2019	1250	INR 46,25,409 Lakh Annual Turnover (2021-22)	The women-run FPO focuses on collecting and selling agricultural produce, non-timber forest products, and medicinal items. It sources directly from farmer groups, ensuring fair prices. Unsold stock is processed into value-added products and marketed under the "Palash" brand through Palash Mart.

3.	Thingtangpa Farmer Producer Company Limited	Churachandpur, Manipur	2019	237	INR 6.7 Lakhs Annual Turnover (2020-2021)	The FPO procures seeds at low cost and distributes them based on need. Farmers use only organic inputs. Around 75% of produce is sold, 15% is processed, and the rest is used otherwise. The FPO aggregates produce for markets, other FPOs, and vendors. With government support, it received subsidized processing machines and vehicles. Processed goods are sold on order, and farmers receive training in organic farming and financial literacy.
4.	Sahyog Women JEEViKA Agro Producer Company Limited	Nalanda, Bihar	2013	1376	INR 1.25 cr Annual turnover (2020-2021)	The FPO is licensed to sell seeds and fertilizers through retail and doorstep delivery. It aggregates crops like lentil, paddy, potato, and wheat, and produces value-added items like Sattu and Besan, which are packaged and distributed through JEEViKA markets, Village Organizations, and local stores.
5.	Maikal Women Poultry Producer Company Limited	Anuppur, Madhya Pradesh	2015	1014	INR 17.4 Crore Annual Turnover (2020-2021)	The cooperative engages women in backyard broiler farming, offering free doorstep services like feed and medicine. Supported by supervisors, vets, and managers, it handles bird sales and assumes risk. Producers are paid via a performance-based index, completing 5–6 cycles yearly. Board members receive training, and poultry is sold under the "Sukhtava Chicken" brand. Operations are managed through a Poultry MIS system.
6.	Maharaj Atmanirbhar Mahila Kisan Producer Company Limited	Maharajganj, Uttar Pradesh	2021	560	INR 10.5 Lakhs Annual Turnover (2021-2022)	The FPO markets 14 products under its "Maharaj" brand and supports mushroom cultivation through training and production aid. It supplies dairy items like milk and paneer, sells through wholesale counters, and has linkages with NABARD mobile marts. It also supplies produce to institutions like Kasturba Balika Vidyalayas, hospitals, and prisons.
7.	Dheesali Raithu Mahila Farmer Producers Company Limited	Solipet, Yadadri Bhuvanagiri, Telangana	2017	631	INR 29,51,757 Lakh Annual Turnover (2020-2021)	With APMAS and NABARD support, the FPO secured licenses to sell agri-inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. It partners with e-Fresh, Markfed, and Coromandel to offer subsidized inputs via Farm Development Centers. The FPO also rents equipment and promotes sustainable farming through Seed Village initiatives and demo farms in collaboration with KVK and the Agriculture University.
8.	Jeevan Sangini Krishi Vikas Women Farmer Producer Company	Talani village, Talani taluk, Motala, Buldana in Maharashtra state	2013	1553	10, 00,000 lakhs	The company supplies pulses to Delhi and plans to launch its "Jeevan Sangini" branded pulses at the new Kisan Mandi. Crop advisories are shared via SMS through team leaders. Women farmers cultivate about 3,500 hectares with crops like cotton, soybean, maize, and tur dal. To boost profits, the company began direct pulse procurement and sought support from the World Bank-backed Maharashtra Agriculture Competitiveness Project.

9.	Aaranyak Agri Producer Company Limited (AAPCL)	Purnea, Bihar	2009	2601	paid up capital 12.16 lakh	Managed by SHG members, the FPO focuses on agriculture and animal husbandry (excluding veterinary care). It improved maize marketing through village-level aggregation and quality checks, linking with NCDEX and accredited warehouses. This model enables direct marketing, fair weighing, timely e-payments, and off-season sales, giving farmers 15–20% higher prices.
10.	Koushikee Mahila Milk Producer Company Limited	Bihar	2017	5500	Authorized capital-500 lakhs paid up capital-0.11 lakh	The milk producer company promotes food safety and quality standards while ensuring transparent milk procurement with timely bank payments. It supports dairy farmers with year-round market access, breeding, nutrition, and animal care services, along with training to enhance productivity.

(Source: <https://www.manage.gov.in/publications/knowledgeseries/womenFPOs.pdf> and <https://anuvaad.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Women-LED-Farmer-producer-organization.pdf>)

Conclusion

Women-led Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) have become significant vehicles for empowering rural women, transforming them from overlooked contributors into acknowledged participants in the agricultural value chain. The case studies presented from various regions in India illustrate how these women-led FPOs are promoting inclusive growth, improving market access, boosting productivity, and facilitating value addition in agriculture and related sectors. These organizations not only provide women with financial independence and opportunities for leadership but also enhance their influence in decision-making, encourage the adoption of modern farming techniques, and create sustainable livelihoods. By tackling gender-specific challenges and harnessing the collective power of women farmers, FPOs are reshaping rural entrepreneurship and playing a crucial role in building fair and resilient rural economies.

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