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Women in Integrated Farming Systems: The Backbone of Rural Livelihoods

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Across rural India, women have always been at the heart of agriculture—sowing, weeding, feeding livestock, managing household nutrition, and maintaining biodiversity. Yet their role often remains undervalued and invisible. With the growing emphasis on Integrated Farming Systems (IFS), women's participation has gained new importance, linking empowerment with sustainability. IFS provides a platform where women can contribute to multiple farm enterprises, value addition, and family decision-making—strengthening both livelihoods and resilience.

Role of Women in Integrated Farming Systems

In an IFS, various enterprises such as crops, dairy, poultry, horticulture, fisheries, beekeeping, and mushroom cultivation are inter-connected. Women play a pivotal role in almost every component—feeding animals, preparing organic manure, managing kitchen gardens, and processing produce for household use or sale. According to FAO (2023), women constitute nearly 48% of India's agricultural workforce, and their contribution is even higher in livestock and horticulture sectors. In regions where IFS models are promoted through Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and Farmer FIRST Programmes, women's active participation has led to improved family income, food security, and nutritional diversity. In Kerala, for instance, self-help groups (SHGs) engaged in mixed farming—combining vegetables, dairy, and poultry—reported up to 30% higher household income compared to non-IFS households. Similar patterns have emerged in Maharashtra and Odisha, where women-managed integrated farms have become models of self-reliance.

Value Addition and Entrepreneurship

Women excel in adding value to farm produce—transforming perishable goods into marketable products such as paneer, ghee, pickles, jams, mushroom packets, and vermicompost. These activities create local employment and enhance the profitability of smallholder farms. Under NABARD's Livelihood Enterprise Development Programme (LEDP) and ICAR-KVK initiatives, thousands of rural women have been trained in post-harvest processing, packaging, and marketing of integrated-farm products. The move from "producers" to "entrepreneurs" has changed the way rural women perceive farming—as a business rather than mere subsistence. IFS-based value chains have also strengthened women's bargaining power within families. Income earned through dairy or backyard poultry often supports children's education, household needs, and reinvestment in farming activities.

Decision-Making and Empowerment

In traditional farm households, decisions on cropping, input use, or livestock sales were mostly taken by men. The integrated nature of IFS, however, demands continuous management decisions across multiple enterprises. This has naturally increased women's involvement in planning and record-keeping.

Studies by ICAR-NAARM (2022) and MANAGE (2024) report that women engaged in integrated farming exhibit higher confidence, better financial literacy, and greater participation in household decision-making. Exposure to training and group-based learning through SHGs and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) has further enhanced their leadership skills.

Government and Institutional Support

The Government of India has recognized gender empowerment as a critical dimension of agricultural development. Programs such as Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) under NRLM, National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA), and Farmer FIRST Programme (FFP) by ICAR actively promote women-centric training and entrepreneurship in integrated farming. KVKs across states are now establishing Women's Training Units, focusing on value-added dairy, vegetable processing, and organic composting modules. Moreover, digital platforms such as Kisan Sarathi and mKisan Portal provide mobile-based advisories that enable women to access market prices and weather alerts, helping them make informed farm decisions even from home.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Despite growing participation, women in IFS still face obstacles—limited access to land ownership, credit, and machinery. Time constraints due to household duties and social norms often restrict their engagement in training or marketing activities.

To overcome these barriers, several measures are essential:

- Strengthen gender-focused extension services through women facilitators at KVKs.
- Ease access to micro-credit via SHGs and cooperative banks.
- Promote labor-saving tools and mechanization suited for women farmers.
- Encourage policy incentives that recognize women as joint farm owners.

When extension programs deliberately include women at every stage—from planning to evaluation—the impact of IFS on livelihood and sustainability multiplies.

Conclusion

Women are not merely helpers on the farm—they are managers, innovators, and entrepreneurs driving rural transformation. Integrated Farming Systems provide an opportunity to harness their potential by linking different enterprises, ensuring steady income, and promoting ecological balance. Empowering women in IFS means empowering families, communities, and the nation's food security. With sustained institutional support and social recognition, India's women farmers will continue to remain the backbone of rural livelihoods—nurturing both productivity and sustainability for generations to come.

About the Author

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