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## Invisible Hands: Women Farmers and Invisible Labour in Indian Agriculture

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Agriculture remains the backbone of the Indian economy, employing a significant portion of the rural population. Within this sector, women play a crucial yet often underrecognized role. Despite contributing extensively to agricultural production, women farmers are frequently categorized as “helpers” rather than primary farmers. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as invisible labour, where women’s work is unaccounted for, unpaid, and undervalued. In India, women constitute a substantial share of the agricultural workforce. However, their contributions remain largely hidden due to socio-cultural norms, lack of ownership rights, and gender biases in policy frameworks. The invisibility of women’s labour has far-reaching implications for economic development, gender equality, and rural livelihoods.

### Extent of Women’s Participation in Agriculture

- Around 80% of rural women are engaged in agriculture in some form.
- Women constitute nearly 33% of agricultural labourers and 48% of self-employed farmers.
- In recent years, women account for over 42% of the agricultural workforce, reflecting the “feminisation of agriculture.”
- Approximately 64.4% of female workers are engaged in agriculture, much higher than male participation.

This increasing participation is largely due to male migration to urban areas, leaving women to manage farms and household responsibilities simultaneously. Women are involved in a wide range of agricultural activities such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, livestock management, and post-harvest processing. Despite their extensive involvement, their identity as “farmers” is rarely recognized.

### Understanding Invisible Labour

Invisible labour refers to work that is not formally recognized, measured, or compensated. In the context of Indian agriculture, it primarily includes:

- Unpaid family labour
- Subsistence farming activities
- Care work linked to agriculture (fodder collection, water fetching, livestock care)

Evidence suggests that:

- Nearly 50% of women in agriculture are unpaid family workers.
- Women spend over half of their time in unpaid work, including farm and household activities.
- A majority of rural working women act as unpaid helpers in family enterprises.

This invisibility stems from the fact that women’s work is often seen as an extension of household duties rather than economic activity.

## Causes

### ➤ Patriarchal Social Structure

Traditional gender norms assign men the role of breadwinners and women as caregivers. As a result, even when women perform significant agricultural work, they are not recognized as farmers.

### ➤ Lack of Land Ownership

Land ownership is a key determinant of recognition in agriculture. However, women have limited access to land rights, which restricts their identity as farmers. Legal and cultural barriers in inheritance reduce women's economic independence. Without land titles, women cannot access credit, subsidies, or institutional support.

### ➤ Gender Wage Gap and Informality

Women are often employed in low-paid or unpaid roles. Wage discrimination persists across agricultural activities. A large proportion of women work in informal or subsistence agriculture.

## Ways to making the Invisible Visible

Recognizing women's contribution is not just a matter of fairness it is essential for sustainable agricultural development. Several steps can help bring change.

### ➤ Recognizing Women as Farmers

Giving women official farmer status is crucial. Including their names in land records and promoting joint ownership can provide them with identity and access to benefits.

### ➤ Equal Access to Resources

Women need equal opportunities—access to credit, modern tools, quality seeds, and agricultural training. Empowering them directly boosts productivity and rural incomes.

### ➤ Reducing Unpaid Workload

Introducing small-scale technologies, improving access to water and fuel, and providing childcare facilities can significantly ease their burden.

### ➤ Changing Mindsets

Perhaps the most important change is social. Recognizing, respecting, and valuing women's work is the foundation of real progress.

## Conclusion

Women are the backbone of Indian agriculture, yet their contributions remain largely invisible and undervalued. Despite performing a wide range of agricultural and household tasks, they are often denied recognition, land rights, and access to resources. Addressing this inequality is essential for achieving sustainable agricultural development and gender justice. Recognizing women as farmers, ensuring equal opportunities, and reducing their unpaid workload can significantly improve rural livelihoods. Equally important is changing societal attitudes to value their work. Empowering women farmers not only enhances their dignity and independence but also strengthens the overall agricultural economy and ensures inclusive and balanced rural development.

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