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From Fields to Leadership: Gender-Responsive Governance for Rural Transformation in India: Empowering Women Farmers as Drivers of Inclusive Growth and Agricultural Resilience

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As the world's largest supplier of spices, milk, pulses, other agricultural commodities, India's agricultural sector has expanded steadily and robustly over decades. It also plays a crucial role in fostering rural prosperity and subsistence. In accordance with the latest Indian Economic Survey 2025–2026, agriculture and related domains showed an average yearly rise of 4.4% at fixed prices, implying an upward trend in the production of food grains, namely wheat, rice and other coarse cereals, as well as horticulture crops. Almost a half of India's workforce has been migrating from rural to urban areas driven by urbanization. Rural economic fragility is triggered by rural demographic decline. This modification contributes to "feminization" in agriculture and enhances the labor force requirement in the remote agricultural sector. Nearly 70% of all farm workers are rural women, who play an essential role in Indian agriculture. have structural impediments in acquiring land ownership and are often regarded as unpaid labor. Opportunities are restricted by patriarchal systems in rural places.

The effectiveness of rural agribusiness and livelihoods can be strengthened by overcoming the gender gap while bolstering women's legal rights. Establishing gender equality is merely one aspect of gender-responsive governance; other facets encompass a responsible budgeting and policy formulation for women's inclusive development. Rural farming and livelihood could be more productive if the gender gap is addressed and women's legal rights are strengthened. Gender-responsive governance encompasses not only the provision of gender equality but also accountable budgeting and policy formulation for women's inclusive development. The upward trajectory of rural women is hampered by persistent inequalities, inadequate provision of social amenities, restricted access to monetary assistance, domestic assault, confined decision-making roles, and unpaid employment.

In accordance with the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey Quarterly Report dated October–December 2025, the prevalence of female labor force participation in the countryside increased when compared to the previous quarter; the ratio of rural workforce population to urban areas increased; rural self-employment increased and the unemployment rate decreased, demonstrating the inclusive growth of women in rural regions; government policies and efforts made significant changes in women's empowerment in rural areas by substituting a women-led development model for the conventional approach in pursuit of fostering the country's development and attaining a \$5 trillion economy by 2027 and \$7 trillion economy by 2030. The emancipation for ladies in rural locations has significantly transformed as a consequence of government initiatives and legislation. The article outlines

key approaches for implementing gender mainstreaming, the role of self-help organizations, governmental intervention, and obstacles.

Gender – Responsive Governance: A Necessity, Not an Option

In India's agrarian economy, women remain central to agricultural production, yet peripheral in governance. According to recent estimates, women make up between 30 and 35 percent of the agricultural-related workforce in India, with much higher participation in unpaid and informal employment (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023). Worldwide, women make up approximately 43 percent of the agricultural labor force (FAO, 2011). Despite this significant participation, their limited access to resources, decision-making platforms, and institutional support continues to limit agricultural productivity and rural transformation. Approximately 43% of agricultural workers worldwide are women (FAO, 2011). Despite their significant contribution, agricultural production and rural transformation are nevertheless limited by their restricted access to conventional resources, decision-making forums, and institutional assistance. Consequently, gender-responsive governance (GRG) becomes a structural requirement for inclusive growth rather than a policy option. Despite making up a sizable portion of the agricultural labor force, women are still undervalued and must contend with systemic challenges such as restricted land ownership, difficult access to credit, and little institutional support.

The concept of "gender-responsive governance" refers to the creation and execution of institutions, policies, and initiatives that actively acknowledge and address the unique needs, roles, and limitations of various genders. It guarantees equitable access to resources, services, and decision-making platforms. Research from the Food and Agriculture Organization shows that closing gender gaps in agriculture can greatly increase productivity and improve food security. Inefficiencies in the development of rural areas result from ignoring gender factors. GRG recognizes that policies need to take into consideration the unique responsibilities and needs of women in traditional farming. It guarantees fair access to platforms for decision-making, resources, and services. According to data compiled by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), closing the gender gap in agriculture will greatly boost output and increase food security. Hence, empowerment for women farmers is both an economic and social necessity.

Besides being tied to land and technology, agriculture in India depends on the invisible labor of multitudes of women whose accomplishments are frequently overlooked. According to recent findings from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023), a sizable percentage of rural women work in agriculture, especially in labor-intensive operations, but their involvement seldom translates into institutional recognition or decision-making power. This disconnect underscores the critical need for governance systems that are responsive in design and execution as well as inclusive in intent. Gender-responsive governance necessitates a change in viewpoint from portraying women as passive welfare beneficiaries to acknowledging them as active participants in economic advancement. UN Women (2023) claims that policies that take gender-specific issues into consideration typically produce more egalitarian and long-lasting results. This strategy necessitates that extension services in agriculture directly reach women, the Farmer Producer Organizations proactively involve women in leadership positions, and that legislative frameworks address obstacles including time limits and mobility issues resulting from unpaid care duties.

Gender-responsive governance is crucial for reasons other than social justice. Equal accessibility to agricultural resources for men and women might greatly increase productivity, according to FAO (2011) data. According to more recent research by IFPRI (2024), women's empowerment is associated with better nutritional outcomes and climatic variability resilience. This is especially important in India, where smallholder farming techniques predominate. The advantages of women having accessibility to resources and the ability to make decisions are seen not only in farm productivity along with in family well-being, including improved child education and food security. GRG is currently a monetary, social, and developmental necessity rather than an ethical choice. Women make up a large

portion of the agriculture workforce in rural countries like India, and their exclusion from decisions compromises equity, sustainability, and productivity. Governance structures that ignore gendered realities run the danger of restricting rural change and sustaining structural inequality.

Deep - Rooted Gender Inequality

The obstacles encountered by women in agriculture are structural rather than fortuitous. Women typically administer a small portion of all agricultural holdings, according to official statistics gathered in the Agricultural Census (2015–16). Limited land ownership continues to be a significant barrier. Access to official loans, insurance, and government programs is restricted in the absence of land titles. Women farmers are more vulnerable since they frequently rely on unofficial lending channels, according to NABARD's rural financial surveys from 2022. Practically speaking, this means that even if a woman actively cultivates property, she might not have the power to decide on investments, market involvement, or cropping patterns. These discrepancies lower overall agricultural efficiency in addition to having an impact on individual livelihoods.

Self - Help Groups: Grassroot Engines of Change

Women have a substantial role in responsibilities including transplantation of paddy, nurseries supervision, and post-harvest processing in numerous areas throughout Tamil Nadu, encompassing peri-urban and rural districts. They still don't participate much in formal agricultural strategies or market discussions, though. Field-level studies frequently reveal that although women make substantial labor contributions, men still make the majority of monetary and strategic decisions.

Simultaneously, Self-Help Groups (SHG) sponsored by the prestigious Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission are currently beginning to alter this narrative, with women affiliated with these groups increasingly taking part in micro-enterprises, obtaining institutional credit, and actively participating in local governance forums (Ministry of Rural Development, 2024). It demonstrates that significant change is possible when institutional support is in line with grassroots realities. According to the Ministry of Rural Development (2024), women belonging to these groups are becoming more involved in local governance forums, accessing institutional loans, and starting microbusinesses. This shows that significant change is achievable when institutional support is in line with grassroots reality.

Self-Help Groups revolutionized rural women's mobilization which have established themselves into producer groups in many areas, increasing the involvement of women in agricultural value chains and marketplaces. Additionally, they have become effective forums for uplifting rural women and serve as a link between grassroots communities and governing structures, guaranteeing improved policy outreach. The notable functions of SHG are as follows:

- Improve the impact of financial integration
- Stimulate small-scale enterprises and entrepreneurial activities
- Strengthen labor negotiations

The Kerala government's Kudumbashree (prosperity of the family) initiative, which at first is endorsed by the Government of India and the National Bank of Agricultural and Rural Development, is a three-tiered system that consists of Neighbourhood Groups at the primary level, Area Development Societies at the ward level, and Community Development Societies at the local government level. It is the largest SHG approach for empowering women at the grassroots level by eradicating poverty and improving socioeconomic status in society. It also reduces gender parity in rural areas and increases the role of leadership. Neighborhood groups at the basic stage, Area Development Societies at the district tier, plus Community Development Societies with the local government level make up the three-tier system. By eradicating poverty and raising socioeconomic standing in the community, this is the largest SHG's approach for empowerment of women at the local level. By expanding loan

availability and providing capacity training, it gives rural women opportunity to become self-sufficient. It enhances women's leadership roles and decreases gender parity in countryside areas.

Government Interventions

The Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) has emerged as a credit-linked subsidy program that encourages young professionals to establish their own businesses. It gives women special attention by offering a larger subsidy for starting new microenterprises. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment oversees the New Swarnima Scheme for Women, which offers loans up to Rs. 2 lakhs at an annual interest rate of 5% in order to support and empower rural women entrepreneurs and job creation. By offering a larger subsidy for starting new microbusinesses, it gives women particular attention. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment oversees the New Swarnima Scheme for Women. It seeks to support and develop rural women entrepreneurs promoting job creation by providing loans up to Rs. 2 lakhs at a 5% annual interest rate.

The largest financial inclusion initiative in the world is the Ministry of Finance's Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY). More over 56 crore banking accounts that were opened under PMJDY where 56% belonged to women. Banking the unbanked, securing the unsecured, financing the unfunded, and helping the underserved and unserved serve as the guiding principles of this mission. This program encourages equitable access to financial resources for men and women. Along with substantial deposits and widespread RuPay debit card distribution, approximately 56 crore accounts have been opened, including approximately 30 crore female cardholders.

Women as Drivers of Rural Growth

The effects of promoting women in agriculture are extensive. Higher productivity, better earnings, including improved household outcomes in terms of education, health, and nutrition are all correlated with increased access to resources. Additionally, women's involvement makes rural institutions more resilient to shocks from the economy and environment.

Role of Technology in Bridging the Gap

Rural livelihoods are changing more and more due to digital technologies, especially for female farmers. While online markets and financial platforms create new avenues for economic engagement, mobile-based advising services now offer prompt advice on crop management. Resilience to environmental issues is further strengthened by climate-smart agriculture advisories distributed via digital means. However, the enduring digital gap continues to be a significant obstacle in spite of these prospects. Targeted programs to improve rural women's digital literacy are necessary to close this gap, as is making sure that smartphones and dependable internet services are reasonably priced. Digital tools can only fully educate women farmers and unleash their true potential for long-lasting agricultural transformation if these systemic injustices are addressed.

Regarding rural women farmers, digital technologies have the potential to revolutionize their access to markets, financial services, and expertise. Digital financial services increase prospects for savings, loans, and insurance, while mobile-based advising platforms can provide real-time advice on crop choices, pest control, and soil health. Women can also interact directly with customers and increase their bargaining power by avoiding traditional middlemen through online marketplaces. Disseminated by means of digital channels, climate-smart agriculture advisories also increase resilience towards unpredictability of weather and environmental stressors, but these benefits are still unevenly distributed because of the ongoing digital divide. By investing in these foundations, digital tools can transform from isolated innovations to inclusive facilitators of empowerment, ensuring that women farmers are not left behind in the global shift toward sustainable and technology-driven agriculture. However, because of the ongoing digital divide, these advantages are still not equally spread. access to gadgets and data services, as well as

encouraging laws that give rural connectivity top priority. Digital tools may become inclusive facilitators of empowerment by engaging in these foundations, assuring that women farmers will not be left behind in the worldwide transition to technology-driven and sustainable agriculture.

Way Forward: Towards Women-Led Development

India is gradually transitioning beyond a paradigm of women's involvement to a model of women-led development, in which women actively drive change rather than only being recipients. In order to provide women more influence over productive assets, it is necessary to improve land and property rights in order to guarantee safe ownership and inheritance. Increasing women's access for crediting and banking services is similarly important since it allows them to diversify their sources of income, invest in agriculture, and become more resilient to shocks. Promoting gender-sensitive extension services for farming is necessary to provide women farmers with specialized guidance and instruction that takes into account their unique requirements and limitations.

Improving digital inclusion would further enable women to utilize technological advances for e-commerce, sustainable agriculture, and financial instruments through accessible smartphones, inexpensive connectivity, and digital literacy initiatives. Rural women's leadership in value systems can be strengthened by transforming collective activity into viable economic endeavors through the expansion of self-help groups (SHGs) to agricultural businesses. In the end, attaining inclusive rural transformation would require integrating perspectives on gender into policy and governance frameworks, guaranteeing that women are acknowledged as major players in determining India's agricultural production and developmental future.

Conclusion

Gender-responsive governance demonstrates a strategy that would render Indian agriculture a more resilient and inclusive sector. Acknowledging women as leaders instead of just contributors will help rural economies reach their full potential and hasten the growth of the country. In order to achieve equitable agricultural development and rural prosperity, gender-responsive governance is now a must. The goal of encouraging women farmers is to unleash the maximum potential of India's agricultural economy, not only to achieve equity. Agriculture's future hinges on participation and equity in addition to investment and innovation. Development becomes really transformative when governance is attentive to gender. The degree to which Indian agriculture successfully incorporates inclusion into its governance systems will determine its destiny. Building an effective, robust, and equitable system is the goal of gender-responsive governance, not only redressing past injustices.

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