

Workers or Owners?

The Case of Women Farmers in India

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Issue Brief

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II INTRODUCTION

Marginalization of women, seen through the case of exclusion from ownership structures, can be considered as one of the key reasons against which the suffrage movement was initially mounted, globally. However, in India and abroad, with the delinkages between citizenship rights and property holdings by the mid-twentieth century, the question of land rights and marginalization of women has changed its form, with it being predominantly associated with rurality and the agricultural and allied sectors (Chowdhary, 2017).

The issue of women's land ownership started gaining attention primarily in the 1970s and 1980s with multiple movements, as well as scholarly engagement with the topic. Scholars like Bina Agarwal have extensively documented gender disparities in land rights, emphasizing that women's lack of access to land ownership remains a crucial factor in their economic and social vulnerability (Agarwal, 1994). Additionally, a 1991 survey highlighted the low percentage of women inheriting land in India, with significant regional variations (Agarwal et al., 2021). A notable example is the Bodhgaya movement in Bihar, which emerged in the mid-1970s. Women and men from landless households came together to demand ownership of the plots they worked on, which were being illegally held by a local religious institution (a Math). The women argued for independent land rights, stating: "If the men who are today landless beat up their wives so badly, merely using the power derived from being men, then tomorrow will they not become relatively even more powerful?...We are part of the struggle, so we should also get land." (Manimala, 1983, p. 8). As anticipated, when only men were granted titles, the result was an increase in domestic violence and, contrarily, when women received titles, they gained the strength to assert their legal rights (Manimala, 1983, p. 15; Alaka & Chetna, 1987, p. 26).

India's agricultural sector is sustained by women's labor, as they constitute 73% of the rural agricultural workforce (Agriculture Census, 2015-16) and perform nearly 70% of all agricultural activities (Oxfam International, 2022). Land ownership in India remains deeply gendered. Despite this, only 14% are operational landholders (Agriculture Census, 2015-16, p.7) and own just 11% of the total land in the country (Agarwal et al., 2021). Despite their extensive labor, they are categorized as "agricultural laborers" or "cultivators", rather than farmers, due to the absence of legal land titles (Mohan, 2017). On average, women work 14 hours a day, both at home and in the fields, increasing up to 16 hours during the harvesting season (National Commission for Women, 2005). Their contributions extend across multiple agricultural and allied activities, including sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. Despite this extensive involvement, women are not officially recognized as farmers and lack independent decision-making power in agricultural and allied activities.

Equal land rights for women is also a key target of Goal 5 on gender equality in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, today, addressing this historical marginalization of women in land ownership is not just a matter of justice, but also a necessary step toward equitable growth, enhanced agricultural productivity and sustainable development. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, if women had equal access to productive resources as men, they could increase farm yields by 20-30% (Munshi, 2017). This increase could lead to a 4% rise in total agricultural output in developing countries, potentially reducing global hunger by 12-17%, which translates to 100-150 million people (Munshi, 2017).

Moreover, research has also shown a positive correlation between food security and women's land rights, along with their economic empowerment. Researchers have identified that there is growing evidence of a systemic bias against women and female children in accessing basic necessities

such as food and healthcare. This bias varied regionally and across social classes, with it being more pronounced in the north-west compared to the south, and among landless households as opposed to those with land. Even in households above a defined poverty line, there were likely to be women and female children whose individual consumption levels would place them below the norm (Agarwal, 1988).

This disparity in access to resources is further reflected in household spending patterns, where women's financial contributions are often directed toward essential needs, while men's spending priorities may differ. Aggarwal (2008) found that across several states in India, significant gender differences exist in household spending patterns. Women in poor households typically contribute nearly all their earned income to meeting the family's basic needs, while men often allocate a significant portion for items like tobacco and liquor. In contrast, women's contributions remain substantial in all cases. In addition, research from Kerala indicates that in agricultural labor households, the nutritional status of women and children is more strongly correlated with the mother's earnings than with the father's (Kumar, 1978).

In this issue brief, I discuss the positive correlation between women's proprietorship of agricultural lands and their position within the social and familial structures, with land ownership facilitating a distinct empowerment in the day-to-day affairs of the family; the legal instruments which governs the access to land rights of women in India; the constraints which inhibit land ownership of women; and conclude with gaps and recommendation in the public policies which have a bearing on the case of women ownership of lands. Throughout the paper, I focus on relevant case studies from rural India.

I SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT AND LAND OWNERSHIP OF WOMEN

Studies show that women's land ownership not only improves their position in the family by enhancing decision making power and financial security, but also grants them greater acceptance in the society. Due to the Bodhgaya movement when women received titles, they gained the strength to assert their rights. One woman stated: *"We had tongues but could not speak, we had feet but could not walk. Now that we have the land, we have the strength to speak and walk."* (Alaka & Chetna, 1987, p. 26)

A study in Himachal Pradesh found that women's opinions are generally disregarded in matters of agricultural participation and rural development (Bala, 2003). An interview with female respondents noted that male members only sought their consent in household and agricultural activities whereas their suggestions/objections were not taken into account. The issue of marginalization of women in day-to-day affairs and decisions of the family and society have been noted in another study too. A study conducted in Haryana, revealed that farm women did not make any independent decisions on farm operation, but participated in almost all the decisions and dominated only decisions more related to domestic sphere, i.e., storage of farm produce, purchase/sale of animals and credit (National Commission for Women, 2005).

Women are also systematically excluded from decision-making bodies, including Agricultural Marketing Committees, and struggle to access loans and subsidies under government programs such as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and Rural Employment Programme (REP). This ensures that while their labor is essential, control over agricultural resources and decision-making remains in the hands of men, perpetuating patriarchal structures (National Commission for Women, 2005). Table 1 shows the decision-making patterns in rural households, revealing that men are the primary decision-makers in agricultural affairs.

Table 1. Decision Making Pattern of Rural Families*Decision Making Pattern (Percent)*

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female Share</i>	<i>Joint by Male and Female</i>
Adoption of HYVs	83	—	17
Use of fertilisers/ plant			
Protection measures	80	—	20
Purchase of farm machinery	72	—	28
Purchase and sale of animals	21	—	64
Sale of milk and milk products	11	—	78
Procurement of credit	50	—	50
Marketing farm produce	32	6	62
Investment of added profit	26	7	67

*(National Commission for Women, 2005)***Table 1. Decision Making Pattern of Rural Families***Decision Making Pattern (Percent)*

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female Share</i>	<i>Joint by Male and Female</i>
Activities	Women	Men	
Household Activities	Cooking (grinding, cutting, preparing food etc)	—	
	Sweeping, washing clothes & utensils	—	
	Fetching water	—	
	Collecting water	—	
	Making cow dung- cakes	—	
Child Care	Feeding children	—	
	Taking care of children	—	

(National Commission for Women, 2005)

Activities	Women	Men	
Agricultural Activities	Digging	Ploughing, digging	
	–	Irrigation of fields	
	Harvesting crops	Harvesting crops	
	Sowing	Sowing	
	Weeding	–	
	Cutting grass from fields	–	
	Groundnut picking	–	
Selling Allied Activities	Husking/ winnowing	–	
	Vegetable plucking	Vegetable plucking	
	–	Fertilising	
	Sells vegetables, groundnuts, cereals, sometimes sells fuel wood	Occasionally	
	Feeding cattle, milking & bathing the cattle	Feeding cattle, milking & bathing the cattle sometimes	
	Cleaning of cattle shed	Sometimes	
Selling Allied Activities	Husking/ winnowing	–	
	Vegetable plucking	Vegetable plucking	
	–	Fertilising	
	Sells vegetables, groundnuts, cereals, sometimes sells fuel wood	Occasionally	
	Feeding cattle, milking & bathing the cattle	Feeding cattle, milking & bathing the cattle sometimes	
	Cleaning of cattle shed	Sometimes	

(National Commission for Women, 2005)

On the other hand, alternative case studies present contrasting findings. Women in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh reported the following benefits from plots titled solely in the women's names (Oxfam & Gorakhpur Environmental Action Network, 2013; Kelkar, field notes 2012):

1. Land titled under the woman's name enhances her self-esteem; she is recognised as a farmer and is more likely to access institutional credit for increasing production and productivity from land.
2. With land in her independent name, a woman receives more respect from her husband, her children and the community.
3. With land titled in her name, a woman is in a position to escape violence and avoid marital conflict.
4. Land titled in the woman's name reduces the risk of her eviction from the marital household.
5. With land titled in her name, a woman is in a position to decide on land-use priorities and disallow any sale of land without her knowledge and approval.

At a fundamental level, the security provided by land is more certain, as it is not subject to the fluctuations of the labour market and other socio-historical disadvantages. While income only maintains consumption, land titles allow individuals to engage in long-term planning. Land distribution facilitates a restructuring of gender relations in the areas of property rights, access to technology and healthcare, and autonomy in the governance of resources, including women's own bodies and labour. Landownership enhances women's bargaining strength and decision-making power, and allows them to challenge the social norms and rules that discriminate against them in the use and transformation of land and productive assets (Kelkar 2014).

Santos et al. (2014) also analyzed data from 1,373 households in West Bengal collected in 2010 and observed a strong positive relationship between having women's names on land titles and their involvement in decisions regarding the use of agricultural land and the purchase of productive assets. Roy (2008) also found similar evidence in India with respect to increases in women's autonomy within their marital families, based on the 2005-2006 National Family and Health Survey dataset that covers 28,000 ever-married women.

Table 3 further illustrates how women with land titles participate more actively in decisions about farming, livelihood, and household activities, compared to women without land titles or those where men hold ownership. Even in areas like family planning, women with land titles demonstrate higher participation rates, reflecting their increased influence and agency.

Table 3. Land Title Ownership by Gender

Activity	All	No Title	Men	Women
Farm decisions				
Crop selection	36.8	37	36.2	71.1
Variety selection	36.2	37.1	35.3	70.7
Food crop farming	34.4	35	33.6	69.4
Cash crop farming	20.1	19.6	20.1	60
Livelihood decisions				

Farm decisions				
Crop selection	36.8	37	36.2	71.1
Livestock raising	73.9	77.2	68.2	95.1
Nonfarm activities	33.8	36.9	30	70.8
Household decisions				
Major expenditure	43.1	43.9	42	58.1
Minor expenditure	88.3	89	86.2	98.7
Children's education	56.9	59.9	51.1	92
Family planning	59.3	61.8	53.1	68.8

Note. All: The overall proportion of women involved in each decision-making area; No Title: Women without land title ownership; Men: Women in households where men hold the land title.; Women: Women in households where they themselves hold the land title. [Source: Valera et al. (2018), based on data from IRRI, 2016. Rice Monitoring Survey 2016 in India. Los Baños, Philippines.]

Our results show that just having a title won't resolve the bigger challenge of different levels of inequities that women face in land ownership. There is also a challenge of limited access to individual land titles, lower shares, smaller land size and inferior quality of land holdings. According to Jain et al. (2023), Even if women own land, either the area of these plots is smaller than or their quality is inferior to the lands owned by men (Jain et al., 2023). It highlights the need for comprehensive social and behavioural change apart from policy interventions to ensure that the women's land rights translate into meaningful ownership and control.

I WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

In India the question of land ownership of women is predominantly a matter of religious personal laws. Other than religious laws, the Land Acquisition (Right to Fair Rehabilitation and Resettlement) Act, 2013, (LARR) and the Forest Rights Act, 2006, (FRA) are two integral laws. The LARR guarantees that families who are intending to undergo rehabilitation must give their consent, and that they will receive a greater amount of compensation. Adivasi groups who live in forests are the focus of the FRA, which acknowledges their entitlement to forest resources and land, on which they rely for their income, housing, and other sociocultural requirements (India Development Review, 2023).

FOR HINDUS

The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 (HSA 1956) serves as the primary legislation for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. On the other hand, Muslims and Christians follow their respective property laws. According to Roy (2015), the HSA 1956 aimed to establish equal inheritance rights for sons and daughters to family property. However, as noted by Bose & Das (2017), the Act only allowed daughters to inherit property acquired directly by their fathers, while ancestral property was reserved for sons. This exclusion, coupled with the prevalence of joint family property in rural areas,

reinforced systemic gender bias.

To address this inequality, five states—Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, introduced amendments to the HSA between the 1970s and 1990s. These reforms allowed married women to inherit ancestral property, marking significant progress (Bose & Das, 2017). Despite these state-level reforms, women in the rest of India continued to face discriminatory inheritance laws, which eventually led to the nationwide adoption of the 2005 inheritance reform (Deininger et al., 2013). The 2005 amendment mandated equal inheritance rights for both married and unmarried daughters in ancestral property and explicitly included agricultural land within its scope, addressing the discriminatory tenurial laws that had governed its devolution (Women's land rights in India, 2023). By legally recognizing daughters as equal successors to their father's property, the amendment sought to eliminate gender bias in property rights. However, the applicability of this law to daughters whose fathers had passed away before the amendment came into force was initially unclear, leading to conflicting judicial interpretations (Bhardwaj, 2020).

In *Prakash v. Phoolwati* (2015) case, a two-judge Bench led by Justice A.K. Goel ruled that the 2005 amendment only applied to “living daughters of living coparceners” as of September 9, 2005, the date of its enforcement. This narrow interpretation restricted the amendment's scope to cases wherein both the daughter and the father were alive at the time (Yadav & Singh, 2023). Contrastingly, in the *Danamma v. Amar* (2018) case, a two-judge Bench headed by Justice A.K. Sikri held that daughters could inherit their father's share of ancestral property even if he had passed away before the amendment (in this case, in 2001). This interpretation significantly expanded the rights of daughters under the amended law (Yadav & Singh, 2023). The ambiguity was finally resolved in the *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma* (2020) case, where a three-judge Bench led by Justice Arun Mishra ruled that a daughter's right to ancestral property is by birth and does not depend on whether her father was alive at the time of the amendment. This landmark judgment unequivocally established gender equality in property succession under the HSAA (Yadav & Singh, 2023). This judgment firmly established gender equality in property succession under the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, granting men and women equal rights to inherit ancestral property in India.

FOR MUSLIMS

The property rights of Muslims in India are governed by the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937, commonly known as the Shariat Act. The primary source of Shariat law is the Quran, where the general principle of inheritance was laid down. “There is a share for men and a share for women from what is left by parents and those nearest related, whether the property be small or large – a legal share.” (Quran, 4:7). In cases where the woman's share is for her personal use and the man's share is divided between his personal use and family maintenance, men are given two shares to a woman's share to maintain equity (Aslam & Kazmi, 2009).

Under Muslim personal law, inheritance is determined only after the death of a person, as there is no concept of the ‘right to property by birth,’ unlike Hindu law. This means that a child born in a Muslim family does not have a right to property at birth. The distribution of inheritance occurs only after fulfilling the primary duties of the deceased, such as funeral expenses, debts, and wages. Muslim law does not distinguish between movable and immovable assets, nor between self-acquired and ancestral property; all belongings of the deceased are equally available for inheritance (Women's Right to Property under Muslim Law, 2023).

As per the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937, both men and women are recognized as legal heirs of inherited property. However, the share of a female heir is half that of a male heir, as men are responsible for financial provisions, while women receive Mehr and maintenance upon marriage. Mehr is a woman's exclusive property received from her husband at marriage and cannot be inherited by others unless voluntarily transferred by the woman. Its quantum is determined by the husband, who may even give his entire property as Mehr (Women's Right to Property under Muslim Law, 2023).

A widow's share of her husband's property depends on whether he has children. Without children, the widow is entitled to one-fourth of his property; with children or grandchildren, she receives one-eighth. If a man has multiple wives, they collectively share one-eighth of the property, or one-sixteenth each if there are children. A widow loses inheritance rights if the marriage was not consummated due to the husband's illness. However, a divorced wife retains her claim until she remarries if the husband dies after divorce. If a woman's son dies with no children then she is entitled to one-sixth share of her son's property. However, if the deceased son has any children then her share becomes one-third (Women's Right to Property under Muslim Law, 2023).

FOR CHRISTIANS

The Indian Succession Act, 1925, governs property rights for Christians in India and ensures equality by treating both male and female children as equal heirs. It grants them an equal share in their parents' property if the parents die without a will. The Act also provides similar rights to widows and widowers over their spouses' property. Section 33 of the Act outlines the distribution of a deceased man's property. If he leaves behind a widow and children, the widow gets one-third of the property, while the remaining two-thirds are divided among the children. If there are no children but other relatives, the widow receives half the property, with the other half going to the relatives. If the widow is the only survivor, she inherits the entire property. Section 35 extends the same rights to a widower regarding his wife's property. Section 36 states that after the widow's share is deducted, the remaining property is equally divided among the children. Together, Sections 33 and 36 clarify that daughters have the same inheritance rights as sons in their father's property if he dies without a will (Milanie, 2022).

FOR PARSIS

In India, Parsis are governed by the Indian Succession Act of 1925, along with specific amendments introduced in 1939 that apply only to them. Under these amendments, the inheritance of the property of male intestates follows distinct rules compared to female intestates. In the case of a deceased man's property (excluding agricultural land), his widow and each son receive twice the share of each daughter. If the deceased is survived by both parents, in addition to a widow and children, the father receives half the share of a son, and the mother receives half the share of a daughter. For agricultural land, the daughter receives one-fourth of the son's share, while the widow is entitled to twice the daughter's share. The parents of the deceased do not inherit from agricultural land. On the other hand, in the property of a deceased woman, the husband, son, and daughter inherit equal shares, meaning daughters inherit equally with sons from their mother's property, but the shares differ in the father's property. (Agarwal, 1988).

While every religion and community in India has granted women land ownership rights, whether equal or unequal, the actual number of women landowners remains very low. The gap between legal entitlements and real ownership is further exacerbated by various barriers, which not

only limit women's access to land but also hinder their ability to directly control and manage the land they do own.

II Constraints on Women's Inheritance and Land Rights

In India, the constraints women face in owning property stem primarily from the deep-rooted social structures that discriminate against them in various ways. These constraints can be categorized as follows:

1. **Lack of awareness about the rights:** Many women believe that key institutions, including the state, religious authorities, and local leaders, do not recognize their right to own and manage agricultural land. According to a study by Landesa and UN Women (2012), about 40% of the surveyed women were unaware that the law grants them the right to own land. This lack of awareness was even higher among female-headed households. In contrast, 85% of husbands surveyed acknowledged that women have legal land ownership rights.
2. **Religious leaders also played a role in shaping these perceptions.** Around half of the Hindu and Muslim women surveyed believed that their religious leaders did not recognize their right to inherit land from their parents. Additionally, 20% of Hindu women and 5% of Muslim women felt that religious authorities denied them their right to inherit land from their husbands. Furthermore, both Hindu and Muslim women reported that local leaders failed to acknowledge their inheritance rights. This widespread resistance within households and communities discourages women from claiming their property rights (Kelkar, 2014).
3. **Lack of formal documentation:** Another major barrier is the lack of formal land documentation in women's names. The study found that only 60% of the plots surveyed had formal title deeds or patta documents, while 25% lacked any documentation at all. The remaining plots were held under informal documents, such as "white papers," which lack official revenue authority seals (Kelkar, 2014). Shockingly, women's names appeared in less than 10% of the formal land documents, whereas their husbands' names were present in over 90% of them. This gender disparity was more pronounced among Muslim families, especially those residing in Bihar, where none of the formal land documents included women's names. The likelihood of a woman's name being included was lowest when land was inherited (6%), compared to land acquired through market purchases (17%) or government allocations (77%). Furthermore, joint titling was nearly non-existent, with only six confirmed cases of joint ownership in Andhra Pradesh (Kelkar, 2014).
4. **Limited interaction with government officials:** Due to entrenched gender norms and the male-dominated nature of land and revenue administration, rural women often lack the confidence to engage with government officials regarding land management. The study revealed that 61% of the surveyed women had never interacted with revenue officials. This lack of engagement not only affects their ability to secure and maintain land rights, but also limits their access to other entitlements and essential information that could enhance their legal and economic standing (Kelkar 2014).
5. **Maintaining goodwill with brothers:** In much of northern and eastern India, women typically relinquish their claims to parental land in favor of their brothers to maintain good relations with them. After their parents pass away, a woman's access to her natal home crucially depends on her bond with her brother. He is seen as someone who can provide her with support, both emotionally and financially, especially if she faces problems in her marriage or mistreatment. He also plays an important role in family traditions, such as helping with her children's weddings in Hindu families. As one old woman from Harbassi (Punjab) says: 'If a brother and sister are on good terms then ... she will tell her brother that she does not want her share of the inheritance. After all, if he eats, then she can eat' (Sharma, 1980, p.57).

6. Cheating or manipulation by male kins: In traditionally patrilineal communities, when women, as daughters or sisters, assert their rights and file claims instead of willingly ceding them to their brothers (often encouraged by their husbands), male relatives have been observed to employ various strategies to bypass modern legal provisions. For instance, to ensure that only sons inherit, fathers have been found to leave wills disinheriting daughters, or wills have been forged by relatives after the person's death (Parry, 1979); the brothers may also appeal to revenue authorities who maintain land registers, stating that the sister is wealthy and does not need the land, or that she is an absentee landlord as she is living with her husband in another village (Mayer, 1960).

7. Pressure on widows to marry brother-in-law: Land claims of widows are generally viewed with much less antagonism than those of daughters, since with widows there is a greater chance of the land remaining with agnates, especially if various conditions on remarriage, including levirate, can be enforced. Levirate appears to be most easily accepted when the widow is young and childless or has only one child, and the brother-in-law unmarried. However, there have been known cases of unwilling widows with several children being forced to cohabit with married brothers-in-law, who then take over their land. Single women (unmarried or widowed) are particularly vulnerable to harassment by male kin, who may involve them in expensive litigation, forcing them to mortgage their land to cover legal expenses and ultimately lose it. Male relatives may also resort to threats of violence to stop women from filing claims or exercising customary rights. In some cases, murder has been reported as a means to intimidate women, especially when accusations of witchcraft are involved (Minturn & Hitchcock, 1966; Kishwar, 1987).

8. Biased institutional responses: Official policies and programmes often reflect and reinforce traditional attitudes, as seen in various instances of land ownership and distribution. For example, the Panchayat Secretary of Kithoor village in Rajasthan openly acknowledged his practice of pressuring daughters to forfeit their land shares in favor of their brothers, while attempting to persuade widows to retain their shares. This illustrates a biased approach to land rights based on gender. In the Bodhgaya peasant movement, women fought not only against the Math but also the deep-seated prejudices of local men and government officers, who were opposed to women holding independent land titles. Despite their success in challenging the Math and local men, the district officer denied their request to formally register land in their names. He claimed that titles could only be issued to the head of the household, who was traditionally the man, and that women, who would eventually leave for their in-laws, were unfit to be landowners (Manimala, 1983). These examples show how entrenched biases, often embedded within institutional practices, impede the implementation of progressive policies aimed at securing women's land rights.

II Barriers to Women's Direct Control, Management and Cultivation of Land

Pressure on widows to relinquish land: Widows with minor children often face significant pressure to either sell their land to a relative at a lower price or lease it out. However, there are instances wherein women, particularly those with minor sons, are more likely to manage the land themselves, especially in tribal communities. Even in these situations, women face extreme social challenges in maintaining control over their land, as highlighted by Kishwar (1987).

Barriers from post-marital residence and purdah: Post-marital residence patterns, purdah ideologies, and the division of village spaces create significant obstacles for women to claim their legal rights to land. In regions where village exogamy and long-distance marriages are common, women face not only ideological barriers but also practical difficulties in land management. The purdah system, along with women's responsibility for childcare and household duties, severely restricts their mobility, limiting their ability to manage land effectively, even when the land is in their marital village (Agarwal, 1988 p.33).

Age, class, and caste influencing mobility: A woman's freedom of movement is often influenced by factors such as her age, seniority, whether she is a daughter or daughter-in-law, and her class or caste. Older women with grown-up sons, village daughters, and women from poor or low-caste families tend to have more liberty. However, even in these cases, women are expected to avoid spaces dominated by men, which puts them at a disadvantage in seeking information on new agricultural practices, purchasing inputs, hiring labor, and selling products (Agarwal, 1988 p.33).

Male control over agricultural technology: Taboos against women ploughing are widespread across most cultures, and in India, the male monopoly over the plough remains a significant barrier to women's effective management and cultivation of land. This taboo, deeply ingrained in many agricultural societies, forces women to rely on men for critical tasks, especially in intensive agriculture, greatly limiting their independence and farming capabilities, particularly for poorer women (Agarwal, 1988 p.34).

II Policy Gaps and Recommendations

To guarantee that women working in agriculture and related fields have access to resources and programs, the government has made gender mainstreaming in agriculture a top priority as part of India's vision for Aatma Nirbhar Bharat (Patel & Sethi, 2021). The Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare has launched a number of beneficiary-oriented programs to boost women's involvement in the industry.

Offering women farmers training and capacity-building initiatives has been a crucial policy strategy. Through National Training Institutes, State Agricultural Management and Extension Training Institutes (SAMETIs), Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), and State Agricultural Universities (SAUs), the Sub-Mission on Agriculture Extension (SMAE) administers the Support to State Extension Programs for Extension Reforms (ATMA Scheme) and offers a variety of skill training courses in agriculture and related fields (minimum 200 hours) (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare, 2021).

Similarly, the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) launched the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), which aims to improve rural women's skill development by providing training on contemporary agricultural methods, agro-ecological best practices, and household food security. Women in rural regions can participate in short-term skill development programs offered by other government programs, including the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY). In order to provide women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with drone technology to perform agricultural tasks and increase their revenue, the Namo Drone Didi scheme (2024) was introduced more recently (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2024). Similar to this, the Biotech-Krishi Innovation Science Application Network (Biotech-KISAN) Program was established to offer small and marginal women farmers in the northeastern region scientific agricultural solutions (Ministry of Science & Technology, 2021).

While these programs place a strong focus on training and capacity building, they assume that women farmers already hold decision-making power in agriculture, overlooking a crucial first step: securing land ownership for women. Despite a greater emphasis on training programs, the influence on women's land ownership is negligible. Agriculture Census (2015-16) reveals that the proportion of female operated landholdings increased by just 1% from 12.78% in 2010–11 to 13.78% in 2015–16, despite increased feminisation and training for women farmers. Furthermore, the data

from the National Statistical Office (NSO, 2021) shows that only 2 out of 1,000 women aged 15 and older have taken part in formal agricultural training, indicating low outreach and effectiveness.

The influence on women's land ownership is still minimal, even with the emphasis on training initiatives. According to the Agriculture Census (2015–16), the proportion of female operational landholdings rose by just 1% from 12.78% in 2010–11 to 13.78% in 2015–16, despite greater feminisation and training for female farmers. Furthermore, only two out of every 1,000 women aged 15 and older have taken part in official agricultural training, according to statistics from the National Statistical Office (NSO, 2021), showing low outreach and effectiveness.

This gap highlights a fundamental flaw in policy design. While skill development is a critical step, it cannot be effective unless women have independent decision-making power, which is intrinsically linked to land ownership.

The need of the hour is to effectively implement the existing legal framework that grants women inheritance rights across different religions, not to introduce new policies. The review of Indian policy frameworks reveals that the issue lies not in the lack of laws but rather in how ineffectively they are being implemented. All of India's religious inheritance laws such as Hindu Succession Act, Indian Succession Act, Muslim personal laws, provide women the right to inherit and own property. However, sociocultural barriers, lack of awareness, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms continue to stop women from exercising these rights. Policy measures have systematically de-emphasized women's economic equality and focused on secondary interventions like training and skill development without securing women's decision-making power through land ownership.

Innovative government programs such as the patta (land title) distribution programs in West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh highlight the importance of implementation-driven solutions. Under this program, land titles were given jointly to women and men in public ceremonies, to ensure that the women's land ownership rights were acknowledged both legally and socially (Kelkar, 2014). Such initiatives not only document women's rights but also help women to gain social acceptance as land owners within their families and communities.

I RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Nationwide Awareness Campaigns:** Launch government-led campaigns to educate rural women, religious leaders, and local communities about women's legal land rights, using radio, workshops, and local influencers, while also addressing cultural norms that discourage women from claiming their land rights.
2. **Mandating Women's Names on Land Titles:** Amend laws to require women's names on land documents, with incentives for updating land titles to reflect joint ownership, and address cultural perceptions around male dominance in land ownership.
3. **Facilitate Interaction with Government Officials:** Build women's confidence through training programs and create women-friendly local offices for easier access to land and revenue officials, breaking the cultural barriers that discourage women from engaging with male-dominated institutions.
4. **Support for Widows and Unmarried Women:** Strengthen protections for widows and unmarried women against forced land transfers and marriage pressures, with legal aid, and address societal norms that pressure widows or unmarried women to forfeit their rights.
5. **Combat Manipulation by Male Kin:** Enforce laws against coercion or manipulation by male relatives, providing legal support and creating helplines for women to report abuses, while challenging deep-rooted cultural practices of male control over inheritance.
6. **Institutional Bias Training:** Implement gender-sensitivity training for land officials and Panchayat members to ensure equal treatment, addressing cultural biases within institutions that undermine women's land rights, and set up grievance redressal systems for discrimination.
7. **Legal Provisions for Joint Ownership:** Introduce provisions supporting joint land ownership between married couples and encourage joint titles with tax exemptions or subsidies, aligning legal frameworks with shifting cultural attitudes towards shared land ownership.

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