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INVISIBLE LABOUR TO RECOGNISED LEADERSHIP

Women Who Feed Nations, Sustain Families, and Hold Rural Economies Together

Invisible Labour to Recognised Leadership: Women Who Feed Nations, Sustain Families, and Hold Rural Economies Together

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The declaration of 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer is not merely symbolic recognition; it is a long overdue political, economic, and moral acknowledgement of the millions of women whose labour sustains food systems, rural economies, ecological resilience, and household survival, while remaining systematically invisible within policies, markets, and institutions. Across the Global South, and particularly in India, women farmers stand at the intersection of productive and reproductive labour: they cultivate fields, manage livestock, preserve seeds, collect water and fuel, ensure household nutrition, care for children and the elderly, and absorb the shocks of climate change, migration, indebtedness, and agrarian distress. Yet, despite being central to agriculture and food security, women in agriculture are generally not able to access extension services, land titles, crop insurance, institutional credit, procurement systems, irrigation governance, and farmer producer institutions. Even government schemes that target "farmers" frequently fail to identify women as primary agricultural actors because eligibility is linked to land ownership records that are held predominantly by men.

In India, the feminisation of agriculture has intensified over the past two decades due to various reasons like male migration, climate vulnerabilities, fragmentation of landholdings, and distress in rural livelihoods. Women today form a substantial proportion of the agricultural workforce. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2024, rural women participation in agriculture has steadily increased from 75.9% (2022) to 76.9% in 2024, with nearly two-thirds of rural working women engaged in agricultural activities. Yet, this labour participation is not matched by ownership, decision-making authority, or access to institutional support. Agricultural Census (2015–16) data shows that women own only 13.9% of operational landholdings. NFHS-6 (2023–24) records that households with any female members owning a house and/or land (alone or jointly with others) stand at just 19.1%, despite women's significant contribution to sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, post-harvest management, livestock care, and food processing.

Economist Bina Agarwal[1] has repeatedly argued that land ownership[2] is not merely an economic asset for women, but a source of bargaining power, social security, protection from violence, and recognition within both household and community structures. Her work demonstrates that women's ownership and control over land improves household food security, child welfare, productivity, and women's agency. Similarly, Jayati Ghosh[3] has consistently highlighted how neoliberal agricultural transitions, climate vulnerabilities, and

[1]Agarwal, B. (1994). A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia. Cambridge University Press.
[2]Agarwal, B. (2021). "India Must Push for Women's Rights in Land Ownership." The Indian Express.
[3]Ghosh, J. (2015). "Unseen Workers: Women in Indian Agriculture." Frontline.

shrinking public investments disproportionately burden women farmers, who often operate with lower access to credit, extension services, technology, irrigation, and markets.[4]

The burden borne by women farmers extends far beyond agricultural labour. Time-use surveys and evidence from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) indicate that women continue to shoulder disproportionate unpaid care work responsibilities, including childcare, eldercare, cooking, fuel and water collection, and household management. Rural women often spend long hours balancing agricultural production with social reproduction, leaving little time for skill development, participation in governance spaces, market engagement, or leadership opportunities. The agricultural economy in India is clearly subsidised by women's invisible unpaid labour.

The International Year of the Woman Farmer is, therefore, important because it reframes women not as beneficiaries of welfare, but as economic actors, producers, entrepreneurs, innovators, custodians of biodiversity, climate leaders, and agents of rural transformation. It pushes governments, multilateral institutions, and development actors to move beyond token inclusion and towards structural recognition and redistribution of resources, rights, and representation.

WOMEN FARMERS AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Recognising women farmers is central to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the principle of "Leaving No One Behind." Women farmers sit at the convergence of multiple SDGs because agriculture is not only about food production; it is fundamentally linked to poverty reduction, nutrition, health, climate resilience, gender equality, and sustainable ecosystems.

Women farmers are indispensable to:

SDG 1 No Poverty — women's access to productive assets, markets, and income opportunities directly reduces rural poverty and intergenerational vulnerabilities.	**SDG 2** Zero Hunger — women contribute significantly to household nutrition, food diversity, seed preservation, and subsistence farming systems.
SDG 5 Gender Equality — securing women's land rights, access to finance, leadership, and decision-making power is central to women's empowerment.	**SDG 8** Decent Work & Economic Growth — recognition of women's labour and enterprise development strengthens inclusive rural economies.
SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities — addressing structural barriers faced by rural women reduces social and economic disparities.	**SDG 13** Climate Action — women farmers are frontline actors in climate adaptation, natural farming, water conservation, and biodiversity management.

[4]India's economy is leaving a generation of women behind on the farm - The Washington Post.

SDG 16	SDG 17
Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions — women's collective institutions strengthen local accountability, democratic participation, and access to justice.	Partnerships for the Goals — gender-transformative agricultural systems require convergence across governments, civil society, research institutions, and markets.

Global evidence increasingly demonstrates that strengthening women farmers has multiplier effects across nutrition, education, health, climate resilience, and local economic growth. Yet, women continue to receive disproportionately lower access to agricultural extension services, mechanisation, digital technologies, climate financing, and institutional credit. This aligns with the spirit of international frameworks such as CEDAW Article 14, which calls on states to ensure rural women's equal access to credit, training, cooperatives, and social security. India's own trajectory — from MKSP to Maharashtra's new legislation — shows this vision increasingly being realised through domestic policy and state-level law making, on the country's own initiative.

THE INDIAN POLICY CONTEXT AND BUDGET 2026–27

India's policy discourse has increasingly recognised women-led development as central to the vision of "Viksit Bharat." An important initiative for giving recognition to women farmers in India was the introduction of the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM). MKSP was launched as a sub-component of the DAY-NRLM to improve the status of women in agriculture by recognising the centrality of women in agricultural activities and giving recognition to women as farmers and key bread earners of their families, while enhancing the opportunities that empower them. The core objectives of MKSP were as follows:

- **Women's Empowerment:** Recognises the central role of women in agriculture and provides direct support to enhance their status and income.
- **Sustainable Farming:** Promotes eco-friendly, non-chemical, and climate-resilient agricultural practices (e.g., organic manure, integrated nutrient management).
- **Resource Access:** Helps women farmers gain better control over productive resources like seeds, water, and agricultural credit.
- **Access to Services:** Strengthens the capacity of women in agriculture to access inputs and services from government and other agencies.
- **Reduced Drudgery:** Introduces appropriate tools and technologies to ease the physical workload of women farmers.

The Union Budget 2026-27 further strengthened this narrative by reiterating commitments towards women's economic participation, self-help groups (SHGs), rural entrepreneurship, climate-resilient agriculture, and digital inclusion. Continued investments in the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), support to women-led Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), expansion of rural livelihoods, and climate-smart agriculture reflect a growing policy acknowledgement that women are critical to rural economic transformation. However, a

significant gap remains between participation and ownership. Women are mobilised extensively through SHGs and collectives, yet they often remain concentrated in low-value segments of agricultural value chains. Access to formal markets, processing infrastructure, storage, branding, digital platforms, irrigation systems, and institutional procurement remains uneven. The challenge before India is therefore not simply increasing women's participation in agriculture, but transforming the conditions under which women participate. This requires moving from:

- Unpaid labour to recognised economic contribution
- Participation to leadership
- Inclusion to ownership
- Welfare to agency
- Subsistence survival to enterprise and market integration

Organisations and networks working on land rights and agrarian justice, including Landesa, have consistently argued that secure land tenure for women is foundational to agricultural productivity, climate resilience, and rural prosperity. Without land rights, women remain excluded from credit systems, crop insurance, procurement channels, and government entitlements linked to ownership records.

WHY COLLECTIVE PLATFORMS MATTER: FPOS, PRODUCER GROUPS, AND PRODUCER ENTERPRISES

The emergence of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), Producer Groups (PGs), and Producer Enterprises (PEs) offers one of the most significant institutional opportunities to transform the status of women farmers in India. These platforms can potentially move women from isolated and informal labour positions into collective economic leadership. Women-led collectives under DAY-NRLM have already demonstrated strong potential in:

- Aggregation and collective marketing
- Seed banks and natural farming
- Dairy and livestock enterprises
- Non-timber forest produce
- Food processing and value addition
- Climate-resilient agriculture
- Local entrepreneurship ecosystems

Yet, women's participation in FPOs often remains numerically visible but structurally weak. Leadership positions continue to be dominated by men; women have lower access to working capital and business literacy; and gender norms restrict mobility and market engagement. To strengthen women-led agricultural collectives, India needs a gender-transformative approach that goes beyond membership numbers.

THE WAY FORWARD

The International Year of the Woman Farmer should become a turning point for reimagining agricultural policy through a gender-responsive lens. Five priorities are critical.

1 Recognise Women as Farmers in Policy and Data Systems

Women must be formally recognised as farmers across all agricultural databases, land records, procurement systems, and farmer registries. Gender-disaggregated agricultural data should become mandatory for planning and budgeting.

POLICY SPOTLIGHT — MAHARASHTRA, JULY 2026

Maharashtra became the first Indian state to legislate formal recognition of women as farmers in their own right, delinking eligibility for credit, insurance, and welfare access from land ownership through a new Woman Farmer Certificate. Passed unanimously, with a Chief Minister-led Empowerment Council and a dedicated state fund driving implementation, it shows how political will at the state level can translate gender-responsive agricultural policy into law.

2 Strengthen Women's Land and Asset Ownership

Joint land titles, inheritance rights awareness, legal literacy, and simplified land documentation processes are essential for women's economic security and bargaining power.

3 Invest further in Women-Led FPOs and Producer Enterprises

Dedicated financing windows, market linkages, incubation support, digital literacy, climate-smart technologies, and leadership training are needed to strengthen women-led agricultural enterprises.

4 Reduce the Burden of Unpaid Care Work

Rural infrastructure investments in water, clean energy, childcare services, transport, and healthcare are essential to reduce time poverty among women farmers.

5 Build Gender-Responsive Climate and Agricultural Systems

Women farmers must be positioned at the centre of climate adaptation planning, agroecology transitions, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable farming systems. Their local ecological knowledge should shape agricultural innovation and climate financing frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Celebrating the International Year of the Woman Farmer is ultimately about correcting a historic injustice. It is about acknowledging that women have always been central to agriculture, even when policies, markets, and institutions failed to see them as such. It is about recognising that the future of food security, climate resilience, sustainable development, and rural prosperity cannot be built on invisible labour and unequal systems.

Women farmers are not marginal actors in agriculture; they are the key players and its backbone. They sustain households, protect ecosystems, preserve knowledge systems, and strengthen local economies under conditions of extraordinary vulnerability. The question before governments, markets, and institutions is no longer whether women contribute to agriculture. The question is whether agricultural systems are willing to redistribute power, resources, recognition, and leadership in ways that truly value their contribution and enhance their access to relevant skills and resources.

The International Year of the Woman Farmer must, therefore, become more than a commemorative exercise. It must become a political and institutional commitment to building agricultural systems where women are recognised not merely as labourers, but as rights holders, producers, entrepreneurs, leaders, and architects of a more equitable and sustainable rural future.

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