



Rural Women and Agricultural Work: Contribution, Recognition, and Rights

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Abstract: Rural women play a vital but often unrecognised role in agricultural production, particularly in developing countries where agriculture forms the backbone of rural livelihoods. This research explores the contribution of rural women to agriculture, the barriers they face in gaining recognition, and the challenges related to their rights, such as land ownership, wage parity, and access to social security. This study aims to highlight the economic and social contributions of rural women, identify the structural barriers that limit their empowerment, and propose policy interventions to enhance their well-being. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study draws upon secondary data from global and national reports (FAO, ILO, Government of India), field observations and structured interviews with 200 rural women across Sirsa. The findings reveal that while rural women are involved in nearly all aspects of agricultural work, they remain marginalised in decision-making and land ownership. Wage disparities of 30–40% exist between men and women performing similar tasks, and only a small fraction of women are aware of government schemes. The paper concludes by advocating for land rights, access to credit, gender-inclusive policies, and cooperative models to improve the socio-economic standing of rural women.

Keywords: Rural, agriculture, ownership, wage disparity, security, gender equity.

Introduction: Agriculture has historically formed the bedrock of rural economies across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and many other developing regions. It remains central not only to ensuring food security but also to sustaining the livelihoods of millions of rural households. Within this agrarian framework, rural women have played a pivotal yet often invisible role. Their contributions span the entire agricultural cycle: seed selection, sowing, transplanting, weeding, fodder collection, harvesting, threshing, storage, and marketing of small surpluses. In addition to farm-related labour, they also shoulder the burden of domestic responsibilities, creating a “double workload” that is seldom acknowledged in official statistics or economic assessments. Despite their indispensable involvement, the valuation of women’s labour in agriculture continues to be shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms, customary laws, and socio-economic structures that restrict their access to critical resources.

Historically, rural women have been excluded from ownership and control over land, which is the primary asset in agrarian societies. Cultural traditions, inheritance laws, and male-dominated kinship systems have largely denied them independent land rights, resulting in limited bargaining power and reduced autonomy in agricultural decision-making. This lack of land ownership also prevents women from accessing institutional credit, insurance, extension services, and modern farming technologies, all of which are generally extended to landowners. The result is a cycle of dependence in which women perform labour-intensive tasks but remain marginalised in terms of recognition, remuneration, and agency. Recent historiographical and gender-development debates challenge this invisibilisation by highlighting the need to mainstream women's agricultural labour within economic and historical discourse. Scholars argue that rural women's work is not merely supplementary to male labour; rather, it constitutes a foundational component of household and national agricultural productivity. Studies from India, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America indicate that when women have secure land rights and improved access to resources, agricultural yields increase significantly. Empowering women farmers is therefore not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic approach to enhancing food security, poverty reduction, and rural development. Despite the growing recognition of women's importance in agriculture, major barriers persist. These include limited mobility, inadequate education, discriminatory labour practices, wage disparities, and the absence of women in leadership structures such as cooperatives, panchayats, and farmer-producer organisations. Additionally, the feminisation of agriculture resulting from male out-migration has increased women's workload without corresponding improvements in access, resources, or policy support. Climate change, declining soil fertility, and market uncertainties further exacerbate the vulnerabilities faced by rural women. Against this background, this research paper examines the multifaceted contribution of rural women to agriculture, the structural constraints that hinder their recognition and rights, and the broader socio-economic implications of these challenges. It also evaluates how targeted policy interventions such as land reforms, microcredit, skill development, and inclusion in government schemes can strengthen their participation and upliftment. The paper is structured into several sections likewise detailed literature review, identification of research gaps, formulation of research questions, explanation of the methodology, analytical discussion of findings, and a concluding section offering actionable recommendations for enhancing the status and empowerment of rural women in agriculture.

Literature Review: The contribution of rural women to agriculture has been well-documented, although inconsistencies remain regarding the extent and recognition of this labour. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2011) estimates that rural women contribute between 40% and 60% of the agricultural labour force worldwide. However, much of this work is informal, unpaid, or subsumed within family-based labour systems, leading to underreporting and undervaluation. Agarwal (1994) argues that land ownership is a significant determinant of women's empowerment; yet, only a small percentage of women in South Asia own or control agricultural land. Deere and Doss (2006) further highlight that structural inequalities, embedded within social customs and educational gaps, perpetuate the exclusion of women from economic benefits and institutional support. The International

Labour Organisation (ILO, 2018) presents evidence that wage disparities between men and women persist globally, with women often excluded from extension services, formal labour contracts, and credit facilities. More recent research underscores the role of gender in shaping access to resources. Studies by UN Women (2019) suggest that rural women's exclusion from decision-making processes significantly affects agricultural productivity and food security. Government of India reports (2020) reveal that despite numerous welfare schemes targeting women, awareness and implementation remain limited at the grassroots level. Scholars also note emerging trends such as cooperative farming and self-help groups as potential avenues for empowerment, though their reach remains localised. These studies collectively affirm the need for inclusive policies but also reveal gaps in recognising rural women's unpaid labour and the lack of gender-disaggregated data in agricultural statistics.

Research Gap: While existing studies acknowledge the significant contribution of rural women in agriculture, gaps persist in the recognition of their labour in national and local statistics. There is a lack of focused research on how structural barriers, such as cultural norms and limited mobility, intersect with economic exclusion. Moreover, awareness and access to welfare schemes have not been adequately explored at the village level, especially in rural districts like Sirsa. This study contributes by providing empirical data from field observations and interviews to highlight how rural women's participation in agriculture remains marginalised despite their indispensable role.

Research Questions: Some major questions raised after literature review and empirical survey of area :-

1. What is the extent of rural women's contribution to agricultural labour in selected villages?
2. How do traditional gender roles affect rural women's access to resources such as land, credit, and technology?
3. What are the wage disparities between rural men and women in agriculture?
4. How aware are rural women of existing government schemes aimed at their empowerment?

Hypothesis: There are two hypothesis that:-

H1: Rural women's participation in agricultural labour is substantial but not formally recognised in decision-making or resource allocation.

H2: Limited land ownership and wage disparities contribute significantly to the economic exclusion of rural women.

Objectives of the Study: Main objective of the study that:-

1. To assess the extent of rural women's participation in agricultural activities.
2. To examine the challenges rural women face in accessing land, wages, and government schemes.
3. To explore the role of social and cultural norms in limiting women's empowerment.

4. To analyse the impact of awareness and training programs on rural women's economic well-being.
5. To provide policy recommendations for enhancing rural women's rights and socio-economic status.

Research Methodology: This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Secondary data was sourced from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Government of India's Agricultural Census, and reports by UN Women. Primary data was collected through structured interviews and field observations in three selected villages, covering 200 rural women aged between 18 to 50+ years. The villages were chosen to reflect diversity in socio-economic status and access to agricultural resources. Interviews were designed to explore labour patterns, land ownership, wage structures, access to government schemes, and cultural practices affecting women's participation. Data analysis included descriptive statistics for quantitative information and thematic analysis for qualitative responses. The study also incorporated case studies of self-help groups and cooperative farming models to highlight successful interventions.

Research Area and Scope: The geographical focus of this research is the Sirsa district in Haryana, India, an area predominantly dependent on agriculture for its economic sustenance. The study spans the last 30 years, a period that witnessed various policy interventions and welfare schemes aimed at improving rural livelihoods and women's empowerment. The temporal frame allows for the examination of both traditional agricultural practices and the gradual inclusion of women in development programs. The research specifically targets rural women actively engaged in farming, livestock care, and post-harvest activities, analysing their contribution, challenges, and access to government schemes, credit facilities, and training programs.

Data Collection: Primary sources are structured interviews with 200 rural women from villages. Field observations regarding agricultural practices. Government records and local panchayat reports. Secondary Sources as FAO reports (2011), ILO publications (2018), Government of India, Agricultural Census (2020) , UN Women reports (2019), Peer-reviewed books and journal articles (Agarwal, 1994; Deere & Doss, 2006)

Analysis and Interpretation: The data collected from the field survey provides an extensive, multidimensional understanding of the role that rural women play in agricultural activities and the socio-economic challenges that shape their lives. The findings reaffirm that rural women are not just passive participants or supplementary workers; rather, they form the foundation of agricultural production in rural communities. Their labour spans the entire agricultural cycle from pre-sowing preparation to post-harvest handling and contributes directly to household survival as well as the broader agrarian economy. Despite this crucial involvement, the socio-cultural system within which they operate limits their access to resources, recognition, and decision-making opportunities. The analysis of the data not only

highlights the centrality of women's labour but also exposes the systemic inequalities, cultural restrictions, and institutional gaps that continue to marginalise them. As such, the findings serve as an important basis for understanding both the challenges and the possibilities for empowerment of rural women. A central insight from the survey is the overwhelming participation of women in core agricultural operations. An impressive 85% of respondents confirmed that they take part in sowing and harvesting, which are among the most labour-intensive and time-sensitive tasks of the agricultural cycle. These stages determine agricultural productivity, crop quality, and market outcomes. Women's involvement in sowing entails preparing fields, seed selection, seed distribution, and maintaining proper inter-row spacing activities that require skill, precision, and physical strength. Similarly, harvesting demands long working hours, bending, cutting, bundling, and transporting the produce from the field to household or storage structures. These are tasks that significantly influence the quantity and quality of the final output. The high percentage reflects that women are central to these activities and indispensable to maintaining agricultural continuity. The field survey further reveals that beyond crop production, rural women contribute substantially to allied agricultural activities. 70% of the surveyed women are involved in livestock management, which forms a parallel economic backbone for rural households. Livestock care is a daily, labour-intensive responsibility that includes feeding animals, collecting fodder, cleaning sheds, milking, maintaining hygiene, and caring for young or sick animals. Livestock is often the most reliable source of cash income for rural families, especially during off-seasons or years of crop failure. Women's participation ensures nutritional security through milk consumption and supports income through dairy sales. Their knowledge of animal health, fodder selection, and production cycles further contributes to the sustainability of rural livelihoods. Furthermore, 60% of respondents reported active involvement in post-harvest operations such as processing, cleaning, grading, winnowing, drying, storing, and small-scale marketing. These activities are generally overlooked in formal labour documentation, largely because they take place within household spaces or village-level informal settings. However, these tasks are central to value addition, market preparation, and long-term preservation of produce. Post-harvest labour significantly reduces crop losses and helps maintain food stocks for household consumption. Women's involvement in these crucial tasks underscores their role in maintaining household food security and contributing indirectly to the local economy. Despite their heavy workload and wide-ranging involvement, the survey reveals a sharp divide between women's contribution and their ownership of productive assets. Only 12% of women reported owning land, highlighting a persistent gender gap in resource ownership. In agrarian societies, land is the most important economic and social asset. It is linked not only to income and production but also to status, autonomy, and bargaining power within the household. Lack of land ownership restricts women's access to government schemes, agricultural credit, subsidies, crop insurance, and training programs. It also limits their ability to make independent decisions regarding agricultural inputs, crop choices, and marketing strategies. Without formal land rights, women remain dependent on male family members for economic security. The data also demonstrates that 68% of women rely on male members for decision-making related to both agricultural operations and finances. This reflects deep-rooted patriarchal norms that position men as the primary decision-makers, regardless of who performs the majority of the

labour. This inequality extends beyond agriculture into daily household management and community activities. Women's voices often remain unheard in decisions related to land leasing, purchase of agricultural inputs, sale of produce, allocation of income, livestock investments, and adoption of new farming technologies. Even when women are the main labour contributors, cultural norms prevent them from assuming leadership roles or negotiating directly with markets, agricultural officers, or local institutions. Wage inequality is another major finding of the survey. The majority of women receive 30–40% lower wages than men for performing similar tasks. Wage discrimination persists across crop-related labour, farm maintenance, livestock rearing, and even daily wage agricultural work. Most women are hired on an informal basis, without written agreements, job security, or fixed payment structures. This makes them vulnerable to exploitative practices such as delayed payments, arbitrary wage cuts, and non-payment. Their limited bargaining power, low literacy levels, and social restrictions further deny them the ability to negotiate wages or protest unfair labour practices. The wage gap reinforces gender hierarchies and weakens women's economic autonomy. In addition to economic barriers, the field survey identifies several non-economic constraints that hinder women's active participation and empowerment. Limited mobility emerged as a significant challenge for the majority of respondents. Cultural norms in rural societies often discourage women from traveling alone, visiting markets, attending training programs, or engaging with government officials. This restriction directly impacts their exposure to new technologies, skill development programs, and institutional support systems. Social expectations regarding gender roles further constrain women's opportunities. Many women are required to prioritize domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and elder care. This unpaid domestic labour adds to their daily burden and limits the time available for economic activities, leadership roles, or community participation. Women often experience pressure to conform to traditional roles, and any deviation may invite criticism or social stigma. Such norms also discourage women from stepping into leadership positions within panchayats, cooperatives, or farmers' associations. Another notable finding from the survey is the low level of awareness of government schemes and welfare programs. Only a few of the women were aware of schemes such as PM-KISAN, MGNREGA opportunities for women, rural livelihood missions, agricultural subsidies, or self-employment initiatives. This lack of awareness prevents women from accessing resources that could enhance their productivity and economic independence. Poor outreach, limited literacy, lack of digital access, and low mobility exacerbate this information gap. Women often depend on male family members for receiving and interpreting information related to government programs, further reinforcing dependency. Despite these limitations, the survey identified several positive and encouraging trends. Self-Help Groups (SHGs), though present in only one of the surveyed villages, had a transformative impact on women's lives. Through SHGs, women gained access to credit, savings schemes, training programs, and peer support networks. The collective strength of these groups helped women build confidence, negotiate better wages, improve agricultural practices, and participate more actively in household and community decision-making. The SHG in the surveyed village initiated income-generating activities, collective savings, and skill development workshops, empowering women both economically and socially. The experiences of these women demonstrate that community-based structures can successfully

challenge traditional norms and pave the way for collective empowerment. The analysis also reveals instances where women demonstrated leadership in managing agricultural labour, particularly in households where men migrated for work. The feminisation of agriculture, driven by male out-migration and economic shifts, has increased women's responsibility for farm management. However, without adequate support, training, or access to resources, this increased responsibility becomes a burden rather than an opportunity for empowerment. Women often manage the farm independently but still lack formal recognition as farmers. The field survey clearly establishes that rural women are indispensable contributors to agricultural productivity, household well-being, and rural sustainability. Their labour is extensive, diverse, and essential at every stage of agricultural production. However, systemic inequalities rooted in patriarchal norms, limited asset ownership, wage discrimination, restricted mobility, and inadequate awareness of welfare programs continue to hinder their empowerment. Addressing these challenges requires multi-dimensional interventions that combine economic empowerment, social transformation, gender-sensitive institutional reforms, and improved access to information. Enabling women through land rights, equal wages, credit support, SHGs, agricultural training, and awareness campaigns can significantly improve agricultural outcomes and enhance women's autonomy. Women's empowerment in agriculture is not only a question of justice but also a strategic necessity for rural development, food security, and overall socio-economic progress. The findings of this survey underscore the urgent need for policies that recognise women's contributions, address structural inequalities, and create an environment where rural women can participate fully and equally in agricultural development.

Findings: Exclusive findings from the study present that:-

1. Rural women's labour contribution is extensive but informal and unrecognised.
2. Land ownership is a significant challenge; only a small fraction have land rights.
3. Wage disparities persist, with women earning considerably less than men.
4. Awareness of government schemes is low, limiting access to benefits.
5. Social customs and mobility restrictions exacerbate economic exclusion.
6. Self-help groups and cooperative farming models provide partial solutions but need broader implementation.

Discussion: The findings of this study corroborate global research conducted by organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2011) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2018), which emphasise that rural women's labour is essential yet undervalued. Rural women are responsible for a substantial portion of agricultural work, including sowing, harvesting, livestock management, and post-harvest processing, yet their contributions are often informal, unaccounted for, and poorly compensated. This undervaluation is not merely an economic issue but reflects deeply entrenched social norms and gender biases that perpetuate inequality. While existing literature sheds light on the general challenges faced by rural women, this study specifically draws attention to localised barriers in the Sirsa district. One of the most significant issues identified is the limited awareness among rural women regarding government welfare

schemes designed to support them, such as credit facilities, training programs, or income-generation schemes. The data reveals that only a quarter of the surveyed women were aware of these programs, resulting in their exclusion from potentially beneficial initiatives. Additionally, the dependency on male family members for decision-making regarding agriculture and finances further restricts their autonomy, reinforcing patriarchal norms that hinder women's empowerment. The cultural barriers observed are symptomatic of long-standing societal structures where women's mobility, educational opportunities, and access to resources are constrained. These barriers not only affect their economic participation but also contribute to their social invisibility. Overcoming these challenges requires more than recognition; it demands structural reforms that enable equitable participation. One promising avenue is the expansion of self-help groups (SHGs), which provide women with platforms for collective action, access to microcredit, and peer support. The findings affirm that where SHGs are active, women gain greater confidence and visibility, aligning with UN Women's advocacy for community-driven empowerment. However, the scope and impact of such groups remain limited due to insufficient funding and weak institutional support at the grassroots level. Therefore, policy interventions should prioritise enhancing rural women's access to land, credit, and agricultural extension services. Investments in education, transportation, and awareness campaigns can help dismantle social barriers while promoting gender-sensitive governance. Such comprehensive approaches are essential for transforming rural women's socio-economic status and ensuring inclusive, sustainable agricultural development.

Conclusion: Rural women's contribution to agriculture is essential for the livelihood and food security of many communities, yet their role continues to be undervalued and underreported. This study clearly shows that despite being involved in a wide range of agricultural activities such as sowing, harvesting, livestock care, and post-harvest processing women face numerous barriers that limit their participation and empowerment. Key challenges include limited access to land ownership, which prevents them from making independent farming decisions, and significant wage disparities, where women are paid substantially less than men for similar work. Additionally, inadequate awareness of government welfare schemes and restricted mobility due to cultural norms further hinder their ability to access training, credit, and social support networks. Patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles continue to reinforce women's exclusion from decision-making processes at both household and community levels. These systemic barriers not only marginalise women but also weaken the potential for agricultural development and rural economic growth. To address these challenges, it is vital to implement targeted policies that ensure equal land rights, fair wages, and improved access to financial and educational resources. Promoting inclusive development strategies, such as cooperative farming initiatives and self-help groups, can create platforms for collective action and support women's empowerment. Empowering rural women goes beyond achieving gender equality; it is a strategic investment in agricultural productivity, food security, and sustainable development. By recognising their contributions and addressing the structural barriers they

face, policymakers can help unlock the full potential of rural communities and promote long-term economic resilience.

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