



## EDITORIAL: INDIAN EXPRESS

**GENERAL STUDIES 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE**

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**TOPIC: WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE**

**A field of her own**

**Advancing rights of women farmers can revolutionise the rural ecosystem**

### Women's Role in India's Agri-Food Systems

- **Significant Labor Contribution:** Women play a crucial role in India's agri-food systems, which encompass agriculture, livestock, agroforestry, and fisheries. They contribute both in paid and unpaid labor, making them an integral part of the sector.
- **Institutional Constraints:** Despite their significant role, women face institutional barriers that limit their productivity, such as restricted access to resources, scientific knowledge, and decision-making power.
- **Gendered Division of Labor:** Gender, alongside caste and class hierarchies, dictates the division of labor in agricultural activities, often relegating women to labor-intensive, low-paying, and unrecognized roles. Women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes and have limited access to technological advancements.
- **Technological Advancements Favor Men:** Historically, technological innovations in agriculture have been designed with men in mind, primarily aimed at improving their efficiency. Mechanization, in particular, has led to job losses for women in certain areas.
- **Impact of Gender-Sensitive Technologies:** When technologies are designed to reduce women's workload, they have a significant positive impact on their productivity. Empowering women with appropriate technologies helps enhance their productivity, autonomy, and participation in economic activities.

### Bridging the Gender Divide in Agriculture

- **MSSRF's Role:** The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) has worked for over a decade to empower women farmers and fish workers by providing them access to technology. This initiative has been particularly impactful in overcoming gender barriers in rural communities.
- **Revival of Small Millet Cultivation in Odisha:** In Odisha's Koraput district, MSSRF has worked to revive small millet cultivation—a practice traditionally controlled by men. By involving women in this process, the organization has enabled them to gain control over agricultural activities and increase their productivity.
- **Improved Productivity through Technology:** Women, typically assigned lower-value tasks in agriculture, benefit greatly from having access to modern technologies and financial resources. This access enables them to improve their productivity and gain more autonomy in agricultural processes.



## The Gendered Nature of Agricultural Machinery

- **Masculine Symbolism in Farm Machinery:** Farm machinery, such as tractors, is often viewed as a symbol of masculine power, reinforcing the gender disparity in agriculture. This cultural perception marginalizes women's contributions, especially in mechanized farming.
- **Male Dominance in Mechanization:** Men primarily control the use of mechanized farming equipment, while women continue to be assigned physically demanding, labor-intensive tasks such as weeding, threshing, and de-hulling. These tasks remain time-consuming and do not receive the same recognition as mechanized processes.
- **Training and Empowerment of Women:** Targeted interventions, such as training women in the use of agricultural technology, are helping them challenge traditional gender roles. By gaining skills in technology use, women are increasing their control over agricultural processes and improving their productivity.

## Challenges Faced by Women in Fisheries

- **Impact of Mechanization in Fisheries:** Women in the fisheries sector have faced significant challenges as the industry has shifted towards large mechanized vessels and centralized harbors. As men have gained access to more lucrative opportunities in deep-sea fishing, women have been relegated to lower-paying, labor-intensive roles such as fish processing, drying, and vending.
- **Marginalization of Women Vendors:** The rise of large buyers and exporters has marginalized women fish vendors, limiting their access to fish and market opportunities. Many women vendors earn very little, with some struggling to earn less than Rs 800 per day, compounded by high commuting costs and significant debts.
- **Lack of Market Access:** Women in the fisheries sector often have limited access to information regarding market prices, opportunities, and demand. This lack of market knowledge further hampers their ability to make informed business decisions and limits their economic resilience.

## Digital Technologies Empowering Women Fish Workers

- **MSSRF's Digital Intervention:** MSSRF has introduced digital technologies to empower women fish workers, particularly in the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu. These initiatives have provided women with mobile phones, tablets, helplines, and online business tools.
- **Training in Digital Skills:** Women have been trained in using the internet, digital payments, inventory management, and navigating markets through digital platforms. This training significantly improves their ability to access better opportunities and increase their economic resilience.
- **Enhancing Economic Resilience:** These digital interventions help women overcome structural challenges, enabling them to adapt to broader economic and ecological changes. They enhance women's ability to manage their businesses and increase their income by broadening their market reach and business capabilities.



## The Need for Gender-Responsive Technologies

- **Systemic Barriers Remain:** While gender-responsive technologies help women overcome many barriers and improve their autonomy, they are not enough by themselves. Patriarchal structures within communities, families, markets, and institutions continue to limit women's opportunities and access to resources.
- **Long-Term Impact Requires Structural Change:** For the full impact of technological interventions to be realized, policies must address the systemic barriers that women face. Investments in technology must be supported by policies that hold families, communities, markets, and the state accountable for creating an enabling environment where women can thrive.
- **Inclusive Policy Development:** It is essential to ensure that gender-sensitive policies are put in place to create a more inclusive environment for women in both agriculture and fisheries. These policies should aim to reduce gender inequality in access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities, thereby empowering women in these sectors.

## Conclusion

- **Empowering Women through Technology:** Empowering women in India's agri-food and fisheries sectors through gender-responsive technologies is crucial for enhancing their productivity and decision-making power. These technologies help women overcome traditional barriers and improve their economic resilience.
- **Need for Systemic Changes:** However, true progress requires more than just technological interventions. Systemic changes are necessary to challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and ensure that women have equitable access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities. Only through such comprehensive changes can women fully benefit from technological advancements and contribute to the growth of India's agricultural and fisheries sectors.

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