

Women Farmers and Decision-Making: Bridging the Gender Gap in Agriculture

Shreya C^{1*} and Sahana S²

¹ M. Sc. Scholar, ²Professor, Department of Agricultural Extension Education, Keladi Shivappa Nayaka University of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences, Iruvakkki, Shivamogga, 577412, Karnataka, India

Corresponding Author

Shreya C

Email: shreyac81232@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

Women constitute a significant proportion of the agricultural workforce and contribute extensively to crop production, livestock management and household food security. Despite their active involvement in farming activities, their participation in key agricultural decisions remains limited. Decision-making power is an important indicator of empowerment as it influences resource allocation, technology adoption, productivity and household welfare. However, factors such as limited land ownership, restricted access to credit and extension services, low educational attainment and prevailing socio-cultural norms continue to constrain women's role in agricultural decision-making. The study emphasizes that improving women's access to productive resources, information and institutional support can enhance agricultural productivity, promote gender equality and contribute to sustainable rural development.

INTRODUCTION:

Agriculture remains one of the most important sectors of the Indian economy, providing livelihoods to a large share of the rural population. Women play a vital role in agricultural production and

contribute significantly to various farm operations such as seed selection, sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, post-harvest processing and livestock management. According to the Census of India (2011),

women account for a substantial proportion of cultivators and agricultural labourers, highlighting their indispensable contribution to the agricultural sector.

In recent decades, the participation of women in agriculture has increased due to factors such as fragmentation of landholdings, rising labour costs and migration of male workers from rural areas to urban centres in search of employment. This phenomenon, often referred to as the feminization of agriculture, has increased women's involvement in farming activities. However, despite their growing contribution, women continue to have limited influence over important agricultural decisions related to crop selection, input use, technology adoption, marketing and financial management (FAO, 2023).

Decision-making plays a crucial role in determining farm productivity, resource utilization and household welfare. When women actively participate in decision-making, farm households tend to adopt improved technologies, allocate resources more efficiently and achieve better livelihood outcomes. Therefore, enhancing women's participation in agricultural decision-making is not only a matter of social justice but also an important strategy for promoting sustainable agricultural development (Quisumbing *et al.*, 2023).

Understanding Women's Role in Agricultural Decision-Making

Agricultural decision-making refers to the process of determining various farm-related activities such as crop planning, selection of seeds and fertilizers, investment in machinery, adoption of new technologies, marketing of produce and utilization of farm income.

Women often participate actively in operational activities such as seed preservation, transplanting and harvesting. However, their involvement in strategic

decisions involving financial investments, purchase of inputs, mechanization and marketing remains relatively low (Satyavathi *et al.*, 2010). This imbalance reflects the persistent gender disparities that exist within agricultural households and institutions. Studies indicate that women farmers possess valuable indigenous knowledge regarding biodiversity conservation, natural resource management and climate-resilient agricultural practices. Despite this knowledge, their perspectives are frequently overlooked in decision-making processes at both household and community levels (Doss *et al.*, 2018).

Current Status of Women in Farm Decision-Making

Women constitute nearly one-third of the global agricultural workforce and play an even greater role in many developing countries. However, ownership and control over productive resources remain highly unequal. Globally, only about 13 per cent of landholders are women (FAO, 2023), while in India women own a relatively small proportion of agricultural land (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, DES, 2013).

Research has shown that women's participation in decision-making varies across agricultural activities (Satyavathi *et al.*, 2010). Their involvement is generally higher in activities such as seed selection, nursery management and post-harvest operations, whereas participation in decisions related to marketing, credit utilization and machinery purchase remains limited. The gap between women's contribution to agricultural production and their authority in decision-making highlights a significant challenge for achieving gender equality in agriculture.

Factors Influencing Women's Decision-Making Power

1. Land Ownership and Property Rights:

Land ownership is one of the most

important determinants of decision-making power. Secure land rights also improve women's access to institutional credit, government schemes and extension services. However, social customs and inheritance practices often restrict women's ownership of agricultural land. As a result, many women remain dependent on male family members for access to productive resources (Doss *et al.*, 2018).

2. Access to Credit and Financial Services:

Limited access to credit significantly affects women's ability to make independent agricultural decisions. Without adequate access to credit, women face difficulties in purchasing quality inputs, adopting improved technologies and expanding agricultural enterprises (FAO, 2023).

3. Education and Training:

Education enhances awareness, confidence and decision-making capabilities. Access to training programs and extension services improves technical knowledge and strengthens women's ability to adopt improved farming practices (Malapit *et al.*, 2019).

4. Social and Cultural Norms:

Traditional gender roles often limit women's participation in leadership and decision-making activities. In many rural communities, women are expected to focus on household responsibilities while men are regarded as primary decision-makers. These cultural norms reduce women's bargaining power and restrict their influence over farm-related decisions (Kabeer, 1999).

5. Access to Information and Technology:

This plays a crucial role in decision-making. However, women frequently have limited exposure to extension services, digital platforms and farmer training

programs. This information gap reduces their ability to participate effectively in farm planning and management (FAO, 2023).

Economic Importance of Women's Participation in Decision-Making

From an economic perspective, greater involvement of women in agricultural decision-making can lead to more efficient resource allocation and improved productivity. Studies suggest that when women have greater control over productive resources, farm income, food security and household welfare improve significantly (Quisumbing *et al.*, 2023).

Women's participation also contributes to diversification of farming systems, better nutritional outcomes and increased investment in education and healthcare. Therefore, empowering women farmers can generate substantial economic and social benefits at both household and community levels (Malapit *et al.*, 2019).

Strengthening Women's Decision-Making Power

- Strengthening women's land ownership and inheritance rights.
- Expanding access to institutional credit and financial services.
- Increasing the number of women-oriented extension programs.
- Promoting participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and cooperatives.
- Providing skill development and leadership training.
- Improving access to digital technologies and agricultural information.

- Encouraging joint decision-making within households and farmer organizations.

These interventions can enhance women's confidence, improve their bargaining power and facilitate greater participation in agricultural governance (FAO, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Women are indispensable contributors to agricultural production and rural livelihoods, yet their participation in decision-making remains disproportionately low. Limited ownership of productive resources, restricted access to credit and information and persistent socio-cultural barriers continue to constrain their role in agricultural management. Strengthening women's participation in farm decisions is essential not only for achieving gender equality but also for enhancing agricultural productivity, food security and rural development. Empowering women through secure land rights, financial inclusion, education, training and institutional support can significantly improve their decision-making capacity. As agriculture faces increasing challenges related to climate change, resource scarcity and food security, greater inclusion of women in decision-making processes will be critical for building resilient and sustainable agricultural systems.

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