

1. Women in Agriculture

Women-led development has been recognised as a structural game-changer for advancing India's economic ambitions, yet its full potential remains under-leveraged.

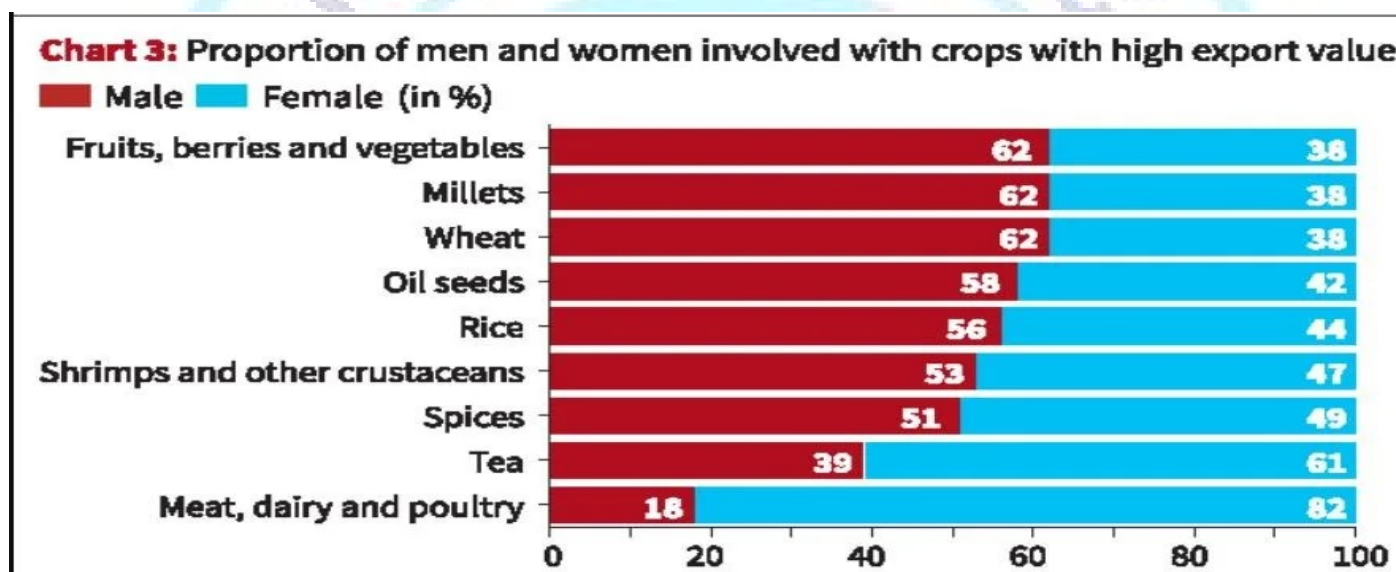
Current Scenario

Agriculture as a Core Sector – Agriculture continues to be a backbone of India's economy and remains the largest employer of women, especially in rural areas. Despite a declining contribution to national Gross Value Added (GVA), it provides livelihoods to millions.

Shifts in Workforce – Rural men increasingly migrate to non-farm employment, leaving women to take up the responsibilities in agriculture. This shift has made women the mainstay of India's agricultural workforce in many regions.

Rising Participation of Women – Over the past decade, women's participation in agriculture has increased by 135%, with women now accounting for 42% of the total agricultural workforce. About two-thirds of working women in India are employed in the agricultural sector.

Economic Implications – Despite increased participation, agriculture's share of national GVA declined from 15.3% in 2017–18 to 14.4% in 2024–25. This indicates that the enhanced labour contribution has not translated into proportional economic gains.



Challenges Faced by Women in Agriculture

Unpaid Labour – Nearly half of women workers in agriculture are unpaid family labourers. Their numbers have increased from 23.6 million to 59.1 million in just eight years. In states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, over 80% of women are employed in agriculture, with more than half receiving no wages.

Systemic Inequities – Women farmers face structural barriers –

1. Own only 13–14% of land holdings.
2. Earn 20–30% less than men for equivalent work.
3. Limited decision-making power, access to credit, and government support.

These inequities trap women in low-value agricultural activities and restrict upward mobility.

Digital Divide – Women farmers face significant challenges in adopting digital technologies –

1. Low digital literacy.
2. Language and usability barriers.
3. Affordability of devices and internet connectivity.

This limits participation in modern agri-markets, e-commerce, and digital extension services.

Emerging Opportunities

Global Trade Opportunities – The India-U.K. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is expected to increase Indian agricultural exports by 20% within three years, offering duty-free access to over 95% of agricultural and processed food products. Export-oriented value chains often employ a large share of women. If FTA

provisions are targeted at women—through training, credit access, and market linkages—they could transition from farm labourers to income-generating entrepreneurs.

High-Value Agricultural Segments – Rising global demand for organic products, superfoods, tea, spices, and millets presents opportunities for women who are already active in these sectors. Geographical Indications (GI), branding initiatives, and export facilitation can help women move from subsistence farming to premium, value-added product markets, improving income and livelihood security.

Government Initiatives Supporting Women in Agriculture

Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) – Under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), it empowers women farmers in sustainable agriculture, livestock, and non-timber forest produce (NTFP).

Joint Land Titles – Encouragement to issue land pattas in the names of both husband and wife to improve women's land rights and access to institutional support.

Priority Sector Lending (PSL) – Mandates flow of credit to women farmers, ensuring access to financial resources for farming activities.

Women-Focused FPOs and SHGs – Support through NABARD and DAY-NRLM. Special provisions under 10,000 FPOs Scheme (2020) for women-led groups.

Agri-Clinics & Agri-Business Centres (ACABC) – Targeted at women entrepreneurs to promote agribusiness opportunities.

Maternity and Health Schemes – Ensure welfare and health support indirectly benefiting women engaged in agriculture.

GI Tags, Branding, and Export Facilitation – Focused on spices, tea, millets, and organic produce, enabling women to access premium markets and export chains.

Way Forward

Policy Recognition – Women must be recognized as independent farmers, enabling access to credit, insurance, subsidies, and extension services.

Land and Labour Reforms – Joint or individual land ownership is critical for enhancing women's bargaining power and economic independence.

Targeted Skill Development – Training programs should focus on –

1. Modern agricultural practices.
2. Entrepreneurship and value addition.
3. Digital literacy for e-markets and agri-tech adoption.

Access to Finance and Inputs – Ensure credit, insurance, and subsidies are equally accessible to women, reducing reliance on informal systems.

Inclusion in Global Value Chains – Support women's participation in high-value exports, enabling shift from subsistence farming to entrepreneurship.

Promotion of Women-Led Cooperatives and FPOs – Strengthen community institutions to facilitate storage, marketing, and bargaining power.

Digital & Smart Agriculture – Adoption of IoT, AI, and e-market platforms can bridge market gaps, reduce dependency on middlemen, and enhance profitability.

Integration with Climate-Resilient Practices – Training and support for sustainable agriculture practices that mitigate climate risks and enhance long-term productivity.

Conclusion

Women form the backbone of Indian agriculture, but structural barriers prevent their full economic empowerment. By combining land and labour reforms, digital inclusion, access to finance, market linkages, and policy support, women can move from subsistence roles to entrepreneurial, income-generating roles. Targeted interventions will not only enhance rural livelihoods but also boost national agricultural productivity, global competitiveness, and gender equity, aligning with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), and SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth).