



EMPOWERING THE FEMALE RURAL WORKFORCE



Savitri Singh

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PREFACE

The P-Insights, short for “Productivity Insights,” is an extension of the Productivity Talk (P-Talk) series, which is a flagship program under the APO Secretariat’s digital information initiative. Born out of both necessity and creativity under the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, the interactive, livestreamed P-Talks bring practitioners, experts, policymakers, and ordinary citizens from all walks of life with a passion for productivity to share their experience, views, and practical tips on productivity improvement.

With speakers from every corner of the world, the P-Talks effectively convey productivity information to APO member countries and beyond. However, it was recognized that many of the P-Talk speakers had much more to offer beyond the 60-minute presentations and Q&A sessions that are the hallmarks of the series. To take full advantage of their broad knowledge and expertise, some were invited to elaborate on their P-Talks, resulting in this publication. It is hoped that the P-Insights will give readers a deeper understanding of the practices and applications of productivity as they are evolving during the pandemic and being adapted to meet different needs in the anticipated new normal.

INTRODUCTION

Empowering the female rural workforce has become a necessity for governments. It is widely understood by economists and policymakers that the female rural workforce is crucial for achieving economic growth and reducing poverty. The unprecedented changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have made it obvious that the nonparticipation of half of the human resources in the labor market will lead to economic and social disaster, such as increased hunger, poverty, slow economic growth, and deprivation leading to confrontation.

Women have not achieved equality anywhere in the world. They are half of the global population but their economic and political participation is far below that of men. In particular, rural women are deprived of basic resources to enable them to participate in paid work outside the cycle of unpaid household drudgery. They struggle with traditional tasks such as fetching water, collecting fuel and livestock feed, and household chores and care work, while facing social discrimination, denial of access to and control over resources such as education and skill development training, property and land ownership, and paid work.

Investment in rural infrastructure such as roads, transport, hospitals, and childcare centers and the availability of work locally helps improve the productivity of rural women. The availability of cooking gas and tap water can save several working hours daily for rural women, which can be used for more productive work. Similarly, education and skill development training in farming and allied work will increase the productivity of the female rural workforce significantly. Cooperatives as people's organizations can play an important role in influencing local governments and mobilizing resources for the capacity building of women to take up skilled and semiskilled jobs in rural areas.

My experience at grassroots level shows that economic empowerment is liberating for the poor, especially for women. Only economic empowerment of the female rural workforce will lead to changes in sociocultural settings. This report discusses empowerment, the issues that prevent women from taking paid work, and possible solutions. It includes examples of women's empowerment initiatives taken by cooperatives in Asia and measures taken by governments for empowering the female rural workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Political Will is crucial for reforms or changes to occur. Governments and people's organizations need to work hand in hand to improve the situation. The potential value of women's human resources must be maximized by incorporating enabling policies and programs.

The sources of information in this report are my own experience, experience collected from fellow cooperative members, the websites of the ILO, FAO, and UN, and articles and books by experts available on the web.

It should be noted that the views expressed in this report are personal.

UNDERSTANDING “EMPOWERMENT”

Various dictionaries and scholars define “empowerment” as a process of individuals gaining the freedom and authority to make choices, take decisions, and control what happens to them. However, empowerment has different meanings to people of different genders and in different situations.

For the hungry and poor and those with minimum resources, empowerment is earning enough to provide square meals on a regular basis for their families. For people who manage to feed their families regularly, empowerment is being able to have a roof over their heads and sending their children to school. For people who can feed and provide the basics to their families, empowerment may mean freedom from exploitation by moneylenders, those in power, and regressive religious and political norms affecting daily survival, human dignity, etc. For people who have sufficient monetary resources at their disposal, empowerment may mean acquiring the highest levels of luxury, fame, and influence as well as the choice to do whatever they like.

Empowerment is also categorized into various types such as economic empowerment, social empowerment, political empowerment, etc. For the poor, economic empowerment provides freedom from hunger and relief from daily struggles to meet basic needs for survival. Social empowerment comes after survival such as education, health, basic rights, and freedom from oppressive religious and cultural norms and from discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, creed, and class.

Why Should Women Be Empowered?

Empowerment has different meanings for women and men or girls and boys in similar situations of poverty or riches. In order to understand the situation of women in Asia, the findings of the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 by the World Economic Forum [1] are relevant (Table 1). This report benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across four key dimensions (economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and

TABLE 1

RANKING OF COUNTRIES IN SOUTH ASIA IN THE GLOBAL GENDER GAP REPORT 2022.

Country	Regional	Global
Bangladesh	1	71
Nepal	2	96
Sri Lanka	3	110
Maldives	4	117
Bhutan	5	126
India	6	135

Source: World Economic Forum [1].

political). In 2022, the Global Gender Gap Index benchmarked 146 countries, providing a basis for robust cross-country analysis.

Women comprise approximately 50–55% of the populations of countries. They are the backbone of society, and youth is the future. Over 55% of food is produced by rural women in Asia and elsewhere, among other paid/unpaid homemaker and caregiver work.

Post-COVID-19, the world has been struggling with unprecedented challenges induced by the pandemic. It would be nearly impossible to meet the economic goals of a family, community, and country without equal participation of half of the population, i.e., women in the workforce.

According to the World Bank [2], accelerating gender equality and investing in empowerment generate large economic gains. No society can develop sustainability without transforming and amplifying the distribution of opportunities, resources, and choices for men and women so that they have equal power to shape their own lives and contribute to their families, communities, and countries. Women’s employment can be a central driver of inclusive growth. On average across countries, long-run GDP per capita would be almost 20% higher if gender employment gaps were closed. Studies estimate economic gains in the order of USD5–6 trillion if women started and scaled new businesses at the same rate as men do. In the context of rising risks of stagflation and the likelihood of recession in many parts of the world, it will be costly for countries to rely on the talents of only half of their populations. Addressing critical gender gaps is an opportunity to boost incomes and stimulate growth.

Gender equality can accelerate progress toward other development goals, including addressing food insecurity, climate change, and conflict and fragility. To this end, investments, reforms, and interventions are especially needed to: a) boost the earnings and productivity of women farmers, entrepreneurs, and businesses; b) expand female labor force participation and employment; and c) promote women’s engagement and participation in decision-making in communities, businesses, and the public sector.

For example, closing agricultural gender gaps can economically empower women and support food production. In Nigeria, USD2.3 billion in agricultural produce could be added by closing this gap; in Tanzania, it would lead to 80,000 more people adequately nourished each year [3]. Gender-sensitive extension services; equal land rights; addressing labor, input, and capital constraints for women farmers; and fostering inclusion along the value chain can boost food production. Women’s empowerment can also improve nutrition through agricultural and household practices.

Climate change and climate policies affect men and women in different ways, especially among poor, vulnerable, and socially disadvantaged groups. Working on gender and climate together can result in impacts greater than addressing each issue in isolation. This entails leveraging women’s empowerment and leadership in community, business, industry, and policymaking circles to enable better resource management, environmental stewardship, and disaster preparedness; strengthening women’s assets, access to finance, and economic inclusion to build resilience and adaptive capacity; and promoting equal opportunities in the green transition.

ISSUES FACED BY THE FEMALE RURAL WORKFORCE

The following are critical issues women face globally, especially rural women in developing countries:

1. Lack of access to and control over resources such as money, moveable or immoveable property, and education and training
2. Drudgery, i.e., long unpaid hours of household work and labor on family farms
3. Social, religious, and political norms
4. Gender discrimination and lack of equal pay for equal work
5. Digitalization and mechanization of agriculture
6. Lack of access to public resources due to a lack of infrastructure such as schools, roads, medical centers, and nonfarm jobs close to their villages
7. Migration of male family members to cities and overseas
8. Miscellaneous issues such as early marriage and childbearing, malnutrition, etc.

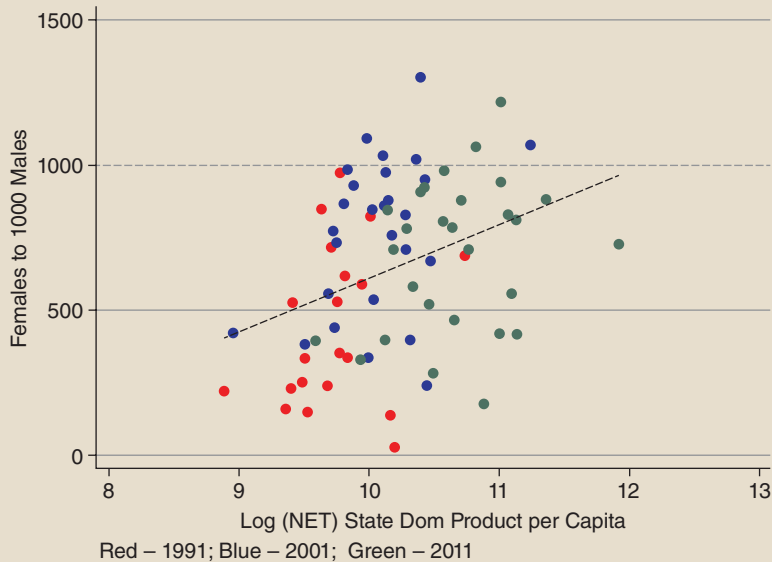
On average, women make up about 50–65% of the workforce in agriculture and allied sectors in developing countries. Women's increasing and equal participation in the rural workforce is even more important for achieving agrarian reforms, safety and security of food production and consumption, arresting natural disasters due to climate change, and ensuring adequate nutrition for a healthy, wealthy nation.

In India, agriculture and related sectors such as dairy, fisheries, hand loom, handicrafts, etc. employ about 80% of rural working women. Empowering and mainstreaming rural women working in agriculture can create a paradigm shift toward economic growth [4]. It will enhance food nutrition security and alleviate poverty. It is a win-win strategy for achieving the SDGs by 2030.

Outmigration by men leaves behind women, the elderly, and children in rural areas, resulting in a triple burden on women. The remittances are mostly used for repaying loans or investment in housing and machines for farming. Munshi and

FIGURE 1

GROWING PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE.



Source: Reproduced with permission from Pingali P et al. [6].

Rosenzweig [5] showed that outmigration greatly impacts the strength and wealth of the social network, increasing the vulnerability of those who are left behind. In such situations, women and older individuals often become an important part of the labor force in agriculture in rural areas over time.

In India, the female-to-male ratio of workers in the agricultural sector has increased both over time and with greater amounts of GDP per capita. Figure 1, reproduced from Pingali et al. [6], reiterates the importance of focusing on increasing agricultural productivity of women to stimulate rural growth in the future.

Evidence indicates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30%. According to the last census, in India, only 22.3% of women participated in the labor market. However, the workforce

participation rate (in agriculture and allied-sector activities) of rural females was significantly higher at 41.8% than that of urban women at 35.31% [7].

Agriculture and allied sectors are the primary source of livelihood which include 80% of all economically active rural women, of whom 33% constitute agricultural labor and 48% are self-employed farmers. Rural women are engaged at all levels of agricultural value chains, i.e., production, preharvest and postharvest processing, packaging, and marketing to increase productivity in agriculture. They are the most important demographic group for sustainable food systems [8].

Challenges

Rural women continue to struggle with dual responsibilities of economic production and domestic labor, and most are confronted by poverty, illiteracy, high health risks, and inadequate access to productive resources, health and sanitation services, and market access in profitable food sectors [8].

Policymakers in most developing agrarian countries are facing challenges in addressing these needs of rural women due to insufficient rural infrastructure, outreach, strong social, cultural, and political influences, etc.

How to free women from the drudgery of fetching and collecting water, fuel, and livestock feed, which takes over most of their working hours and physical energy, in addition to rearing livestock, cooking, and looking after children and the elderly, is a much debated issue. Women also work as unpaid labor on their family farms. All this family work leaves no time and energy to look for regular paid work. However, women are engaged in paid work on farms which is seasonal in nature.

Due to drudgery and gender discrimination, young girls are mostly engaged in household work, thereby being deprived of school education, learning new skills, etc. Cultural norms deprive them of adequate nutrition and encourage early marriages and childbearing, which further contribute to the lack of opportunity to learn and earn.

There are several other reasons for nonutilization of the full potential of the female rural workforce such as unavailability of nonagricultural jobs for educated, skilled, and semiskilled women close to their homes. The poor quality of rural

nonfarm-sector jobs, especially for women, leads to greater withdrawal from the labor market [9].

Malnutrition remains a problem for women and children regardless of the level of national economic development. The problem of hidden hunger, or micronutrient deficiency, in India continues to remain acute [6]. For example, the current incidence rates of anemia are 23% for men, 53% for women, and 58% for children. When women are undernourished, research has found that it leads to low labor productivity, health, and economic development of the household. This has negative intergenerational spillovers on the health of children for whom women are the major caregivers. Undernourishment in childhood has been linked to poor adult education, health, and productivity outcomes.

Interventions that increase the education of girls and women, delay child marriages, provide households information on economic opportunities for women, and increase safety at workplaces are known to impact both nutrition outcomes for women and their children. Research has shown that women's empowerment leads to positive nutrition and health outcomes, especially for young children [6].

COVID-19 and Women

According to World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report-2021 [10], high-frequency data for selected economies from the ILO, LinkedIn Economic Graph Team, and Ipsos offer a timely analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender gaps in economic participation. Early projections from the ILO [11] suggest that 5% of all employed women lost their jobs, compared with 3.9% of employed men. LinkedIn data show a marked decline in women's hiring in leadership roles, creating a reversal of 1 to 2 years of progress across multiple industries

HOW COOPERATIVES ARE EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN

Cooperatives are providing significant platforms for the socioeconomic empowerment of women and crucial spaces for livelihood opportunities. The ILO study “Advancing gender equality: The cooperative way-2015” [11] provides an overview of the effectiveness of cooperatives as platforms for achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment, as conveyed by a broad range of cooperative practitioners, civil society organizations, academics, and government workers. That report highlights a number of achievements and areas for strategic action while acknowledging that there are many contextual variables and areas for improvement.

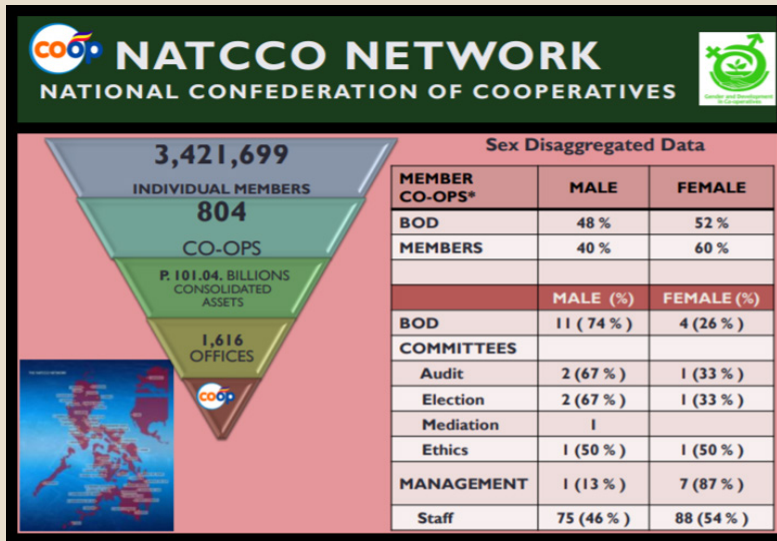
The key findings indicate that cooperatives have an increasingly positive impact on women and on their inclusion in economic activity and the labor force. They also suggest that cooperatives enhance their capacity to empower women by working with civil society and gaining government recognition. However, there are issues with cooperative structure, laws, and principles to accommodate gender needs which have resulted in the exclusion of women from the cooperative fold. In particular, laws on agricultural cooperatives need to be revised to include more women farmworkers.

Some of the exclusionary features that create barriers to the inclusion of landless women farmworkers or women working on family farms resulting in the denial of cooperative services such as credit, farm inputs, dividends, education and training, etc. are:

- One member, one family policies;
- Criteria of landholding for membership in primary agricultural cooperatives;
- Segregation in “women-only” cooperatives, preventing mainstreaming; and
- Discrimination by denial of opportunities and early retirement for women.

FIGURE 2

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AT VARIOUS MANAGEMENT LEVELS IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES IN THE PHILIPPINES.



Source: Reproduced with permission from Limocon M.E.C. [12].

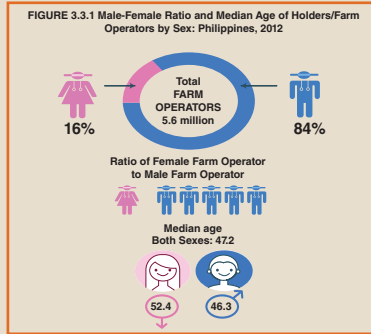
Examples from cooperatives in Asian countries on how they are helping to empower the female rural workforce are summarized below.

Philippines

The sex-disaggregated data from cooperatives in the Philippines from the National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATCCO) Network [12] shown in Figure 2 reflect the participation of women at various levels of management. The statistics in Figure 3 are self-explanatory, showing that 84% of farmholders/operators aged 15 years and older are men and 16% women.

FIGURE 3

FARMHOLDERS/OPERATORS IN PHILIPPINE AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES, 2012.



Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, *Census of Agriculture and Fisheries 2012*

Source: Reproduced from a report received from FPSDC [13].

The Philippines recorded 5.6 million holders/farm operators aged 15 years and over, of which 84 percent were males and 16 percent were females (Figure 3.3.1). This translated into a ratio of about five male holders/farm operators for every one female holder/farm operator. Usually, a female household member becomes a holder/farm operator in the absence of a male head or male household member. Hence, this explains the nil percentage of female holders/farm operators in the country.

The holders/farm operators in the country posted a median age of 47.2 years old. The male holders/farm operators had a median age of 46.3 years old, which was six years younger than their female counterparts.

Female Rural Workforce Empowerment by Cooperatives in Nepal

Women comprise over 51% of the total membership of agricultural cooperatives in Nepal. In the National Agriculture Cooperative Federation network, over 82% of the more than 1 million members are women farmers. Fifty percent of leaders of agricultural cooperatives are women.

Women have access to common production resources (such as credit, land, marketing facilities, infrastructure, tools, and technology), which increases their incomes as well as lightens their tasks. Agricultural cooperatives in Nepal have empowered women through reducing gender disparities, involving them in social programs, and encouraging their participation in political programs offered.

Policies on Women Farmers in the Republic of Korea

The Government of the ROK has introduced policies to raise the share of women farmers to 51%. The policies focus on:

- Promoting development in agriculture and farming society by protecting the rights of women farmers, improving their quality of life, and supporting them to become professional manpower;
- Revising the enforcement rules (January 2018) in the Business Entity Law to enable the registration of joint ownership by women farmers, thus eliminating the business-owner consent process;
- Expanding rates of female union membership and executives in the National Agricultural Cooperatives (2022 goals: 40%/20%); and
- Expanding professional training through customized training programs reflecting the demands of women farmers.

Empowering Female Rural Farmers by Cooperatives in India

The National Centre for Cooperative Education under the aegis of National Cooperative Union of India (NCUI) organizes various skill development training courses especially for women members and leaders. Other sectoral cooperatives also provide regular business-specific training on soil conservation and proper use of fertilizer and other farm inputs. Women are encouraged to participate in various promotional, social, and community development programs. The Indian Farm and Forestry Development Cooperative network membership is 92% women. The cooperative imparts training on environmental protection through farm and forestry activities.

The NCUI cooperative education field projects provide vocational training for livelihood, such as screen printing, tailoring and embroidery, fruit and vegetable preservation, and improving skills in dairy and animal husbandry, horticulture, farm mechanization, use of balanced fertilizers, biofertilizers, beekeeping, aquaculture, computer use, mobile banking, etc. The cooperatives also organize adult education programs and medical checkup camps for rural women for overall development. Besides the capacity development programs, the cooperatives also provide the following preferential treatment to assist rural women in assuming leadership roles.

Quotas/Reservations in Cooperatives and Cooperative Banks

The cooperatives provide quotas for women on the boards of cooperatives ranging from 1–3% or more. Women-only cooperatives such as the Self-employed

HOW COOPERATIVES ARE EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN

Women's Association (SEWA) Cooperatives and "women only" cooperative banks are unique features for women's empowerment.

30% Quotas at Local Governance/Village Level

The Government of India has set 30% quotas for women's participation in local- and village-level governance, thereby enhancing their social empowerment.

97th Amendment to the Indian Constitution

The 97th amendment to the Indian Constitution provides for the reservation of two seats for women directors in every primary cooperative. The implementation of the amendments are pending.

A COOPERATIVE SUCCESS STORY OF EMPOWERING THE FEMALE RURAL WORKFORCE: SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION COOPERATIVES - SEWA

It is true that rural women's workforce participation rate has fallen and it is not clear why, although there are many theories. In SEWA, we have found that the absence of an enabling environment makes it hard for women, especially younger ones, to work outside the home or in paid work since they are responsible for childcare, elderly care, and patient care, all of which cut into women's ability to work and earn. We have also seen that after the pandemic and lockdowns, women could not return to work as easily as men. SEWA conducted a study of this among urban but not rural women. However, points arising in our discussions with women applied equally to rural and urban dwellers.

In SEWA studies on creating an enabling environment for women's work, we looked at childcare. In a study of tobacco workers in the Kheda district of Gujarat, we learned that their incomes went up by at least 50% due to childcare support programs, and this was also true in urban areas. In addition, 70% of older siblings had been able to attend school for the first time under government childcare assistance programs. Since most rural women are self-employed as small and marginal farmers, SEWA has mainly focused on strengthening their work in agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts as well as forest produce collection in some areas. Some of the work done by SEWA for the empowerment of the female rural workforce is outlined below.

1. Agricultural cooperatives: SEWA has formed women farmers' cooperatives/collectives like farmer/producer organizations (FPOs) and

self-help groups. They provide women farmers with training in modern agricultural practices and link them with subsidized farm development centers and other government facilities offering training in the use of technology and agricultural machinery. SEWA licenses cooperatives to sell high-quality, low-cost seeds from government seed corporations. Similarly, SEWA tries to provide access to other farming inputs like irrigation and fertilizers to boost agricultural productivity and incomes. Finally, SEWA has attempted to set up marketing structures like RUDI, where women farmers' produce is bought, cleaned, packaged, and sold in villages under the RUDI brand. Some states are taking up the RUDI idea as part of the National Rural Livelihood Mission.

2. **Animal husbandry:** With the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), SEWA formed women's dairy cooperatives. While women do most of the work associated with dairy operations like fodder collection, cleaning of stables, and animal care, they were not involved in decision-making and control. SEWA and the NDDB therefore formed 65 dairy cooperatives and trained women to test for fat levels, use dairy machinery, keep accounts, and manage overall operations. The milk from these women's dairy cooperatives is marketed by the NDDB and district milk federations. SEWA also trains women in managing goat and poultry operations as part of its women farmers' cooperative programs.
3. **Forest produce:** In the state of Madhya Pradesh, SEWA formed collectives of tendu leaf pickers as the previous contractors were exploiting tribal women. Now the women receive fair prices for the leaves picked during this seasonal activity.
4. **Crafts:** Many women in India are engaged in handicraft production as a main or supplementary economic activity. SEWA organized those women into collectives and/or cooperatives to help them access working capital for production, purchase raw materials through wholesale arrangements, and then sell the products through government e-marketing portals and offline. Two of the collectives also market and export their products independently.

SEWA has learned that rural women need work all year round. One problem is that while women are the nation's farmers, they have almost no voice in primary agricultural cooperatives or the leadership of farmers' cooperatives. That lack of voice gives them little incentive to work in those cooperatives.

GOOD PRACTICES IN INDIA FOR EMPOWERING THE FEMALE RURAL WORKFORCE

Since independence, the Government of India has paid special attention to the socioeconomic empowerment of women. Several interministerial initiatives have helped women farmers receive access to resources to enhance their livelihoods through socioeconomic empowerment and made significant contributions to gender parity and socioeconomic empowerment of women. Some of the major policies, projects, and schemes that have had tangible impacts on the empowerment of rural women are listed below.

National Policy for Women

The Government of India's National Policy for Women 2016 was "Articulating a Vision for Empowerment of Women." It envisaged creating a society where women can achieve their full human potential.

JEEViKA (Rural Livelihood Promotion Society)

JEEViKA is an initiative by the government for providing socioeconomic empowerment to the rural poor, focusing on women's empowerment for success. So far, JEEViKA has reached out to approximately 100 million poor rural households by organizing them into 1 million women's self-help groups under 60,955 village organizations and 1,085 cluster-level federations.

Between 2014 and 2019, the JEEViKA project mobilized 270,000 women smallholder farmers into commodity-based FPOs. Those FPOs achieved a business turnover of USD5.5 million, marketing over 30,000 metric tons of grains, fruit, and vegetables. Farmers' returns per unit of produce increased by 15–20% due to higher margins and improved production practices.

The World Bank-supported JEEViKA has helped rural women increase their productivity, as shown by the following results [14]:

- 1.2 million rural women have been helped to enroll in and access public insurance schemes.
- Since 2016, 52,000 rural households have been supported through women resource persons called *pashu sakhi* in improved animal management and marketing practices.
- More than 5,000 rural households have been supported in undertaking beekeeping enterprises in the form of training and market linkages with leading industry players.
- Between 2007–19, more than 100,000 women members were trained as community resource persons and technical experts, providing capacity-building support in Bihar and other states.
- 7,500 women artisans have been mobilized into arts and crafts clusters and provided capacity-building support for design upgrading and marketing including through online marketplaces.
- In 7,800 villages, community organizations have formed local health subcommittees that conduct household visits to improve nutrition and sanitation practices.
- Since 2016, the JEEViKA project has successfully piloted innovative community enterprise approaches like Rural Retail Marts aimed at improving income levels of rural women working as small traders and women-owned catering enterprises that have been recognized under state government policies to improve services at public institutions like hospital canteens and administrative offices.

Mahila E-Haat (Local Market for Women)

A unique direct online marketing platform where women entrepreneurs/SHGs/NGOs can display their products/services was launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, on 7 March 2016. The objective of this scheme is to empower and strengthen the financial inclusion of women entrepreneurs.

Support to Training and Employment Program for Women

The Ministry of Women & Child Development started the Support to Training and Employment Program (STEP) for women. STEP aims to provide skills that

enable women to become self-employed/entrepreneurs. The scheme is intended to benefit women aged 16 years and older nationwide.

Property Inheritance Law

Women have equal rights under the Property Inheritance Law to own property and receive equal inheritance rights. In 2005, the inheritance laws were amended to ensure that daughters enjoyed equal rights to inherit their parents' land and property. The challenge lies in enforcement of the law.

Anganwadi

An *anganwadi* is a type of rural childcare center in India (Figure 4). A typical *anganwadi* center provides basic healthcare in a village and is a part of the Indian public healthcare system. Basic healthcare activities include contraceptive counseling and supply, nutrition education and supplementation, as well as preschool activities. These centers empower women in terms of childcare and birth control, thereby enabling them to save time and undertake paid work.

FIGURE 4

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION AT KARUNARAM ANGANWADI, KOZHIKODE DISTRICT, KERALA.



Source: Reproduced from Wikipedia file photo [15].

Empowered Women, Empowered Nation

The Government of India is currently celebrating 75 years of independence. One of the celebratory themes is “Empowered Women, Empowered Nation.” Under the vision of *Aatma Nirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India), the government has prioritized gender mainstreaming in agriculture by providing access to resources/ schemes for rural women engaged in agriculture and allied sectors.

The special beneficiary-oriented schemes were developed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare to mainstream the participation of rural women. These special schemes provide for states and other implementing agencies to earmark 30% of expenditures to benefit women farmers. With increased female participation in agriculture and pro-women initiatives, the percentage of women’s operational holdings increased from 12.78% during 2010–11 to 13.78% during 2015–16 [16].

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi said that, “If you educate a man, an individual will be educated. If you educate a woman, a whole family will be educated.” Rural women are invaluable assets as they are custodians of traditional knowledge in agriculture and food production, local medicinal herbs, textiles, and climate action. However, in many countries or regions, they are deprived of basic resources and remain poor, hungry, and discriminated against.

There is an urgent need for capacity building of rural women to maximize their potential as human resources and achieve national food security and economic growth. Governments have recognized the value of women’s economic participation and are focusing on the empowerment of rural women farmers in the workforce. In many countries, ministries, departments, and commissions have been created to exclusively focus on the development of rural women. However, specific data on cooperatives are lacking to track progress in enhancing women’s participation, even though cooperatives are in a good position to help increase women’s contributions to the agricultural workforce. In the future, family members, cooperative members, and government agencies are expected to help strengthen the capacity of rural women and enhance their participation in paid work to multiply their contributions and benefits to national productivity.

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