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BEYOND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION: TOWARDS GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN INDIA

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VARSHITHA.V, HARIKA. P

[1]M. Sc. (Ag.) Student, Department of Agricultural Extension Education, S.V. Agricultural College, Tirupati

[2]M. Sc. (Ag.) Student, Department of Agricultural Extension Education, S.V. Agricultural College, Tirupati

Corresponding author – E mail: *14varshithav@gmail.com*

Introduction

Women play a vital role in Indian agriculture. They contribute to crop production, livestock management, seed selection and conservation, weeding, harvesting, food processing and marketing. In many rural households, they manage several agricultural activities while also carrying major responsibilities for household work and family care. Despite this contribution, women's work and knowledge are not always fully recognised in agricultural extension programmes and decision-making processes.

Over the years, agricultural extension agencies have encouraged women's participation through training programmes, demonstrations, self-help groups and awareness activities. These efforts have helped women access agricultural information and develop new skills. However, participation alone does not guarantee

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empowerment. A woman may attend a training programme but lack the authority to select crops, purchase inputs, access markets or decide how farm income is used.

The important question is therefore not simply whether women participate in agricultural development, but whether they can influence the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods.

This is where gender-transformative agricultural extension becomes important. It seeks to move beyond reaching women as beneficiaries and towards recognising them as farmers, decision-makers, entrepreneurs and leaders.

Understanding Gender-Transformative Agricultural Extension

Gender-responsive extension aims to make agricultural services accessible and useful to women and men. Examples include organising training at convenient times, providing information in local languages, developing women-friendly technologies and encouraging women to participate in farmer groups.

These measures are necessary, but gender-transformative extension goes a step further. It examines the social norms, institutional practices and unequal access to resources that prevent women from benefiting fully from agricultural development.

For example, introducing a tool that reduces women's workload is useful. However, a transformative approach also asks whether women can help select the tool, access the resources required to use it and benefit from the additional income or time saved. Similarly, providing information about improved crop varieties has limited value if women cannot obtain seeds or influence decisions about their adoption.

Research on gender-transformative approaches in agriculture highlights the importance of addressing the deeper causes of inequality rather than focusing only on immediate needs (Singh et al., 2022).

Thus, gender-transformative extension is not simply about conducting more programmes for women. It is about changing the way extension institutions work so that women have fair opportunities to access knowledge, technology, finance, markets and decision-making.

From Participation to Agency and Decision-Making

Participation is an important first step, but it should not be the only measure of extension success.

Consider a Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) that trains 50 women in climate-resilient agriculture. The number of participants shows that the programme reached women. However, it does not tell us whether they can apply the knowledge in their fields.

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Can they obtain the recommended inputs? Can they decide whether to adopt a new practice? Do they have access to credit and markets? Can they influence the use of income earned from agricultural activities? Are they encouraged to share their knowledge with other farmers?

These questions help distinguish participation from empowerment.

Agency means having the ability and confidence to make choices, take action and influence decisions. Agricultural extension can strengthen agency by combining technical training with financial literacy, farm planning, digital skills, market negotiation, entrepreneurship and leadership development.

For instance, a training programme on vegetable cultivation could also teach women to calculate production costs, compare market prices, maintain records and negotiate with buyers. Such training helps them understand not only how to produce crops, but also how to manage an agricultural enterprise.

Extension programmes should therefore assess changes in women's knowledge, confidence, control over resources, involvement in decisions and leadership opportunities—not merely the number of women attending training.

Recognising Women as Farmers

One of the first requirements for gender-transformative extension is to recognise women as farmers in their own right.

In many rural households, agricultural information is primarily directed towards the male household head. Women may perform substantial agricultural work but remain less visible in farmer databases and extension records. As a result, they may miss opportunities to receive training, access schemes or participate in technology demonstrations.

Extension institutions should directly identify women who cultivate crops, manage livestock, conserve seeds, undertake processing and value addition, market produce or operate agricultural enterprises. Their information needs should be assessed independently rather than assuming that they have the same needs and access to information as other household members.

Recognising women as farmers also means respecting their practical knowledge. Women often have valuable experience in seed selection, livestock care, local food systems and the management of farm resources. Extension workers can connect this knowledge with scientific recommendations to develop solutions that are appropriate for local conditions.

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Transforming Extension Institutions

Gender transformation cannot be achieved by women farmers alone. Extension institutions must also change their practices and priorities.

India's agricultural extension system includes State Departments of Agriculture, KVKs, ATMA, agricultural universities, NGOs, farmer organisations and private service providers. These institutions need to examine whether their programmes reach women directly and whether women's needs influence programme planning.

Several actions can support this change:

- Include women farmers directly in extension databases and beneficiary identification.
- Organise training at suitable times and accessible locations.
- Train extension personnel in gender analysis and inclusive communication.
- Involve women in identifying problems and planning extension activities.
- Encourage women to become lead farmers, trainers and community resource persons.
- Include women's views when evaluating programme outcomes.

Gender responsiveness should be the responsibility of all extension personnel, not only women officers or staff working on women-specific programmes.

Extension workers can also engage men, families and community leaders to address social barriers that restrict women's access to information, mobility and decision-making. The objective is to create an environment in which women's participation and leadership are accepted and supported.

Women's Groups and FPOs as Platforms for Leadership

Self-help groups (SHGs), farmer groups and Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) provide important opportunities for collective action. Through these organisations, women can share information, purchase inputs, market produce, access financial services and negotiate with buyers. Working collectively can also increase their confidence and bargaining power.

Government information released in 2026 reported that 10,000 FPOs had been registered under the central FPO scheme, including 1,175 FPOs with entirely women members. Such developments indicate the potential of collective organisations to strengthen women's economic participation.

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However, membership alone does not guarantee influence. Women may belong to an organisation without participating actively in business planning, financial management or marketing decisions. The challenge is to move from membership to meaningful leadership.

Extension agencies can help women's groups strengthen their skills in business planning, record keeping, product quality, value addition, digital marketing and market linkage. They can also facilitate connections with banks, buyers, government schemes and technical institutions.

Women should be encouraged to take leadership positions and participate in decisions about the direction and management of their organisations. This can help transform groups from platforms for receiving information into institutions through which women influence agricultural development.

Digital Extension and Climate Change

Digital technologies have created new opportunities to deliver agricultural information through mobile phones, messaging services, videos, weather applications and digital advisory platforms. These tools can provide timely information and reduce the need for frequent travel to training centres.

However, digital extension can also exclude women who have limited access to smartphones, share devices with family members or face difficulties with digital literacy, connectivity and language. Providing information online does not automatically make it accessible to everyone.

A hybrid extension approach is therefore important. Local-language mobile advisories can be combined with farmer groups, field demonstrations, face-to-face guidance and KVK support. Extension personnel can help women understand the advice and apply it to their own farming conditions.

The same principle applies to climate change. Women are closely involved in livestock care, seed management, vegetable cultivation and household food security, but receiving climate information is not enough. They also need access to suitable inputs, finance, technology and decision-making opportunities.

If drought-tolerant crops or improved livestock practices are recommended, women should be involved in selecting the practices and given the means to implement them. Women should also be recognised as contributors of local knowledge and as partners in developing climate adaptation strategies.

Digital and climate-smart extension will be more effective when it enables women to use information, access resources and make informed decisions.

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A New Opportunity for India

The year 2026 offers an opportunity to strengthen the visibility and leadership of women in agriculture. The International Year of the Woman Farmer and the Global Conference on Women in Agri-Food Systems 2026 have drawn attention to women's contributions, entrepreneurship, innovation, access to technology and leadership.

These developments provide an opportunity for agricultural research, education and extension institutions to translate broader commitments into practical action. Progress will depend on whether women are recognised directly in extension systems, whether they can access the resources they need and whether their voices influence decisions at household, community and institutional levels.

A useful framework for guiding this change is:

Recognition → Access → Participation → Agency → Decision-Making → Leadership

Recognition establishes women's identity as farmers. Access connects them with information, technology and resources. Participation gives them opportunities to engage in extension activities. Agency strengthens their ability to make choices. Decision-making increases their influence over farming and income, while leadership enables them to guide groups, enterprises and institutions.

Extension institutions should assess progress across all these stages rather than treating participation as the final outcome.

Conclusion

Women's participation has been an important step towards making agricultural extension more inclusive, but participation should not be the final goal. The real objective is to ensure that women have the knowledge, confidence, resources and authority to shape agricultural decisions and benefit from their work.

Achieving this requires changes in extension methods, institutional practices, access to resources and leadership opportunities. It also requires the involvement of men, families and communities in addressing social barriers that restrict women's choices.

The role of an extension worker must therefore extend beyond transferring technology. Extension personnel should also facilitate learning, collective action, decision-making and leadership.

The central question should no longer be simply, "How many women participated in agricultural extension?" It should be:

"How much has agricultural extension strengthened women's ability to decide, act and lead?"

That is the essential shift from women's participation towards gender-transformative agricultural extension in India.

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