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- OPINION

The Invisible Farmers

BY **BINA AGARWAL**

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Photograph By Suresh K. Pandey

The Chief Justice of India's recent remarks suggesting women have no place in the ongoing farmers' protests may have gone unnoticed in the 1960s. Today they appear astonishing in their lack of awareness about what the face of the Indian farmer looks like. Women are protesting alongside men because they too have stakes in the outcomes. Indeed, their stakes are bigger—in rural India, 73 per cent of female workers (and only 55 per cent of male workers) depend on agriculture. It is high time women farmers were seen and heard in their own right by policy-makers and law enforcers. After all, they are the backbone of India's agriculture and allied sectors, performing a wide range of tasks in crop cultivation as well as in

management of livestock, fisheries, poultry and non-timber forest produce. In cultivation, they do much of the non-mechanised back-breaking work, especially in rice farming, such as transplanting, weeding and harvesting. They comprise an estimated 60 per cent of the workforce in livestock production and 32 per cent of the 13.5 million employed in aquaculture.

Statistics, however, largely fail to capture the diversity and intensity of women's work. In 2005, women comprised 40 per cent of our agricultural work force (National Sample Survey 2004-05). This fell to 30 per cent in 2017-18 (Periodic Labour Force Survey), even though significantly more men than women migrated to non-farm jobs. Why are women's contributions undercounted? First, it depends on what we consider as work. If we count only paid work, rural women's work participation rate (in both farm and non-farm work) comes to 17.5 per cent (NSS 2011-12). But adding home-based production, self-employment and declared unemployment makes it 64.8 per cent (Dubey et al. *IJLE* 2017).

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Secondly, women are seen as farm helpers rather than as farmers in their own right. Women become de facto farm managers when men shift to non-farm jobs, but are not recognised as such because they seldom own the farm. The assumption that women are dependents also affects who inherits land. My recent research showed that in 2014, averaging across nine states, only 14 per cent of all landowners were women, owning only 11 per cent of land in landowning rural households. They typically inherited land from deceased husbands rather than from fathers, despite the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, giving daughters and sons equal rights in agricultural land.

Treating women farmers as housewives, as implied in the CJI's comments, also has consequences for farm productivity. Even when they are effectively managing the farms, women face a strongly male-biased scenario in terms of access to credit, information on new technology and practices, irrigation, inputs and markets. A 2019 study in *Science* found that agricultural information delivered via cell-phones increased the odds of farmers adopting recommended inputs by 22 per cent and yields by 4 per cent across countries, including India. But women are less likely to gain from such developments as fewer women than men own mobile phones, and even fewer have internet access. These gender gaps will adversely affect our productivity and growth. Analysing global evidence, the Food and Agriculture Organization found in 2011 that if women farmers had the same access as men to land and other inputs, farm yields could be 20-30 per cent higher and agricultural growth rates 2.5-4 per cent greater in developing countries.

This bias can be overcome to a fair extent if women cultivate in groups by jointly leasing in land and/or pooling their small plots, combining their labour and capital, and sharing costs and benefits. As a group, they can obtain credit via NABARD's

Joint Liability Group scheme, gain from scale economies, save on hired labour and sell their produce profitably. My research in Kerala showed that the sampled all-women group farms had, on average, almost twice the annual value of output per hectare and five times the net returns per farm compared with the mostly male-managed individual family farms. And 87 per cent of some 31,000 group farms harvesting in March 2020 survived economically under the stringent Covid lockdown, unlike most individual farms. Beyond Kerala (which has over 68,000 women's group farms), women have also begun group farming in Gujarat, Bihar and West Bengal, with visible benefits.

(The writer is professor of development economics and environment, GDI, University of Manchester, UK. Views are personal.)