



Kurukshetra

A RURAL DEVELOPMENT MONTHLY SINCE 1952

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Save the Future



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Protecting Farmers
Preserving the Future



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Women Redefining Sustainable Agriculture

The UN has designated 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer. In India, this recognition comes after over a decade of sustained investment in rural women through Self-Help Groups, Krishi Sakhis, drone technology and improved land and legal rights. These initiatives are reshaping leadership in Indian agriculture– from the hill terraces of Meghalaya to the organic fields of Sikkim and the legislative corridors of Maharashtra.

Dr. Arvind Kumar

Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaffirmed that the Government has spared no effort in empowering the country's youth, women, and farmers over the past decade and that it will continue on this path of service as India progresses towards *Viksit Bharat*. It is a theme he returns to often, especially when speaking about the women who anchor rural India's Self-Help Groups. "Women connected with Self-Help Groups are the strong link for

Viksit Bharat," he has said, describing them as central to a quiet yet sweeping transformation unfolding across India's villages—a transformation that has gained global recognition with the United Nations designating 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer.

This recognition is not ceremonial; it reflects a fundamental reimagining of rural livelihoods where women are no longer passive recipients of welfare but active architects of economic change. Their contribution now spans the entire agricultural value chain from crop

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production and livestock management to agroforestry, fisheries, horticulture, pre-harvest operations, post-harvest processing, packaging and marketing. Beyond the farm gate, women are driving allied enterprises in dairy, poultry, beekeeping, sericulture, mushroom cultivation and nursery management, capturing value that once flowed entirely to middlemen. They are adopting climate-smart practices, managing water resources through spring-catchment rejuvenation and drip irrigation, and leveraging digital tools and drone technology for precision agriculture.

Women as Drivers of Agricultural Transformation

The scale of this transformation is evident in the numbers. What began in 2010–11 as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, later renamed the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), has grown into one of the world’s largest women-led development platforms. As of December 2025, over 10.05 crore rural women had been mobilised into 90.91 lakh Self-Help Groups, which collectively accessed more than ₹12 lakh crore in institutional bank credit since 2013–14.

Within this framework, the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) continues to focus specifically on strengthening agricultural livelihoods. Complementing this effort are newer initiatives that further deepen women’s participation in agriculture. More than 34,000, of a target of 70,000 women, have already been certified as Krishi Sakhis—para-extension workers trained in natural farming and soil health. In

addition, over 2.5 crore women farmers have received training in agro-ecological and livestock management practices since 2022.

The Namo Drone Didi scheme, supported by an outlay of ₹1,261 crore, is placing agricultural drones in the hands of women’s Self-Help Groups, enabling them to provide drone-based services and improve farm productivity. Meanwhile, more than 1,175 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) are now managed entirely by women shareholders.

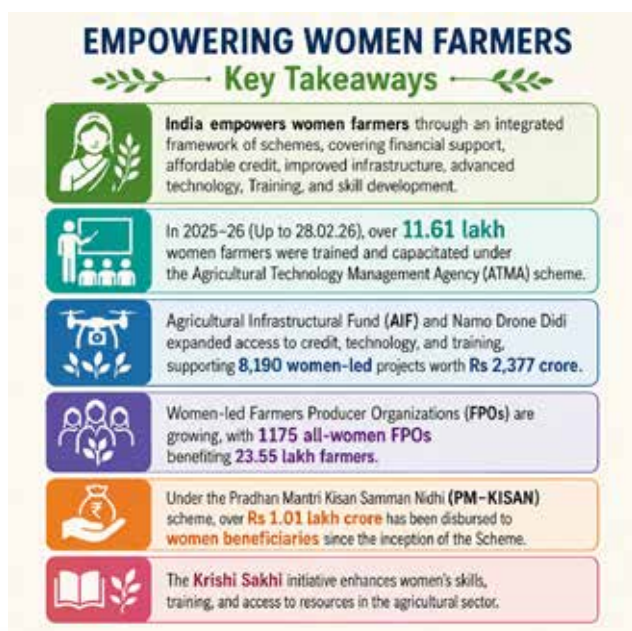
The Lakhpati Didi Mission has already enabled more than three crore women to earn annual incomes exceeding ₹1 lakh, with the target expanded to six crore women by 2029. These initiatives are part of a broader ecosystem of women’s empowerment, which includes 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and State legislatures, while women hold 56 per cent of Jan Dhan accounts and 68 per cent of Mudra loans. This progress was showcased globally in March 2026, when New Delhi hosted the Global Conference on Women in Agri-Food Systems.

The Economic Survey reflects the underlying transformation. Women’s share in India’s agricultural workforce increased from 57 per cent in 2017–18 to 64.4 per cent in 2023–24. However, land ownership continues to lag behind. Women still operate only about 14 per cent of agricultural holdings nationally, a gap that several State Governments have now begun to address through targeted legal and policy reforms.

Building an Enabling Ecosystem

The empowerment of women in Indian agriculture is no longer a peripheral concern but the central axis around which the nation’s agrarian future is evolving. From the rain-soaked hills of Meghalaya to the organic farms of Sikkim, from Maharashtra’s legislative reforms to Telangana’s enterprise networks, a unified story is emerging—one in which women are transitioning from unrecognised labourers to acknowledged leaders. This transformation is taking place not in isolation but through a deeply interwoven tapestry of institutional support, technological innovation, and progressive policy reforms.

In Meghalaya, the state’s matrilineal culture has long placed women at the helm of land ownership and household decision-making, but it is the Integrated Basin Development and Livelihood Promotion



Programme (IBDLP), shaped by India Water Foundation with partners like JICA, GIZ, IFAD, and the World Bank, that has given this traditional authority institutional heft. Women who once practiced fragmented jhum cultivation now command high-value crops like Lakadong turmeric, ginger, and cardamom, enabled by spring-catchment rejuvenation and drip irrigation, solutions that address the paradox of heavy rainfall and acute dry-season water stress. This water security, in turn, has unlocked multiple cropping, steady incomes, and a shift into processing, packaging, beekeeping, and nursery enterprises, capturing value once lost to middlemen.

Sikkim offers a parallel yet complementary example from its mountainous terrain. Since becoming the world's first fully organic state in 2016, women have been the custodians of the intergenerational knowledge that sustains this transition, turning large cardamom, ginger, and turmeric into commercial successes. The model has gained such national resonance that it is now held up as a template for the rest of the country, urging even tourists to buy local organic produce, a direct link between state policy, women's agency, and market demand.

Maharashtra has taken one of the country's most significant legislative steps by unanimously passing the Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Act in July 2026. The Act grants women legal recognition as independent farmers irrespective of land ownership—a

long-awaited structural reform in a State where women constitute more than 80 per cent of the agricultural workforce but have been excluded from welfare schemes, crop insurance, and institutional credit because land titles were predominantly held by men. The legislation introduces Woman Farmer Certificates, establishes a dedicated State Fund, and creates a comprehensive digital database, thereby addressing one of the most persistent barriers to women's empowerment in agriculture.

Telangana, meanwhile, has built on its vast network of 4.35 lakh Self-Help Groups, organised under the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, to launch a Rs. 12.66 crore Challenge Fund that mentors and finances women-led enterprises in food processing, agri-allied activities, and handicrafts across all 33 districts, pushing women from microfinance participants to independent rural entrepreneurs.

These state-level innovations do not stand alone; they are reinforced by a pan-Indian architecture of schemes and institutions that collectively create an enabling ecosystem. The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) has directly transferred over ₹1.01 lakh crore to women beneficiaries, with nearly 2.15 crore women receiving support in the 22nd instalment alone. The Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) has sanctioned 8,190 projects worth ₹2,377 crore to women farmers, while the Agricultural Marketing Infrastructure (AMI) scheme has subsidised more than 10,600 storage projects for women, strengthening their access to markets.

Making Institutional Credit More Accessible

Financial inclusion has been further strengthened through the Modified Interest Subvention Scheme (MISS) and the Kisan Credit Card (KCC) programme, making institutional credit more accessible to women cultivators. Beyond financial support, equal emphasis has been placed on capacity building. The National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE) has trained more than 61,000 women since 2020, while the National Gender Resource Centre in Agriculture (NGRCA) continues to promote gender mainstreaming across agricultural policies and programmes.

This convergence of state-specific models, national financial and technical schemes, gender-responsive legislation, community-based extension, and



Schemes and Programmes Supporting Women Farmers

- Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF)
- Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA)
- Integrated Scheme for Agriculture Marketing (ISAM)
- Namo Drone Didi
- National Beekeeping and Honey Mission (NBHM)
- Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana—National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM)
- Modified Interest Subvention Scheme (MISS)
- Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH)
- Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses
- Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN)

Source: Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare

women-led collectives demonstrates that agricultural transformation is not a fragmented patchwork but a coherent, interwoven movement; one that is finally giving the nation's agrarian backbone the recognition and support it has always deserved.

The Road Ahead

The next phase of reform must prioritise the universal recognition of women as farmers through gender-responsive land records, joint land titles, and inheritance reforms. Such measures will ensure that access to credit, insurance, markets, and government schemes is determined by actual cultivation rather than land ownership alone. Simultaneously, greater investments are required in climate-smart agriculture, digital extension services, precision farming, farm mechanisation, women-led Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), value addition and agri-processing enterprises to enable women to evolve from primary producers into agribusiness leaders.

Expanding irrigation, water security, storage infrastructure and market linkages, while strengthening SHGs, Krishi Sakhis and rural cooperatives, will further enhance resilience and income security. The International Year should also serve as a catalyst for increased public and private investment, gender-responsive budgeting and evidence-based policymaking that measures women's contributions across the entire agri-food value chain. As emphasised during the Global Conference on Women in Agri-Food Systems, empowering women farmers is indispensable for achieving food security, climate resilience, and sustainable rural development.

India's journey demonstrates that when women are recognised not merely as agricultural workers but as farmers, entrepreneurs, innovators, and decision-makers, they become the driving force of inclusive rural transformation. Empowering the woman farmer is, ultimately, indispensable to realising the vision of *Viksit Bharat*. □



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