

Female Employment and Agriculture: Women as Farm Managers

In Brief

- Female labor force participation rate in rural India has declined from 52% to 38% between 1987 and 2011, which is puzzling given economic growth and demographic conditions like fall in fertility and increase in women's education.
- This study aims to understand the impact of structural transformation in agriculture – the sector where 80% of the female rural workforce is engaged (about 50% are cultivators and the remainder are agricultural laborers) – on female employment over time. A key focus is to develop a nuanced understanding of the role of women as farm managers, which usually goes unnoticed.
- Over time, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of rural households where women manage farms. Female farm-management is positively associated with male out-migration and women's farm ownership, with the former being the more important explanatory factor. While a majority of households with female farm-managers are headed by women, female headship and farm management do not overlap completely.
- Relative to their male counterparts, female managers are less educated, are less likely to own the land they manage, and their households own and cultivate smaller landholdings.
- Given an expected increase in male out-migration from rural areas in the future, agricultural policy needs to align to the specific needs of female farm-managers.

Research Context

Besides the right to ownership and the right to use, a third dimension of women's association with land is their role as farm managers. Role of women as farm managers in India remains invisible behind the veil of the image that men are primary decision-makers on farm matters in cultivator households. As per the Agriculture Census 2010-11, women farmers manage 12.78% of operational

landholdings and 10.34% of the operational area. These numbers are low, but not insignificant to not merit attention. Besides, they have been increasing over time; in 1995-96, the corresponding figures were 9.5% and 7.2%. Using data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) (2004-05, 2011-12) this research analyses the rise in female farm-management; its variation along demographic dimensions; and differences between cultivator households where men and women manage farms.

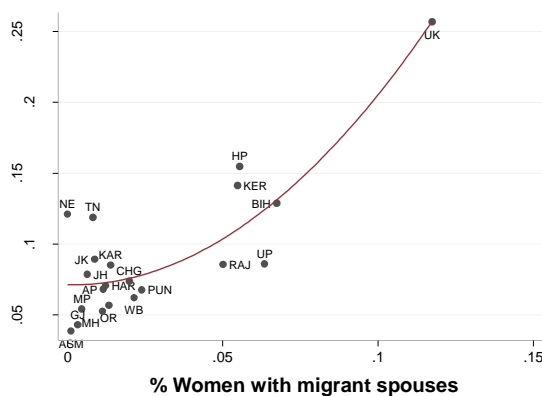
Key Findings

There has been a steady increase, over time, in the proportion of rural households where women manage farms

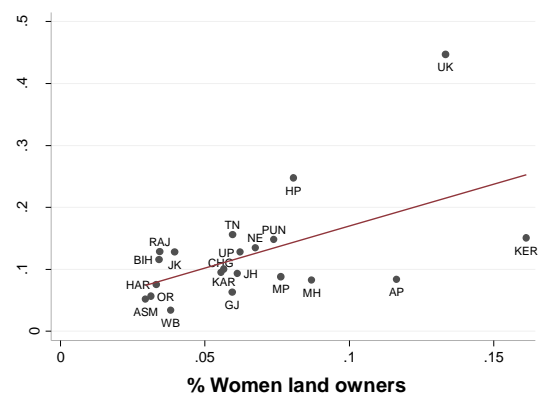
Women report managing farms in 8.3% of households in 2004, which increased to 10.9% in 2011, according to IHDS. Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan have the highest rates of women with migrant husbands in 2004 and are also in the top 10 states in terms of proportion of households where women manage farms. A similar positive relationship holds in 2011 as well. A positive association is also observed between women farm-management and land-ownership in 2011. Together, male out-migration rate and female land-ownership explain 80% of the variation in female farm-management across states in 2011, and migration alone explains 70% of the variation in 2004.

Figure 1. State-wise incidence of women farm-management in rural India and (a) migration and (b) female land-ownership (2011)

1(a). Migration



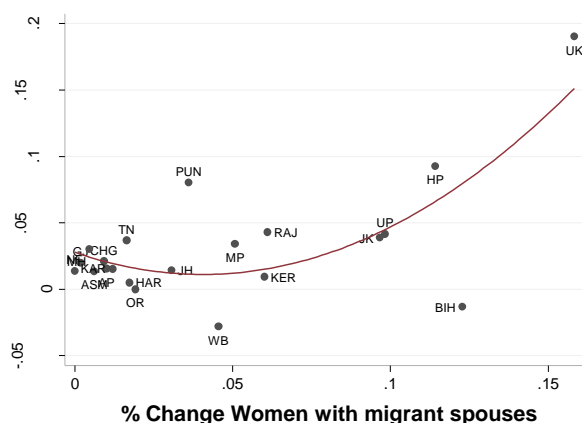
1(b). Female land-ownership



Rise in female farm-management is largely driven by male out-migration

The most dramatic rise in the proportion of female-managed farm households between 2004 and 2011 has been in Uttarakhand (26% to 45%) and Himachal Pradesh (15% to 25%). These two states have also experienced the largest increases in migration rates.

Figure 2. Change in state-wise incidence of women farm-management in rural India and migration (2004-2011)

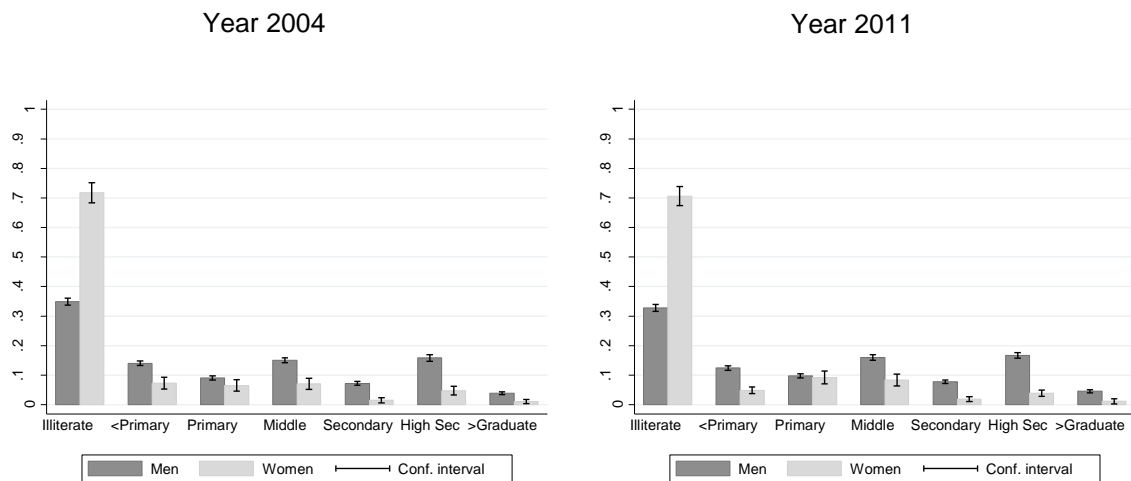


Amongst all women managers in 2004, the highest proportion is widowed (55%), married and living with spouse (25%), and married with an absent spouse due to migration (15%). During 2004-2011, the largest increase (by 11%) has been in the proportion of women who are married and have a migrant husband, with a commensurate fall (by 9%) in the proportion of women who are married and living with spouse.

Female farm-managers are less educated relative to their male counterparts

Women farm-managers are more likely to be illiterate in comparison to men farm-managers. Women have lower education attainment in 2004 and this gap has not narrowed over time.

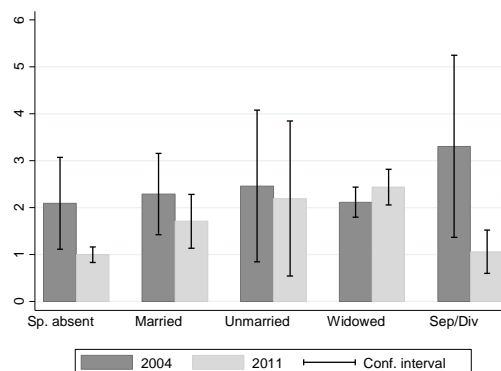
Figure 3. Education distribution of men and women farm-managers (2004, 2011)



Households with female farm-managers own and cultivate smaller landholdings

Male-managed farm households own 3.4 acres of land and female-managed farm households own 2.2 acres in 2004 (the corresponding figures for 2011 are 2.8 acres and 1.9 acres). While there is no significant difference in household land-ownership by marital status of female farm-managers in 2004, there is a major reduction in the migrant husband and separated/divorced categories in 2011.

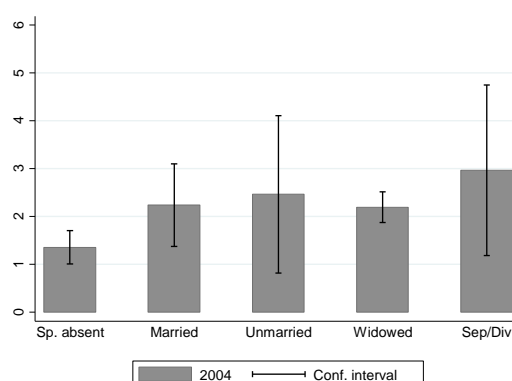
Figure 4. Land owned by female-managed farm households, by marital status of female manager (2004, 2011)



Net cultivated area – which includes owned and rented land – is 3.4 acres in households where men manage farms and 2.1 acres where women manage farms,

in 2004. In the same year, net cultivated area is lowest amongst female farm-managers with migrant husbands, even though these households are similar to others in terms of land ownership. This shows that either they face greater resource constraints and are unable to utilize all of the household land, or not all of the land is suitable for cultivation.

Figure 5. Net area cultivated by female-managed farm households, by marital status of female manager (2004)



Policy Implications

Given the rising trend in female farm-management in India and the observed characteristics of female managers, the Economic Survey, 2017-18, rightly highlights that women farmers should have enhanced access to resources like land, credit, technology, and training, and that the entitlements of women farmers will be the key to improving agricultural productivity. Earmarking at least 30% of the budget allocation for women beneficiaries in all ongoing programmes and development activities is a step in the right direction. Government initiatives such as *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* (MKSP), which started in 2010 and covers only 20% of Indian districts, should be scaled-up and strengthened. In terms of focus on female farm-managers, the states with higher rates of male out-migration may be prioritised.