

# Rural Women

## Agriculture, Forests and Employment



### Economic Agency and Entitlement to Productive Assets

In a village meeting in August 2010 in Maharashtra, India, a woman farmer in the presence of thirty women and twenty-one men said: “When the land is in my husband’s name, I am only a worker. When it is in my name, I gain some position in society and my children and husband respect me. My responsibility is greater to my own land and I take care of my fields like I do my children.”

Asset ownership and control rights are preferable to policy alternatives of women’s income generation. It provides a basis for overcoming distortions in the functioning of markets and for restructuring gender relations in property rights, access to technology, healthcare and governance. Recent studies (listed below) conducted by UN Women is an attempt at drawing attention to this complex inter-relationship between women agricultural producers and their lack of rights to land and related factors of production. They explore implications of women’s marginal rights to land for economic security and agricultural productivity.



### Women, Land and Agriculture in Rural India

Seventy nine percent of rural women work in agriculture; they, however lack control over productive assets such as land, livestock technologies, credit, finance and markets.

Most of these problems would sort out if women’s rights over land are recognized in the revenue records. Endowing women with land would empower them economically as well as strengthen their ability to challenge social and political gender inequities. There are three main sources of land for women: direct government transfers, market (by purchase or lease), and inheritance.

To enhance land access from all three sources, a range of initiatives are needed, including land titles to women in all government land transfers, credit support to poor women to purchase or lease land and raising legal awareness and support about women’s inheritance rights.

### MGNREGA and Women’s Empowerment in Rural India

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was introduced to meet the complex challenge of global economic crisis, along with an acute rise in food and fuel insecurity. It is noted for its measures for gender wage parity and a yearly 100 days of guaranteed employment in creation of environmentally sound productive assets. Studies conducted in six states of India reveal that MGNREGA has enhanced women’s say in management of household financial resources. There is, however, a greater need for institutionalizing women’s effective role in local planning of MGNREGA assets and community-based social audits of the implementation.



## Reduction of Violence Against Women: Land Ownership and Economic Independence

Rekha acknowledged that Rajbir, her husband, had a “temper” and was given to airing it freely. Rajbir confirming this stated that he indeed was given to “slapping Rekha now and then to keep her straight”. This ‘slapping’ ceased since her property claims came to be voiced. When asked whether society was now allowing daughters to have a share in their father’s property, Rajbir, underlining the changing norms, maintained: “Society doesn’t say anything. All households are now facing such demands from their daughters who are claiming their share and in fact even getting it.”

Dhanpati felt that if the son who is the inheritor was alive, in most cases the daughter was beaten by her husband as well as other family members. This was because she does not inherit the property. On the other hand, if the son was no more, the daughter becomes the inheritor - the violence ceases from her inlaws.

Nirmala maintained, “Because we have our father’s property behind us we have not only got respect in our family but also our husbands have never raised their hand on us. We have never experienced physical violence.”



## Barriers to Women’s Entitlements to Land in India

Lack of awareness about the law, lack of assets, financial security and social support, perceptions and beliefs, illiteracy and inaccessibility of the courts and other administrative institutions (particular with Revenue officials) are factors which exclude women from exercising their rights to land.

Social and cultural barriers and lack of support from family members and communities prevent women from demanding their rights to land which is seen as men’s domain. This influences social systems and is an embedded aspect of cultural barriers.

## Women’s Rights to Forest Spaces and Resources

Vulnerability to environmental degradation induces women to become agents of eco-restoration in organised efforts. Women have taken keen interest in planting fruit, fodder and fuel wood trees around their houses and on common lands. They have also taken part in struggles to protect grazing lands and forests from disruptive developments like mining. Since women are so closely linked with natural resources, they represent a constructive and protective force for the environment.

Addressing gender issues requires that a). Any development intervention does not deprive women access to previously accessible resources; b). Workload related to gathering of fuel, fodder and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) is lightened; c). Increased availability of forest products for livelihoods and enhancing women’s skills through value-chain of the products.



UN Women is the global champion for women and girls. UN Women acts on the fundamental premise that women and girls worldwide have the right to live a life free of discrimination, violence and poverty, and that gender equality and women’s unmediated economic rights are central to achieving development.