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Between the Field and the Record: Women's Labour and Land Ownership in Indian Agriculture: A National Overview with a Regional Focus on Rajasthan

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Abstract

Although women's land ownership remains low, agriculture in India is steadily becoming feminised. This paper draws on secondary data from several national surveys the Agriculture Census, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4 and NFHS-5), and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) to examine the widening disparity between women's agricultural labour and their control of agricultural land, with particular attention to Rajasthan. While the share of female workers engaged in agriculture rose to 64.4 per cent in 2023-24 from 57 per cent in 2017-18, women accounted for only 13.9 per cent of operational landholdings as per the most recent census with published gender-disaggregated data, conducted in 2015-16. NFHS-5 (2019-21) data show that land owned alone or jointly is lower among women (31.7 per cent) than men (43.9 per cent), with Rajasthan among the states where women's land ownership is lowest, at under 20 per cent. The paper locates this gap in the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, which granted daughters equal coparcenary rights under Section 6 and removed Section 4(2), extending succession rights to agricultural land. Despite this legal reform, a gap persists between entitlement and actual ownership. The paper examines the spatial implications of the SVAMITVA scheme which establishes clear ownership of rural residential properties through drone-based surveying and property cards alongside women's Self-Help Groups under the National Rural Livelihood Mission as institutional mechanisms that could strengthen women's access to and control over property. It argues that formal legal rights have not translated proportionately into recorded ownership or effective decision-making power, and that region-specific intervention in land administration is needed to close this gap culminating in recommendations for mandatory joint titling and improved gender-disaggregated monitoring of land data.

Keywords: Women in Agriculture, Land Ownership, Gender Gap, Hindu Succession Act, Rajasthan, Rural Empowerment.

Introduction

Land is the most critical productive asset in rural India, and the least controlled asset by the women. While women play a substantial role across agricultural operations, including sowing, weeding, harvesting and post-harvest processing, male farmers are overwhelmingly recorded as owners and operators of agricultural land¹. The labour and land disjuncture is not only economic, but spatial and institutional as well, because of inheritance custom, land registration, and the gendered geography of rural livelihoods. Given that Geography is a subject about people, resources and space, it makes sense that it would look at the issue of women's access to land and how this is distributed in various parts of the world as well as the uneven results of land reforms in practice.

This paper discusses the extent and endurance of the gender disparity in agricultural land ownership in India, tracing its evolution from customary exclusion through legal reform to the present. Rajasthan recorded the largest operated area among Indian States in 2015–16, at approximately 20.87 million hectares² while women's reported land ownership remained in the lowest state-level band in NFHS-5. The paper argues that formal legal entitlement has been important but not enough to ensure ownership in practice and that there is a need for institutional action which is targeted in space to close the gap between formal legal entitlement and effective ownership.

Objectives

The paper has three broad goals: (i) to analyse how the trend of women's participation in agricultural labour compares with their landholding shares; (ii) to compare and contrast the regional trend in women's land ownership with reference to Rajasthan; and (iii) to examine legal and policy measures to narrow the gender gap including the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, the programme of SVAMITVA and the National Rural Livelihood Mission.

Methodology

This paper uses a descriptive-analytical methodology, which is based on secondary data from official and peer-reviewed sources such as Agriculture Census (2005-06 to 2015-16) from the latest round³, published with gender data; NFHS-4 and NFHS-5 survey; and PLFS data from the Economic Survey 2024-25⁴. The paper

¹ Nency Agrawal & Soham Bhattacharya, *"Unequal Work: Explaining the Recent Increase in Female Workers in Rural India"* (2024).

² Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, *Agriculture Census 2015–16: All India Report on Number and Area of Operational Holdings* (Agriculture Census Division, Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, 2019); see also Bina Agarwal, Pervesh Anthwal & Malvika Mahesh, "How Many and Which Women Own Land in India? Inter-gender and Intra-gender Gaps," *The Journal of Development Studies* (2021).

³ "Operational holding" denotes all land used wholly or partly for agricultural production, operated as one technical unit, irrespective of ownership title (Agriculture Census definition, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI).

⁴ Ministry of Finance, Government of India, *Economic Survey 2024–25*, citing Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, National Statistical Office.

cautions against relying on any one source and highlighted the differences between the sources, for example, the self-reported ownership of NFHS-5 versus the lower estimates based on the All-India Debt and Investment Survey (AIDIS) that was conducted.

The Feminisation of Indian Agriculture

The proportion of agriculture labourers in the workforce has been rising consistently in India during the last decade, as a result of the out-migration of men to non-farm work and the increasing role of women in handling the increasing burden of agricultural operations¹. PLFS data cited in the Economic Survey 2024-25 shows that the share of female workers in the agricultural sector increased from 57 per cent in 2017-18 to 64.4 per cent in 2023-24, compared to a decrease from 40.2 to 36.3 per cent for males². In 2023-2024, 76.9 per cent of rural women were employed in agriculture, compared with 75.9 per cent in 2022-23³; and in certain states like Chhattisgarh and Himachal Pradesh, women workers already outnumber men in agriculture.

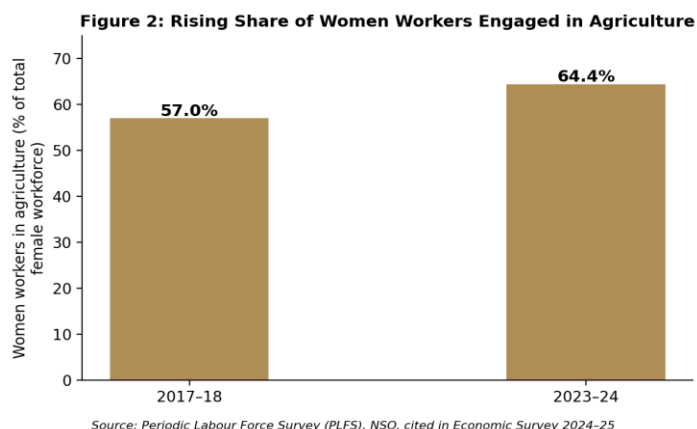


Figure 1: Rising share of India's female workforce engaged in agriculture (PLFS, cited in Economic Survey 2024-25).

This feminisation of agricultural work has not been accompanied by a proportionate increase in women's recognition as landholding farmers. Women may perform substantial agricultural work while remaining absent from formal land records, which can restrict their access to institutional credit, crop insurance and schemes linked to landholding or farmer status⁴.

¹ Social and Political Research Foundation (SPRF), *Workers or Owners? The Case of Women Farmers in India* (New Delhi: SPRF, 2023).

² Ministry of Finance, Government of India, *Economic Survey 2024-25*, citing Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, National Statistical Office.

³ Ministry of Finance, Government of India, *Economic Survey 2024-25*, Chapter on Employment and Labour.

⁴ R. Mohan (2017), as cited in SPRF, *Workers or Owners?* (2023).

The Land Ownership Gap

The proportion of women's holdings in recorded operational land holdings is still very low. According to the Agriculture Census, the percentage of female operational holders increased slightly from 11.0 per cent (15.1 million) in 2005-06, to 12.8 per cent (17.65 million) in 2010-11, to 13.9 per cent (20.25 million) in 2015-16¹, the latest census year with gender data available. Women accounted for 13.9 per cent of total operational holdings and 11.7 per cent of the total operated area in 2015-16. The lower share of operated area relative to the number of holdings also indicates that women's operational holdings were, on average, more concentrated in smaller land parcels.

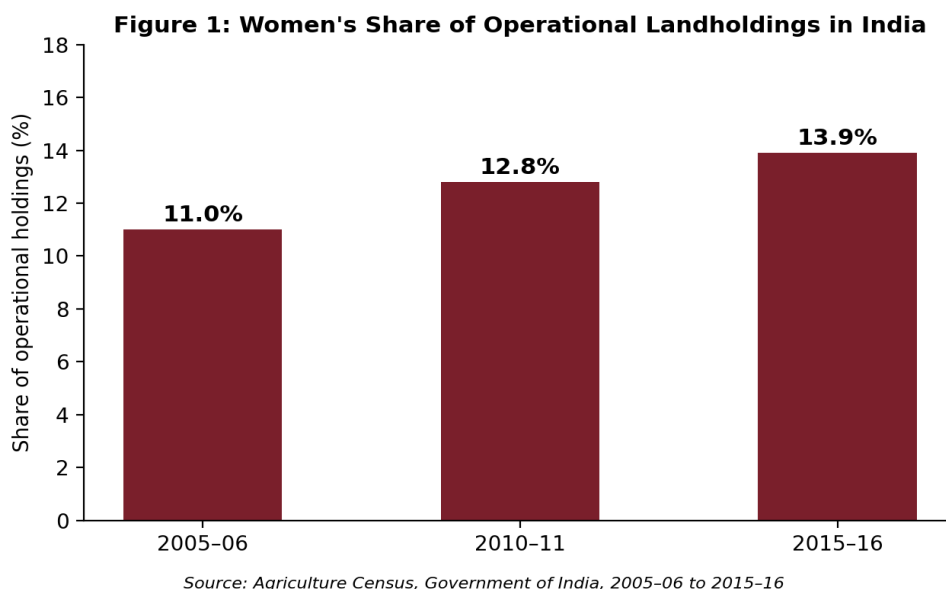


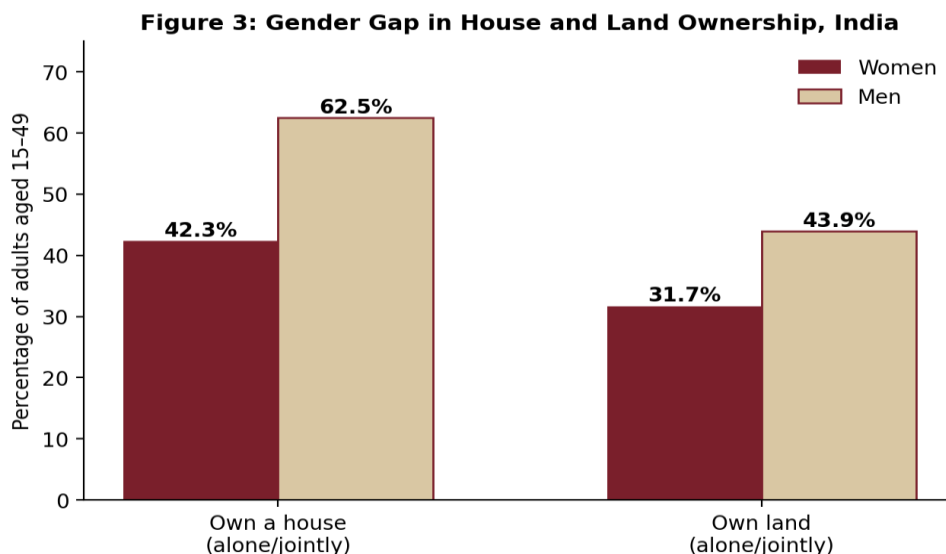
Figure 2: Women's share of operational landholdings in India, three census rounds (Agriculture Census, GoI).

The data from NFHS provides a picture of ownership at the household level, with the proportion of women aged 15-49 who own land, either alone or collectively, increasing slightly from 28.3 per cent in NFHS-4 (2015-16) to 31.7 per cent in NFHS-5 (2019-21), compared with 43.9 per cent for men; women's house ownership was 42.3 per cent, while men's was 62.5 per cent². These self-reported figures have also been questioned: a study in Economic and Political Weekly in 2024 revealed that only about 5.5 per cent of women aged 15-49 were reported as landowners in AIDIS,

¹ Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, *Agriculture Census 2015-16: All India Report on Number and Area of Operational Holdings* (Agriculture Census Division, Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare, 2019).

² UNFPA India, *Asset Ownership by Women in India: Insights from NFHS Data*, Analytical Paper 6 (New Delhi, 2022).

compared with 31.7 per cent in NFHS-5. The authors attribute the substantial divergence to differences in survey design, definitions and reporting mechanisms¹. Although NFHS-5 and AIDIS differ substantially in their estimates and methodologies, both the available evidence and the Agriculture Census indicate a persistent gender disparity in women's access to and control over land relative to their participation in agricultural work.



Source: National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21), IIPS & Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, GoI

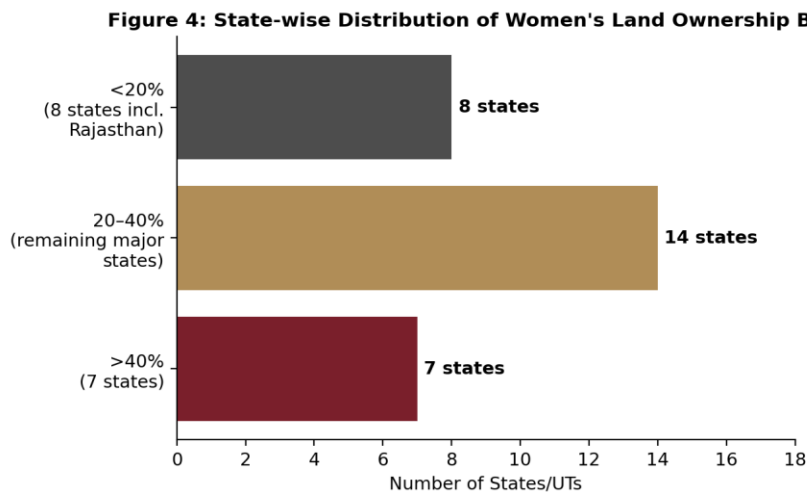
Figure 3: Gender gap in house and land ownership, NFHS-5 (2019–21)

Regional Variation and the Case of Rajasthan

There is substantial variation by state in the proportion of women who are landowners, with inheritance of land and the history of land ownership contributing to this variation. According to NFHS-5 data, only seven states- Karnataka, Telangana, Meghalaya, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jammu & Kashmir have a proportion of women reporting land ownership, individually or jointly of over 40 per cent for women who own land individually or collectively while in a larger set comprising of Kerala, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Goa and Rajasthan, less than 20 per cent of women own land in their names or in joint names.²

¹ Rakesh Kumar Mahato et al., "Status of Women's Landownership in India: A Comparison of Estimates from NFHS and AIDIS," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 59, Issue 16 (2024), pp. 58–68.

² UNFPA India, *Asset Ownership by Women in India: Insights from NFHS Data, Analytical Paper 6* (New Delhi, 2022).



Source: NFHS-5 (2019–21) state fact sheets, as analysed in UNFPA India (2022), 'Asset Ownership by Women in India: Insights from NFHS Data'

Figure 4: States grouped by band of women's recorded land ownership (NFHS-5)

Rajasthan's ranking in the lowest band is noteworthy in the context of its agrarian nature: It had the largest operated area of any Indian state in 2015-16 (20.87 million hectares); It had more than 76 lakh operational holdings in 2015-16, predominantly consisting of marginal and small holdings¹. Notwithstanding the laws of equality in inheritance, agrarian states in northern and western India with entrenched patrilineal inheritance customs demonstrate the greatest disparity between agricultural work by women and their recorded land ownership.

The Legal Framework: From Exclusion to Formal Equality

Before the 2005 amendment, Section 4(2) of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 preserved the operation of certain State laws governing succession to agricultural holdings and tenancy rights². The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 omitted Section 4(2) and substituted Section 6, thereby giving daughters the same rights and liabilities as sons in Mitakshara coparcenary property. The amendment consequently strengthened the statutory framework for gender-equal succession, including in relation to agricultural property³. However, implementation studies found that women's understanding of their enhanced inheritance rights and the procedures for asserting them remained limited, and entrenched behaviour, especially in relation to dowry, which substituted for inheritance, and family pressure on women to abandon their right to inherit, was still a barrier to women's use of the right to inheritance⁴. This

¹ Government of Rajasthan, *Economic Review 2025–26*, citing Agriculture Census 2015–16, Table 1.1.

² Hindu Succession Act 1956, § 4(2), as omitted by the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005.

³ Hindu Succession Act 1956, § 6, as substituted by the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005.

⁴ Landesa Rural Development Institute, *What Is Preventing Women from Inheriting Land? A Study of the Implementation of the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 in Three States in India* (Seattle: Landesa, 2014).

is why land ownership by women has not yet caught up, 20 years later, with that of men, both on the face of land records and in the hearts of everyone who is involved in the process of registration. This helps explain why women's reported land ownership remains below one-third among women aged 15-49 nationally and below one-fifth in Rajasthan according to the NFHS-5 measure used here.

Institutional Interventions: SVAMITVA and Self-Help Groups

These interventions illustrate how institutional and administrative design can complement legal reform by translating formal property rights into recorded ownership. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj scheme "SVAMITVA" has conducted drone surveys to map rural residential land and issued legal property cards, reaching 3.29 lakh villages and 3.10 crore property cards by March 2026¹. In states including Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and Karnataka, have mandated that women be listed as co-owners on these property cards. The clearest documented outcome of this is from Pune district, Maharashtra, where the share of residential properties owned jointly or solely by women rose from 16 per cent to 88-89 per cent following the change². Secondly, the women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the National Rural Livelihood Mission functions as a spatial network of collective bargaining power which have been mobilized to claim land and enhance women's position in household land-use decisions in several states. Both recommend formal recognition is best advanced through the infrastructure of land registration itself.

Discussion

The evidence points to consistent pattern that the role of women in Indian agriculture has strengthened over the years while their ownership of land has grown only marginally. This is not just a question of whether there is adequate legislation to ensure equal rights to access land in the eyes of the law; this is also a question of social and administrative procedures in which land is actually registered and transferred. The state of Rajasthan is an example of this: It has the highest agricultural area of the country and has a large percentage of female agricultural workers, but is one of the lowest percentage states for women's land ownership.

The gap has to be addressed not just through national policy, but by looking at the variation in customary practice, land record and administrative capacity across the region. The Pune experience suggests that embedding women's co-ownership directly into the property-registration process can produce substantial changes in recorded ownership. This indicates the potential value of institutional design at the point of registration, although further comparative evidence would be necessary to

¹ IAS Gyan, "SVAMITVA Scheme: Digitizing Rural Land Records" (2026).

² Rising Kashmir, "Women's Empowerment through Co-ownership in the Property Cards created under SVAMITVA Scheme," 2025; see also Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, "SVAMITVA Scheme," Press Information Bureau, PRID 2241691, 11 March 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2241691®=3&lang=1>.

establish whether such mechanisms consistently outperform awareness-based interventions across States. This is a call to action for those states such as Rajasthan to adopt joint titling as part of the existing land information systems and incorporate land verification into existing rural livelihood schemes.

Recommendations

- Mandatory joint titling of agricultural and homestead land as a default, not an opt-in claims within programmes such as SVAMITVA, following the model already showing measurable results in states that have embedded co-ownership into the registration process itself.
- Integration of land title support within NRLM's Self-Help Group network, using the existing spatial reach and collective bargaining structure of women's SHGs as a delivery mechanism for land documentation and title assistance, rather than relying on awareness campaigns alone.
- Expanded, more frequent state-wise monitoring of gender-disaggregated land data, given that the most recent Agriculture Census with published gender figures dates to 2015–16; without more current data, it is difficult to assess whether interventions such as SVAMITVA are actually narrowing the ownership gap over time.
- Targeted legal literacy on inheritance rights, delivered through panchayats and SHGs in low-ownership states including Rajasthan, addressing the documented gap between women's awareness of their rights under the 2005 Amendment and their actual exercise of those rights.
- Region-specific intervention rather than a uniform national approach, given the sharp state-to-state variation in customary inheritance practice; policy tools that work in states with weaker patrilineal inheritance norms may need to be adapted for agrarian states with more entrenched customary exclusion, such as Rajasthan.
- Cross-verification of self-reported ownership data against administrative records, given the significant divergence between NFHS-5's self-reported figures and lower estimates from sources such as AIDIS, better data reconciliation would allow policymakers to size the problem more accurately before designing interventions.

Conclusion

The share of female workers engaged in agriculture has increased to 64.4 per cent, while women continue to account for a disproportionately small share of recorded operational holdings. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 strengthened women's inheritance and coparcenary rights, yet women's participation in agriculture remains substantial, with the share of female workers engaged in

agriculture reaching 64.4 per cent, even as their representation among recorded operational holders remains considerably lower. This paper has shown that the persistence of the gap is closely tied not to the absence of legal entitlement but to regional variation in custom, inheritance practice, and land administration, with agrarian states such as Rajasthan which has the largest operated area of any state in the country among those where the disjuncture between women's labour and women's recorded ownership remains widest. The evidence from Pune suggests that institutional design which embeds women's co-ownership into the property-registration process can produce rapid changes in recorded ownership. This complements, rather than replaces, the role of legal reform and highlights the importance of translating formal rights into administrative practice. This points to a broader conclusion: formal equality before the law is a necessary but insufficient condition for closing the gender land gap, and lasting change will depend on how land is actually registered, verified, and recorded at the point of administration. Only when legal entitlement is consistently translated into administrative recognition and effective control can women's substantial contribution to Indian agriculture be matched by corresponding recognition in land records and property rights.

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