

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Breaking Ground: Women's Contribution to Agriculture and their Struggle for Land Rights in North Eastern India

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In the lush, rolling hills and fertile valleys of North Eastern India, women are the backbone of rural economies. They till the soil, sow seeds, harvest crops, and manage livestock. Yet, when it comes to owning the land they nurture, most women remain on the margins—locked out by tradition, law, and social norms. In spite of their immense contribution, they face number of challenges and constraints. They lack technical skills required for modern farming practices, access to credit and other facilities which are very much required for them. Without these facilities, they are not able to contribute more and their role in the farm sector has become passive and unnoticed. If through policy interventions and programme development we are able to address the hurdles faced by women in agriculture, there is a lot of scope not only for the improvement in living of these women farmers but also for the well-being of the society as a whole. Therefore, understanding their contribution and removing all types' obstacles in the farm sector will be a step towards enhancing their contribution to farm sector.

With the above understanding, this research paper aims to assess the role and contribution of women in the farm sector in north eastern states of India and to assess their land rights. By addressing these objectives, this research paper seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for policy reforms and interventions that can enhance women's access to land and promote gender equality in rural development. Methodology adopted include both qualitative as well as quantitative. In order to collect qualitative data from the field, 'participants observation' and 'in-depth interviews (DIs)' were conducted. In total 10 depth interviews were conducted with the policy makers, agricultural experts, and ngo people. So far as quantitative method is concerned, in total 8405 'Face to Face interviews were conducted with the women farmers of seven North Eastern states (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya). The study also examines factors influencing women's access to land and agricultural resources.

Women's Contribution to Agriculture of North East India

Women in the North Eastern States play a vital role in agriculture, animal husbandry and allied farm activities, although their contribution is often undervalued or described merely as "helping" family members. Except for ploughing, women participate in almost every stage of cultivation, including land preparation, sowing, weeding, grass cutting, harvesting, storage, processing and transportation. They also contribute substantially to livestock and poultry care through milking, milk processing, preparing ghee and managing household-based animal enterprises.

According to Basic Statistics of the North Eastern Region 2015, Sikkim recorded the highest overall work participation rate among the northeastern states at 51%, while Assam recorded the lowest at 38%. Nagaland had the highest female work participation rate at 45%. Women's share among those engaged in cultivation was also highest in Nagaland, at 51.75%, followed by Arunachal Pradesh at 49.50% and Sikkim at 46.06%. The corresponding figures were much lower in Tripura and Assam, at 22.67% and 23.68%, respectively.

The data suggests that approximately 67.1% of women participated directly in agricultural activities, while 32.9% were engaged in other farm-related work. Participation was highest among landless women and declined as landholding size increased—from 100% among landless women to 44.9% among those owning more than 30 hectares. This suggests that women from smaller and landless households depend more heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods, whereas women from larger landholding households may have access to alternative occupations and income sources.

Age, education and household size also influenced women's participation. Older women generally participated more actively in agriculture, while younger women increasingly explored non-farm livelihood opportunities. Participation declined with higher levels of education: about 71.7% of illiterate women were engaged in agriculture, compared with 29.4% of graduates. Women from larger households also reported greater participation, possibly because of higher household labour requirements and stronger dependence on family-based farming.

Social differences were comparatively limited.



Participation was highest among women from Other Backward Classes, at 71.3%, followed by Scheduled Tribes at 69.5% and women from general castes at 59.8%. However, land size remained an important factor. Women's involvement was particularly low in activities such as land preparation, dung application and sowing among households with larger landholdings, where these tasks were more likely to be performed by hired or male labour.



Animal husbandry was another major area of women's contribution. Around 68.4% of women participated in livestock-related activities, while 31.6% were engaged in other farm activities. Assam, with its relatively large population of cattle, buffaloes, goats, sheep and pigs, offered significant opportunities for women's participation in livestock-based livelihoods.

Women were also actively involved in horticulture. Their participation in vegetable cultivation stood at approximately 58.4%, while their role in fruit cultivation ranged from 31.2% in Tripura to 66.7% in Nagaland. Vegetable cultivation attracted women across age groups, but participation declined with higher education levels. While 62.8% of illiterate women were engaged in vegetable cultivation, the proportion fell to 42.8% among graduates and 29.4% among women with postgraduate or higher qualifications.

The findings make one point clear: women are not peripheral workers in Northeast India's farm sector—they are its primary workforce and knowledge base. Greater access to land, technology, credit, extension services, livestock support, market linkages and producer organisations can transform their under-recognised labour into secure and remunerative livelihoods. Recognising women as farmers in their own right is essential for building a more inclusive, prosperous and sustainable rural economy in the Northeast.

Unpaid Value of Women's Work in Agriculture & Animal Husbandry

To estimate the economic value of this contribution, the study calculated the number of days and hours worked by men and women and multiplied them by prevailing wage rates for agricultural, animal husbandry and other unskilled activities.

The total imputed value of male and female labour in agricultural activities was estimated at approximately ₹69,641 per household. Women contributed about ₹11,436, compared with ₹58,206 contributed by men. Although women's overall share was approximately one-sixth of the combined value, their contribution varied significantly across activities.

Women's economic contribution was even more visible in animal husbandry. The total value of livestock-related labour was estimated at approximately ₹61,069 per household. Women contributed ₹34,793, compared with ₹34,775 contributed by men. According to the study, women accounted for nearly 68% of the total economic value of work hours spent on animal husbandry, while men contributed about 32%.

Practical Barriers and Social Attitudes

Although women may have legal or customary claims to land, practical barriers often prevent them from exercising effective ownership. In many tribal societies, women are not permitted to inherit ancestral land. Even where women receive property, control over its use, management and transfer may remain with male family members. Consequently, ownership on paper does not always translate into actual authority or decision-making power.

Lack of awareness is another major challenge. Approximately 17% of women surveyed were unaware of their property rights. Some women also choose not to claim their legal entitlements because of social expectations, fear of family conflict or a desire to preserve family harmony. Such attitudes can reinforce unequal inheritance practices and discourage women from pursuing formal ownership or legal remedies.

The legal framework also contains important gaps. Amendments to the Hindu Succession Act in 2005 strengthened the inheritance rights of Hindu women, including daughters' rights in ancestral property. However, these provisions do not automatically extend to tribal, Christian or Muslim women, whose property rights may be governed by different personal laws or customary systems. This creates unequal protection for women across communities in the region.

Conclusion

Women's access to land rights in North Eastern India is limited by a combination of customary laws, weak implementation of statutory rights, low awareness, and entrenched social norms. While some progress has been made, especially in legal reforms for Hindu women, significant gaps remain for tribal, Christian, and Muslim women. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated legal, policy, and community-level interventions to ensure women's economic empowerment and equality.