

Farm Laws: Impact on Women Farmers

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The agricultural labour force is also seeing 'feminisation', as more and more men migrate to urban areas in search of work, women left at home tend to agricultural landholdings. Almost 84% of women in rural India depend on agriculture for their livelihood. The Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM) and other women organisations have opposed the unilateral and undemocratic passage of Farm Laws and argue that they highlight the vulnerabilities of women in agriculture in India, who are largely invisible.

In news: Women's Groups Express Concern Over Impact of New Farm Laws on Women

Placing it in syllabus: Agriculture

Dimensions

- Farm Bills and Women
- Positive Impacts
- Negative Impacts
- Suggestions to make the bills beneficial for women

Content:

Farm Bills and Women

- Three controversial Farm Laws were passed by the parliament through a voice vote despite repeated requests from the opposition to send the Bills to a Parliamentary Committee for scrutiny.
- The **Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act 2020** relaxes government restrictions on the sale and purchase of farm produce

- The **Farming Produce, Trade, Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020** proposes a legislation to facilitate direct trade with large corporations, bypassing state mandis or **Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs)**.
- The **Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020** eases regulations on stocking produce under the **Essential Commodities Act (1955)**.
- Despite being termed 'revolutionary' by Union Minister for Agriculture, Narendra Tomar, the bills have received criticism from experts as well as farmers' unions.
- **Marginal and small holdings operated by women farmers together constitute 27.9 % of total operational holdings** cultivated by women according to the Economic Survey of 2018-19 .
- While the legislation seems to be harmful for the farming community at large, farmers with smaller land holdings such as women, are likely to be worst affected.
- In West Bengal, Maharashtra and Karnataka women farmers' organisation and Dalit farmers' organisation have been at the forefront of these protests

Status of Women and Farming in India

- **47%** of the **agricultural labour force** of India is comprised of **women**
- Even though **73.2% of women are involved in agriculture, only 12% own the land** they work on.
- **81% of women farmers are also Dalit and Adivasi.**
- And only **8% of women farmers have control over their agricultural income**
- women farmers in India already face multiple pre-existing challenges in terms of:
 - lack of recognition as farmers,
 - unequal rights over key resources such as land, water, forests, etc.,
 - gendered access to support systems and services

related to agricultural credit, inputs, subsidies, budgets and marketing their produce

- The census calls anyone who operates a piece of agricultural land a 'cultivator'. Operational land is land used by anyone for agricultural production – irrespective of whether the person using it owns it or not.
- Since **more than 87% of women do not own land**, the benefits of land ownership are not enjoyed by them.
- As they are not categorised as 'farmers' in official records, they do not get institutional credit for farming or farming subsidies.
- This reduces the agricultural productivity of the land tilled by women.
- Therefore, even though women are adequately represented, their efforts are unrecognised due to lack of landholding, access to government provisions and traditionally institutionalised gender roles.

Positive Impacts of the Laws

The Indian Government expects the farm laws to benefit the farmers in the following ways:

The law on reforms of agri market – Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce(Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020- would:

- **create an ecosystem where farmers and traders enjoy the freedom to sell and purchase** farm produce outside registered 'mandis' under states' APMCs.
- promote **barrier-free inter-state and intra-state trade of farmers' produce**
- **reduce marketing/transportation costs** and help farmers in getting better prices
- provide a facilitative framework for electronic trading

The Farmer (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020 – is expected to:

- **transfer the risk of market unpredictability from farmers to sponsors**
- enable farmers to **access modern tech and get better inputs**
- **reduce the cost of marketing** and boost farmer's income.
- **engage in direct marketing by eliminating intermediaries** for full price realisation
- **Effective dispute resolution mechanism** with redressal timelines.

The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020 would:

- remove commodities like cereals, pulses, oilseeds, onion and potatoes from the list of essential commodities. It will do away with the imposition of stockholding limits on such items except under "extraordinary circumstances" like war
- **attract the private sector/FDI into the farm sector** as it will remove fears of private investors of excessive regulatory interference in business operations.
- **bring investment for farm infrastructure** like cold storages, and modernising the food supply chain.
- help both farmers and consumers by bringing in **price stability**.
- **create a competitive market** environment and **cut wastage** of farm produce.

Negative Impacts of the Laws:

Several organisations like **Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM)** have criticised the Farm laws for the following reasons:

Issue of Mobility

- Farmers' Produce and Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 is premised on the assumption that all farmers are equally mobile and have equal access to transportation facilities to sell or purchase

their agricultural produce anywhere in the country.

- Women farmers suffer due to poor mobility and access to transport facilities.
- It would be difficult for them to travel far to trade their produce or bargain around better prices.
- In fact, what women farmers need is proximal markets such as APMCs but with oversight to protect them from exploitation by buyers/traders.

Avenue for Exploitation by Private Traders:

- State level APMCs serve as an important mechanism for price discovery for women farmers.
- Even though women farmers prefer to trade outside the system with private traders, APMCs perform a crucial role in signalling prices. This gave bargaining power to negotiate prices even when women farmers sold outside of the APMCs.
- The Act has proposed to bypass the APMC and usher in an era of fragmented and unregulated markets.

Unequal Field For Women Farmers:

- Women farmers in many states are starting autonomous **Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs)**.
- In Telangana, women farmers floated '**Benishan**', a company to procure and sell their produce in association with **Farmer Producers Organisations (FPO)** and **Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP)**.
- Kerala's **Kudumbashree initiative**, under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, has promoted 'Naatuchanta' or weekly markets which are run entirely by women.
- The new Farm Acts, instead of supporting them through market and state supported credit schemes, put them at par with existing traders and other big corporations and **create an unequal playing field**

Misery to Women Farmers

- Large corporations can now enter into contracts with farmers
- An estimated 52-75% of Indian women engaged in agriculture are illiterate and there are also lower levels of awareness.
- **Without prerequisite legal knowledge these contracts could exploit the vulnerable.**
- Large corporations mostly use chemical intensive farming. This is one of the major reasons for increasing numbers of farm suicides.
- **Women organisations fear the acts could further aggravate the farm suicides** and render more women as widows and powerless wage labourers.
- This could create further agricultural distress.
- **Agricultural distress has a ground-level impact on food and nutrition of women**, education opportunities for girls, health and sanitation of households, and other such factors.

Digital Alienation of Women Farmers:

- In an attempt to fulfil the '**One Nation, One Market' prophecy**, the bills emphasise on the **e-NAM**, or National Agriculture Market, to facilitate online trade across states.
- Studies conducted in rural Madhya Pradesh show that deep rooted **patriarchal structures restrict women's usage and access to technology**.
- Shifting to digitalised market systems alienates women farmers who might find it difficult to adapt.

Impact on food and nutritional Security:

- The proposal to remove cereals, pulses, potatoes from the list of essential commodities is **bound to impact food security goals**.
- It is also an invitation to attract big corporates FDI into grain trade at a time when rest of the industry is

in the doldrums and 90 metric tonnes is lying in the godowns and more to come by way of Kharif procurement.

Inadequate Protection from Exploitation

- The Farmers Empowerment, Protection, Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act 2020 seeks to **legalise contract farming across the country** while claiming to enable farmers to get into other agreements related to seeds, other inputs and prior agreed price etc.
- **poor literacy levels amongst farm women and their differential situations based on caste, class and gender places them in a disadvantaged position** while understanding or negotiating (written) agreements with traders and corporate entities who are seeking to enter into agreements with the farmers to purchase their produce or for other services.
- Also, the conciliation or dispute arbitration framework that is provided in the above Act is clearly weighed against small and marginal farmers in general and women farmers in particular.

Suggestions to make the bills beneficial for women:

In brief, reforms in agriculture need large scale investments in protecting farmers and not just agri-businesses.

Small and marginal farmers among whom are a significant number of women form the backbone of this sector. They need to be protected through robust investments towards enhancing their capacities and knowledge.

Few of the suggestions to address the women's concern include:

- Government must direct its attention to supporting the small and marginal farmers who are in distress due to the pandemic by
 - providing cash transfers and loan deferments and
 - supplement those with expanding the **MNREGA**,

providing seed and market support.

- The Government should guarantee at least the MSP in all market transactions involving farmers, whatever the marketing channel might be. This should be a legal entitlement for all farmers.
- Government must bring in reforms in the APMCs that would ensure easy access to women farmers who trade at the local level. For example the Andhra Pradesh and Telangana government initiative to hand over procurement to women's **SHGs** at the village level and also support direct marketing initiatives.
- The government ensures
 - incentivising decentralised procurement including procurement of coarse grains;
 - geographical diversification of procurement operations;
 - augmentation of adequate decentralised modern and scientific storage;
 - giving top priority to the movement of foodgrains and providing sufficient number of rakes for this purpose, including expanding the line capacity of railways to facilitate foodgrain movement from surplus to consuming regions.
- The government rolls out a time-bound plan to ensure at least the mandated 30% representation of women farmers in the local market committees. For this MAKAAM calls for a large scale study on systemic obstacles in women farmers' safe access to markets.
- **Create an enabling environment that promotes women's FPOs** by giving them **higher equity grants** and working capital at low interests; encourages it in procurement at the local level. The government should also remove FPOs from the purview of the Acts brought in.
- Bring in a separate law that guarantees remunerative prices for farmers for diverse crops and ensure all payments are made jointly to farmer households, against the current practice of only remunerating the landowner.

- **Universalise and expand PDS to include millets, pulses and oil** that could be procured through decentralized procurement systems by guaranteeing remunerative prices.
- It would **address the concerns of the procurement of farm produce as well as fulfill the goal of eliminating hunger**. Women farmers often produce a diverse set of crops such as moong, urad, ragi and other millets which can find guaranteed markets if the PDS, MDMS and ICDS programmes are revised to include these foods.

Mould your thought: How do the recent Farm Laws impact women farmers? What can be done to improve the condition of women in agriculture?***Approach to the answer:***

- Introduction
- Briefly discuss the farm Laws
- Discuss the positive impacts for women
- Discuss the negative impacts
- Write the suggestions for improvement
- Conclusion