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Allowing Confidence: The Secret to Unlocking the Potential of the Invisible Working Women in India's Agriculture Sector

Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for about 58 percent of India's population, equating to around 800 million people (Population-Total India). Despite its rise in economic power, the country still faces difficulty to adequately feed its population due to challenges regarding nutrition, agricultural sustainability, and the economic development of agricultural workers. Farmers themselves are on the frontlines of India's severe agricultural issues including declining plot sizes, degraded soils, rising debt, and more (Doolittle). To develop India's agricultural sector and combat the country's food insecurity, it is time to provide concentrated support to the individuals dealing directly with the crops, the agricultural workers - 75 percent of whom are women (Kamdar and Das).

Due to the outmigration of men from rural to urban areas, the once male-dominated field of agriculture has shifted to having a workforce made up primarily of women (Pattnaik). However, the feminization of India's agriculture is a far cry from a movement of social and economic empowerment. Instead, the influx of women agricultural workers is strongly related to several indicators of poverty, depriving women of opportunity (Pattnaik).

When examining the social climate in rural Indian communities, it is clear that patriarchy has had the upper hand in most traditional norms of the society, which has given stead to a stark and unique form of gender discrimination in the agricultural workplace (Jana, Sohini). The collective nature of discrimination practices has led to a universally burdened and unquestioned position for women in this society. From birth, a girl is seen as less valuable than her brothers as her family's resources for education or skill-building will not be allocated to her as she is expected to be married off at a young age to work for her husband's family. There, a woman faces great pressure to sustain her marriage, work long and physically demanding hours in the field, and bear and raise her children (Jana, Sohini).

On the other hand, a rural woman's husband is not tied to social structures in the same way and could fall into a lifestyle of lounging, drinking, gambling; find work in urban areas; or focus mainly on the management aspects of maintaining the farm (Jana, Sohini). Either way, the woman is left with great physical responsibility, which she is capable of taking on. However, because she is more involved with her children and the crops, she is more likely to spend her economic resources on the productivity of her farm and the education and health of her children, accelerating her family's path out of poverty (Munshi, Surgandha). Despite this, throughout her life, a woman must rely on her husband or the men of her family for access to economic

resources. In this form of upbringing, a woman is taught to be timid, submissive, and obedient as her “dream” should be to become a good wife, mother, homemaker, and agricultural worker (Jana, Sohini). Though these dreams are not evil ones, throughout her life she is consistently pounded into unquestioning her pre-made path, all the while having her voice and opinion silenced, leaving her potential untapped.

Across the developing world, the standard of living for an individual is largely defined by the number of secure land rights or other related resources that are allocated to the individual’s name (Girls and Land). Land rights play such a central role because formal institutions can use the land as collateral in providing agricultural credit.

Disproportionately, women only make up 13 percent of the 146 million operational landholders in India (“Role of Women Farmers in Indian Agriculture”). Even though the Hindu Succession Act (2005) gave equal rights to women in inheriting parental property through succession, the increase of agricultural holding in the name of women in the last five years is less than one percent (Jadhav, Radheshyam). Many factors constrain women from taking control of their legal rights. These include opposition to mobility from men, traditional institutionalized gender roles, low female literacy and awareness, male dominance in public decision models at all levels, and most importantly the low awareness about women’s rights to land (“The Invisibility of Gender in Indian Agriculture”)

Because the vast majority of women in agriculture do not have any land rights to their name, they are rarely able to access any financial resources from formal or informal institutions. This greatly affects the investment decisions of the women farmers as they cannot invest in their farms’ productivity or families’ health or education (“Role of Women Farmers in Indian Agriculture”).

During an average crop season, a woman logs around 3,300 hours of fieldwork whereas her male counterpart logs 1,860 hours on average (Kamdar and Das). Men work almost half the amount of their female counterparts. Yet, the absence of land titles leaves most of these women unrecognized as farmers (Jayati Ghosh). Many of the government’s schemes, programs, and announcements that are targeted towards farmers reach them through communication paths forged by land ownership (Raman, Shreya). Therefore, the benefits of the programs and innovations reach those who own the land, excluding the majority of women in agriculture, or the majority of individuals who plant the seeds themselves.

Touching on the Indian Government, it is important to examine and discern its role in the wellbeing of women farmers. In the past, the government has spent billions of rupees on empowerment schemes that provide agricultural techniques and support for women to find markets (Srivastava, Roli). In 2019, it is reported that over 36 lakh women farmers have benefited from a flagship government scheme called Mahila Kisan Sashaktikatan Paryojana (MKSP), which has spread over 84 projects in 24 states/union territories (Dash, Dipak). But the current scene and attitude of women farmers shows that much remains to be achieved on the ground as there is a clear lack of individualized support for women farmers in the country’s policy (Srivastava, Roli).

The Indian Agriculture Acts of 2020, often referred to as Farm Bills, demonstrate this inequity. Recently in September 2020, the Indian government passed farm laws that deregulated the agricultural market and weakened the government-established minimum sale price for crops in ways that could disadvantage small farmers against big agribusiness firms in the future (Kamdar and Das). These policies led both women and men farmers to months-long nationwide protests. However, women farmers will suffer the most from these laws. With the lack of land ownership and the lack of validity of being a farmer, female agricultural workers are already bringing home less money than they deserve. With market control shifted to the private sector, it is reasonable to assume the disappearance of a price floor set by the government will only continue to abet their financial distress (AK, Aditya). The new farm laws also eliminate a government-regulated middleman agency for crop sales. The Indian government sees this as a positive as the freer markets will enable farmers to sell or purchase produce anywhere in the country, allowing them to get the best price for their crop (Kamdar and Das). But this is not always possible. Though women often received less money for their crop from these market negotiators than if they were to sell direct to consumer, these market negotiators served as a path to bargaining and price discovery that did not require them to leave the home and enter male-dominated markets, in which women often feel very uncomfortable (Jadhav, Radheshyam). The deep-rooted gender inequity of the country does not allow female farmers to travel nearly as often as their male counterparts, limiting their market access further in face of the new laws. Furthermore, the Farm Bills may also impair women's abilities to resolve disputes. Under the new Bills, all issues between farmers, traders, or agribusiness firms are to be settled by a new agricultural board, not local courts. As rural women's access to the legal system in India is already limited, if the opposing party were to do so much as to file a claim in a far-off jurisdiction, female farmers who lack access to money and resources for travel are at a great disadvantage (AK, Aditya).

The recent farm laws paint give light to the lack of acknowledgment of the struggles of women farmers in Indian agricultural policy. Furthermore, this instigates the patriarchy in Indian culture and economics. To change this, the Indian government must enact laws geared towards the lack of land holdings, titles, and awareness of the vast majority of the country's women agriculture workers. Until then, not only will the women continue to face the burdens that they have endured but also the proposed solutions of the government will lack their intended effect for the workers that arguably need them the most.

Land ownership does not only define economic value. It is an economic asset that defines a woman's dignity and value in the eyes of her community. Many women farmers see themselves leading "thankless jobs" as their husbands and other family members rarely express any appreciation or gratitude for their work (Sheikh Saaliq). Consistently, the woman is led to believe that she is not valued, even by those closest to her. The lack of land titles or any economic value to the name of a woman leaves her very vulnerable in the event of a divorce, abandonment of spouse, or death of her spouse (Girls and Land). In each of these cases, the woman either has to return her and her children to her own family or her in-laws' family. She has no opportunity for

independence as she does not have any land resources to her name. Because institutional credit is limited with no land ownership, funding options for women are through self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance banks/institutions. Because SHGs have limited funding options, women often accept the high-interest rates of microloans, accepting an almost inhuman recovery process and journey of sucking debt (Raman, Shreya).

Many markets are male-dominated, making them very uncomfortable for women to enter. Leaving the men to sell the produce and have direct exposure to the exchange of money. And because they do not have great exposure to the outside world, many women are fearful to step out and share their struggles (Jadhav, Radheshyam).

Though she greatly wants to invest in the betterment of her children and the productivity of her crops, from her access to limited and deprecating economic resources to her lack of respect or support from her own family and society, a female farmer in India's agricultural sector does not have the confidence to persist for her rights or opportunities. If a woman's husband does not want to enter the markets, then the woman has to resort to selling her produce at a lower price to a middle man, which is not a fair option.

Internally, she does not have the confidence to persist in her rights. Externally, she lacks the resources of her male counterparts to invest in the betterment of her family and her crop, sending herself and her family down the ever-deprecating path of poverty. A 2011 study from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization showed that women farmers achieve 20 to 30 percent lower yields than men because they do not have the access to the resources and information that men do (Gates, Melinda). In India alone, if women farmers had the same resources, then they would have the same yields. This would put more income in the hands of women, giving them a stronger voice in the household, leading to better nutrition and education for their children, and - because of the rise in food production-reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 50 million (Gates, Melinda).

To better understand the current resources that are available for women farmers it is important to examine the current NGO landscape. Currently, in the country, there are organizations funded both privately and publicly that support women, farmers, through community-based gatherings, helping them gain access to institutional credit, and finding other financial options to help bring their families out of poverty. Two such organizations are Oxfam India, which is a privately funded organization that has partnered with SEWA Bharat, which is an all-India federation of self-employed women (Sewa Bharat). Together they run awareness programs across different states in India to educate women about sustainable agricultural practices and the importance of land ownership. They invest and fund to reduce the number of barriers to women's leadership and independence in farming communities. Their efforts have received a very positive response from the communities that they reach ("Move over 'Sons of the soil'").

Now within the realm of women's equality efforts, women's employment and manufacturing opportunities have proved a very powerful method of empowerment. One such organization that utilizes this model is the Myna Mahila Foundation, a Mumbai-based NGO that

employs women in slum communities to manufacture menstrual products that are then sold in the slum communities, advocating for women's health and financially empowering them with a stable income (Our Initiatives, Myna Mahila Foundation).

In many of the issues that these women face daily, they need internal strength and persistence fueled by their confidence to voice their concerns and opinions, leading to efficient and effective decision-making in their communities (Oxfam International). To build this confidence and to tackle the deprecating social structures against women, it is clear that the collective power of women must be harnessed, specifically with a focus on sustainable economic development options inclusive to every woman farmer.

Both the Myna Mahila Foundation and the SEWA Bharat and Oxfam India Foundation work serve as inspiration for the proposed program Bhalam. Through Bhalam, an operational and advocacy non-governmental organization (NGO), collective groups of women farmers will be based in each participating village.

To provide financing options apart from those of institutional credit, each chapter will have a collective fund shared among the women of each village. This fund will not rely solely on government funding or individual donations but instead will be funded by the sustainable solutions manufacturing plants run by Bhalam. Here, items that serve as sustainable solutions to issues that farmers face in their field will be developed. The main products will include vermicompost and multilayer farming infrastructure. Vermicompost is a natural and nutrient-rich fertilizer that allows for easy flow of water to growing crops (BYJUS). Taking in organic food waste of the village and requiring little resources as its composition is made up of 75 percent cow dung and 25 percent rock phosphate, this product is not only in high demand in agricultural villages but also is easily produced by a collective group, who can manufacture the product at a high scale (Akash Chaurasia). The product sells at 5,000 rupees or about 70 dollars per ton. This can serve as a great source of income for Bhalam's community fund for women. Another product that can be sold is multilayer farming infrastructure. Because land holdings in India are becoming smaller and smaller with the rise of industrialization in the country (Doolittle, Lexi), solutions to grow the most yield in the least amount of space are extremely helpful to farmers. Multilayering farming allows farmers to grow multiple crops at different heights on the same plot of land with the aid of simple infrastructure made of bamboo or wooden material (Akash Chaurasia).

An example of planted layers may look like the following. To begin, the farmer must plant the first layer, which is beneath the surface of the soil. A crop that could thrive here is ginger for example. The next layer is above the soil and is for green, leafy vegetables. Here can be fenugreek, amaranthus, spinach, coriander, etc. Another benefit to such crops is that because they cover the soil layer within 15-20 days, they can prevent weeds from sprouting, saving resources for de-weeding. On top of this layer will be the bamboo/wooden structure to support the climbing layers of crops suitable for papaya, tomato, scarlet gourd, etc. The top layer of the infrastructure should be shaded, for this type of farming cannot be done in an open environment,

otherwise, the crops will get damaged. This can easily be created with bamboo and wild grass, allowing both sunlight and shade to get to the crops (Akash Chaurasia).

This infrastructure easily allows marginal farmers to grow three types of crops at a time on the same plot of land. It is also important to note that this material can help protect crops from climate change-related events such as hail, which can occur in northern India, and extreme heat. This type of farming also consumes less water, which is important for water-scarce areas (“Multi-layer Farming Process and Benefits”).

This is a manmade product that women can easily make within their communities while promoting a sustainable solution to their fellow farmers who are looking to increase their yield.

The funding from these products will be distributed among the members of each Bhalam chapter. It will not need to be paid back as the products are made by the same women who are manufacturing them. This will help women gain economic independence while supporting their farms with sustainable solutions.

Bhalam also creates a connective and collaborative network among the women in each village. At the grass-roots level, this village-based financial organization will be able to play a crucial role in promoting shared knowledge about agriculture, health, and education, which can change the lives of women who are so used to be left alone and not supported (Munshi, Surgandha)

For these initially shy and unconfident women, it is easier to approach fellow women farmers with increased knowledge and practice with sustainable agricultural solutions when there is a shared identity that is brought about by a group setting (Saikia, Nikita). When women farmers enter a state of the discussion and are empowered by economic resources, they are in a space that allows for their confidence and their empowerment. Independently, women farmers are very uncomfortable and shy to enter the marketplace. However, through Bhalam’s women-friendly marketplaces that will have an established patrol throughout Bhalam’s markets during the hours of operation, they will have a place where they can comfortably sell directly to consumers. With increased access to the markets, these female farmers will no longer have to rely on middlemen and sell their crops at a lower price.

However, as any grassroots organization, Bhalam recognizes the obstacles that lay in the path of gaining initial support from women in the community. Through analysis of other grassroots-based NGOs, like the Myna Mahila Foundation, it is clear that perseverance, persistence, and patience, mixed with respect for the community and its residents is the most organic and just way to gain the trust and support of individuals who have been barred away from such treatment. It may take weeks, months, or even years, but like any new or foreign entity, it is critical that we remain an organization with underlying values of care and respect, projected in each action that we take.

To run any organization there is a need for an inanimate yet vital piece - money. We will measure Bhalam’s cost of operations per each Gram Panchayat, which are the governmental bodies at the village level that cover a large village or a cluster of smaller villages. For each Gram Panchayat, Balam will have an employed team consisting of a Community Relations

Director, Operations Manager, Data Analyst, and Market Staff and Security. Major areas of cost for Balam will include paying staff, running educational and awareness campaigns, renting land for markets, and buying the raw supplies needed for manufacturing sustainable products. Taking into consideration the cost of living in village communities, salaries for Balam employees will be between 5-6 lakhs (Databank). The estimated cost of educational programs is 2 lakhs. The majority of these costs of this sector come from distribution methods as the development of programs is not cost-intensive. To buy rock phosphate and manure from local sellers we estimate ½ lakhs for large production of both vermicompost and multilayer farming infrastructure (Akash Chaurasia). This means that 2.5 lakhs are initially needed per village sector to run Balam's mission. To meet initial funding, we will utilize fundraising campaigns as well as seek donations from both the private and public sectors. However, after we are able to mass-produce sustainable solutions, we hope to use 10 percent of the income to fund Balam's operations. 1 ton of vermicompost can sell for 0.05 lakhs (Akash Chaurasia). Even 50 tons of vermicompost, which can be developed by 4-5 women, can fund Balam's operations in the land of an entire Gram Panchayat. Employee salaries will be paid through funding and private donations until the desired revenue is met.

Reverting back to discussing Balam's efforts, in India, as per the law, land rights can be allocated to women. However, individually, women may feel shy or unconfident to persevere to gain their respective land titles. Through the collective power of Balam's groups, women will be supported by a community of strong, persistent, and passionate peers to voice their rights to economic empowerment, and claim the land rights that are rightfully theirs. After Balam has developed into a larger organization, we hope to fund the legal efforts of female farmers. However, as past success stories have shown, with confidence and persistence women can reclaim their rights (OxfamIndia).

When women can learn from one another and discuss their solutions, they can harness their collective power and confidence to demand change. A woman's confidence is the spark to effective initiative, pushed by those who work in the fields daily.

Currently, many agricultural women fieldworkers' efforts are often not seen. Their opinions and concerns are not recognized as they are not even recognized as the farmers they are. However, when multiple women are brought together to discuss and collaborate in a space that allows for their confidence to flourish and grow, their potential will unleash their ability to make decisions for their crops and the health and education of their children, combating food insecurity faced by their nation.

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