

The Role of Women in Contemporary Farmers' Movement in Haryana: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *The role of women in the agriculture sector and farmers' movements in India has been underexplored in academic literature, particularly in the state of Haryana, where agriculture sector and protests have historically been seen as male-dominated. However, the contemporary farmers' movement, especially in the context of the 2020-2021 farmers' protests against the farm laws, has highlighted the active involvement and leadership of women in rural and agrarian struggles. This paper explores the multifaceted role that women have played in agriculture sector and in the ongoing farmers' movement in north India, focusing on their participation, contributions, and challenges. It examines the women's engagement with the movement, as well as the ways in which this participation has transformed gender roles in rural areas. Through a combination of qualitative interviews, fieldwork, and secondary data, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how women have emerged as crucial actors in the contemporary farmers' movement in Haryana. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of this growing participation for the future of agrarian sector and gender equality in rural India.*

Keywords: Farmers' Movement, Gender Equality, Social Movements, Women

INTRODUCTION

The agrarian crisis in India has been a persistent issue, exacerbated by factors such as poor infrastructure, climate change, and the low growth of the rural economy. Haryana, a state traditionally known for its rich agricultural land and significant role in India's Green Revolution, has been at the forefront of many agricultural protests, particularly in the post-independence era. Historically, these movements have been dominated by male farmers, with women playing a peripheral role. However, recent years have seen a dramatic shift in the landscape of rural protests, with women taking a more prominent role in the leadership and execution of such movements. This shift has been most evident during the farmers' protests of 2020-2021, when women from Haryana, along with other states, actively participated in the protests against the farm laws enacted by the government. (Nabourema, 2021)

This paper seeks to explore the evolving role of women in Haryana's farmers' movement, focusing on the period of the 2020-2021 protests, but also addressing the broader historical context and the deep-seated societal structures that influence gender relations in the agrarian sector. Through this exploration, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how gender dynamics have evolved within the farmers' movement and to assess the potential long-term impact of women's involvement on the socio-political fabric of rural Haryana.

Women's Role in Agriculture in Haryana

Before examining their role in the contemporary farmers' movement, it is important to understand the role women play in Haryana's agriculture. Women are deeply involved in farming activities but are often invisible in discussions around agricultural policies and movements. Women in Haryana contribute significantly to agricultural labor. In rural areas, they are engaged in a variety of tasks such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest activities. Despite their substantial contribution to agricultural production, their labor is often undervalued, and they are usually not considered formal economic participants in agricultural production. ("The invisible labourers: Why women farmers in India rarely receive recognition for their work - WOTR," 2024) Additionally, women in Haryana, especially from farming families, are often responsible for managing household budgets, including the income generated from farming. This economic role also extends to managing livestock, dairy, and the care of children, all of which are crucial for sustaining the rural economy.

Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of workers in Haryana including both main and marginal workers. 55.86% of women worker are engaged in agriculture sector.

Table - 1: Percentage distribution of workers (main and marginal) in Haryana 2011

Category	Percentage of workers		
	Female	Male	Total
Agricultural laborers	23.08	15.30	17.14
Cultivators	32.78	26.28	27.82
Workers in household industries	3.59	2.74	2.944
Other workers	40.55	55.68	52.10
Total workers	100	100	100

Source: Director of Census Operations, Haryana

Only 3.59% female workers are in household industries and 40% of female workers are engaged in other works. Also, as per the Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Report 2021-22, Agriculture has highest estimated percentage distribution of female workers followed by manufacturing. According to the report, 62.9% of rural women are employed in agriculture. Most of them work on their own farms, while men tend to migrate to urban areas for employment opportunities. However, in Haryana, land ownership is predominantly male, with a few exceptions. Women rarely own land or are formally recognized as farmers, despite their immense contribution to agricultural labor. A report by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in 2018 highlighted a significant gender gap in land ownership. While women make up 42% of the agricultural workforce, they own less than 2% of agricultural land. (Director General, 2018) This exclusion from land rights makes it harder for them to access agricultural credit and subsidies, putting them in a precarious position economically.

THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY FARMERS' MOVEMENTS

The 2020-2021 farmers' protests against the three farm laws enacted by the Indian government were a turning point in the involvement of women in the agrarian struggle. The new laws were perceived by many farmers, particularly in Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, as pro-corporate and anti-farmer (Jodhaka, 2021). The movement against the laws quickly gained traction, with tens of thousands of farmers gathering at various borders around Delhi, including the iconic Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur borders. ("Factsheet: Farmers' protest in numbers," 2021)

While the farmers' movement initially began with male farmers as the primary leaders, women from rural Haryana, along with women from other parts of India, began to participate in large numbers. Women were seen on the front lines of the protests, marching with placards, raising slogans, and sitting in the cold and the rain. They participated not just in the logistical aspects of the movement, but also in strategic decision-making and leadership roles. (Bhowmick, 2021; Singh, 2022).

Women's Role in Farmers' Movement in Haryana

Women in Haryana have played supporting roles in earlier farmers' movements, even though their contributions were often overlooked. However, in the recent farmers' movement (2020-2021), their participation has been highly visible and crucial. Traditionally, Haryanvi society has been patriarchal, with limited roles for women in leadership, but the movement changed this dynamic, offering women more

public space to assert their agency. Women from Haryana were integral to the movement. Their participation was significant in both symbolic and practical terms. Women's organizations also, particularly those aligned with leftist or agrarian movements, were supportive during the protests. Groups like the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) actively mobilized women, provided them with a political education about the implications of the farm laws, and encouraged their participation. (Sangwan & Singh, 2022)

One of the unique aspects of women's involvement in the protests was the presence of women from different age groups. Elderly women, young girls, and middle-aged women all joined the protest, showcasing a wide generational representation. This cross-generational solidarity demonstrated that women's concerns in agriculture are deeply felt across different age brackets. Throughout the movement, women demonstrated incredible resilience. Many had to manage both their domestic responsibilities and their participation in the protests. Despite being at the protest sites, women also managed to keep the agricultural cycle going back home. Many continued to take care of the fields and their families while their husbands or other male family members participated in the protests, ensuring that the movement did not disrupt farming activities. (Singh, 2024)

In several regions of Haryana, women-only protests were organized to assert women's place in the movement and raise awareness of their unique struggles. These protests were led by women farmers and agricultural laborers, many of whom don't own land but contribute significantly to farming activities. The women-only marches were widely reported and symbolized their demand for equal recognition in the agrarian sector. For example, Mahila Kisan Diwas (Women Farmers' Day) was celebrated during the protests on January 18, 2021, where women took center stage at various protest sites, including in Haryana. They addressed gatherings, spoke about the importance of women's role in agriculture, and demanded the scrapping of the farm laws, which they felt disproportionately impacted women involved in farming. On International Women's Day (March 8), the farmers' protests held special events to celebrate women farmers. At several protest sites in Haryana, including the borders, women took charge of the day's proceedings. They gave speeches, led marches, and highlighted the specific problems faced by women in agriculture, such as lack of land ownership, unequal pay, and the impact of the farm laws on female farmers. The day was a celebration of women's central role in the movement and their growing leadership in the agrarian sector. (Sangwan & Singh, 2022)

Through interviews with union leaders involved in the protest, several key themes emerge regarding the participation and leadership roles of women.

Active Participation in Protests and Demonstrations

On the frontlines, thousands of women from Haryana actively participated in the farmers' protests, standing side-by-side with male family members. Their presence at protest sites like the Delhi borders (Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur) symbolized their deep involvement in the movement. Similarly, many women joined the movement at local protest sites like at toll plazas. Many women joined the protests not just in solidarity with their husbands and male relatives but because the issues raised (such as minimum support price (MSP), land rights, and the future of small farms) directly affected their lives. Women not only attended

protests but often stayed at protest sites for extended periods, enduring the harsh weather, long hours, and logistical difficulties. In many cases, rural women took on the responsibility of ensuring that protests were well-organized and sustained.

In words of a union leader, "Initially, when we began our protests, the numbers were overwhelmingly male. But soon, we saw women coming in large number from villages. They were not just bystanders; they were walking with us, carrying their children, managing the food supply, and talking to the media. The support of women was invaluable it's what made the movement stand out as an inclusive, people-driven fight."

Leadership and Mobilization

Women from farming communities, particularly from rural areas in Haryana, stepped up as local leaders. Many women acted as spokespersons within their villages and local communities, rallying other women to join the larger protests in Delhi. Their role in the early stages of the protests, before the major sites were established, was instrumental in building grassroots support for the cause. While leadership in farmers' unions during the protests was predominantly male, women played an important role in organizing and supporting the protests at the grassroots level. Women actively participated in food distribution, managing protest logistics, and organizing rallies. For example, women's groups were instrumental in setting up langars (community kitchens) and maintaining the daily functioning of protest sites. Women farmers from Haryana helped in mobilizing their peers, ensuring that the protests were not limited to just men. Women leaders emerged from within the movement, taking part in debates, giving speeches, and leading processions. Many women became public speakers, addressing large crowds, and playing a leadership role that challenged the traditional patriarchal system.

One of the respondents said, "Women were crucial in rallying other women. They were the ones going from village to village, organizing meetings, explaining the laws to other women who might not have been politically aware. These women were often the first ones to step up and take responsibility for organizing events. I have seen many women—who had never even participated in politics—take leadership roles during this movement."

Logistical Support and Administration

At the protest sites, women were involved in the administration and day-to-day management of the protests. This included food distribution (particularly organizing langars or community kitchens), providing health and sanitation facilities, and managing the welfare of protesters. Women from Haryana set up kitchens, made arrangements for water, hygiene, and safety, ensuring that the protest camps were well-run and self-sustaining. One of the most visible contributions of women was in managing the langars or free kitchens at protest sites. Women coordinated the cooking, distribution of food, and general welfare of the protestors. These langars became symbolic of the collective strength of rural women in the movement and ensured the sustenance of protesters over several months.

The women's contribution to daily protest management allowed the protests to maintain momentum, making them one of the most sustained public movements in recent history. Women led the organizing committees that ensured the protest sites were self-sufficient

and well-managed, keeping morale high and ensuring that logistical concerns never impeded the progress of the protest. However, it is also important to point out that even in the movement in majority of cases division of work between males and females were stereotype. Females mainly did cooking, sanitation and other related works.

Symbolic and Cultural Role

Women in Haryana also played a symbolic role in the protest, where they expressed their grievances and demands through songs, dances, and traditional art forms. Their participation was seen as an assertion of their presence in the public political sphere, a space that has historically been dominated by men. They were seen wearing traditional dress, holding banners, and even leading protests with chants, all while challenging gender norms that restrict women to domestic roles.

Women sang folk songs and slogans that became the emotional backbone of the protests. These songs not only inspired the protesters but also kept the movement's morale high. These performances were deeply rooted in the agrarian culture of Haryana, symbolizing resistance through traditional mediums. These cultural performances were often used to convey messages of resistance, unity, and empowerment, making their voices heard in an impactful, yet culturally resonant way.

A respondent said, "The women were the heart of the protest in a cultural sense. They brought the emotional strength to the movement. Their songs and their speeches were not just political; they were personal, reflecting their struggles in their families, their homes, and on their farms. The songs they sang spoke of how they were the true caretakers of the land and how the laws threatened their very livelihoods."

Empowerment and Social Change

Finally, the protests acted as a vehicle for empowerment for many women in Haryana. By participating in public protests, taking on leadership roles, and asserting their rights, many women felt empowered to speak up for themselves and their families. They also challenged patriarchal norms that traditionally confined them to domestic spaces.

A respondent underscoring this said, "This movement has been empowering for women, especially in Haryana, where gender roles are strictly defined. Women have broken out of their homes to take part in a national movement. Their involvement is not just about protesting; it's about claiming their rightful space in the public and political sphere. It has led to a wider social change that we are witnessing even today."

Challenges to Women's Full Participation

Despite the visible participation of women, several barriers continue to limit their full engagement in the farmers' movement in Haryana. These barriers are both structural and cultural, influenced by the deep-rooted patriarchy in rural society.

Patriarchal Norms: In Haryana, as in many parts of rural India, women's roles are largely confined to the household, with limited opportunities for political or public participation. Even though women contribute to farming activities, they are often excluded from leadership roles within farmers' unions or political movements. This structural patriarchy means that women's voices and leadership in the protests are often marginalized or overlooked. This was clearly visible in

the movement also. In the initial phase, women were not allowed to take seat on stage, however, after raising voice by some female activities things changed. In the special case of Badoval toll plaza protest site near Narwana, after initial resistance to the females participation on stage, later complete management of the stage was given to the females on alternate day. (Chakrabarti, 2022).

Safety and Mobility Concerns: The protests, which often involved staying at protest sites for extended periods, presented challenges for women in terms of security, mobility, and personal safety. Concerns about the safety of women at protest sites, especially in a highly charged political environment, created additional barriers to their full participation. It was much harder in the initial stage when there was inadequate infrastructure and basic amenities. For safety of females, after the case of rape of a Bengal female protester, "eight member committee (Mahila Suraksha Samiti) was formed to address" the cases of sexual harassment. It was headed by Medha Patkar. Yet, despite these challenges, many women overcame these barriers and joined the protests.

Socio-economic Constraints: Women from poorer and marginalized backgrounds often face multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion. Rural women who are from landless labor families or come from smaller, less affluent agricultural households face greater hardships in mobilizing for protests. Economic and social inequalities limit their ability to participate actively in public demonstrations or to be recognized as central figures in the movement.

The Future of Women's Participation in Farmers' Movements

The experience of women in the 2020–2021 farmers' protests, along with the growing visibility of women in rural India's agricultural landscape, suggests that women will continue to play a crucial role in shaping the future of farmers' movements in Haryana and beyond. Several key issues need to be addressed to enhance women's participation.

Increased Representation: Ensuring that women's voices are represented in leadership positions within farmers' organizations is crucial for their active participation in future movements. This involves breaking down patriarchal barriers that limit women's decision-making power. A women member from Narwana was elected to the state committee of the AIKS after her active participation in the movement. But, such cases are rare and even male leaders were suspicious of the large participation of the women in the future.

Land Rights and Economic Security: Addressing the gendered disparities in land rights and access to agricultural resources will be crucial in ensuring that rural women have a fair stake in the agrarian economy. The implementation of land reforms that promote equal land access for women can be a vital tool in empowering rural women.

Gender Sensitivity in Policy: Future agricultural policies and movements should take into account the specific needs of women in farming communities. This includes recognizing women as equal stakeholders in agricultural production, ensuring their economic security, and advocating for policies that directly address their needs.

CONCLUSION

The role of women in Haryana's contemporary farmers' movement represents a significant shift in the gender dynamics of rural India. While the movement has been driven by men in many ways, women have made indispensable contributions to its success. Their participation has not only

challenged patriarchal norms but has also raised important questions about gender, power, and rural development. The ongoing involvement of women in farmers' protests suggests that gender roles in rural India may be undergoing a transformation. As women continue to assert their agency in agrarian struggles, they are likely to influence the future direction of agricultural policies and rural development. In the long term, this could lead to a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to rural governance and agrarian reform.

In conclusion, while significant challenges remain, the increased visibility and participation of women in the farmers' movement in Haryana is a step toward greater gender equality in rural India. The experience of women in these protests offers valuable lessons for other movements in the country and around the world, demonstrating the potential for social change when women take an active role in political and social struggles.

Notes

1. Quotations of the respondents have been translated from Hindi to English language for the research paper.

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