



# AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES: A CATALYST FOR GENDER EQUALITY

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## Abstract

In many rural communities' women farmers make a substantial contribution to agricultural production but often face challenges such as restricted land ownership, limited financial access & exclusion from leadership roles. Agricultural Cooperatives help to bridge these gaps by offering collective bargaining power, access to resources, markets & financial services tailored to women's needs. Furthermore, they establish avenues for women's participation in governance & entrepreneurship, fostering economic independence & social empowerment. This article examines how agricultural cooperatives are promoting gender equality, highlighting case studies, challenges faced & policy recommendations to enhance their impact. By addressing structural barriers & encouraging inclusive participation Agricultural Cooperatives serve as catalysts for more equitable & sustainable agricultural development.

**KEYWORDS:** Agricultural cooperatives, Gender equality, Women, Empowerment, Agriculture, Development

## INTRODUCTION

Indian Labour Organisation (ILO) has defined cooperative as an "Autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social & cultural needs & aspirations through a jointly owned & democratically managed enterprise." (Kakoty & Kakoty, 2022, p.118)

Each member receives an equal share of the ownership, earnings & losses. To put it another way, it is a cooperative endeavor in which a team of people try to achieve common goals. As per the data entered by states/UTs on the National Cooperative Database portal there are 7,96,344 cooperative societies registered in India with total membership of 29,13,09,827. (Govt. of India, Ministry of Cooperation, 2023) Agricultural cooperatives are farmer owned entities that collaborate & work to enhance the social & economic standards of their members. These cooperatives operate on the principles of self-help, mutual assistance & democratic governance, empowering farmers to collectively address their economic & social needs. (Basu & Basu, 2023)



## How Agricultural cooperatives can promote gender equality?

Women in agriculture face numerous obstacles that limit their opportunities, productivity & overall wellbeing. Agricultural cooperatives can empower them in various ways.

### 1. Economic Empowerment of Women:

One of the biggest obstacles for woman farmers is financial exclusion. Agricultural cooperatives can serve as a powerful tool by providing financial support through collective savings & loan programs.

### 2. Providing access to land & resources:

In many communities' women face legal & cultural restrictions on land ownership. Agricultural cooperatives can address this issue by facilitating leasing or group ownership schemes that include woman farmers, ensuring women have equal access to farming equipment & technology & supporting legal advocacy to promote land ownership rights for woman farmers.

### 3. Enhancing knowledge & skill:

Agricultural cooperatives can enhance the knowledge & skill of women farmers by offering training programs, conducting workshops & providing mentorship programs that will connect the younger ones with the experienced woman farmers.

### 4. Expanding market access & providing trade opportunities:

Woman farmers often struggle due to lack of access to formal markets. Agricultural cooperatives can establish direct links with buyers eliminating the middle men & promoting fair trade prices that ensure equal profit for both men & women.

### 5. Social Empowerment of women & gender advocacy:

Beyond monetary benefits, cooperatives can serve as a platform to tackle gender related challenges such as gender based domestic violence, discrimination by creating support networks, partnering with organizations that provide legal support to woman farmers & facilitating policies that address gender disparities in wages, land ownership & access to resources.

### 6. Work-Life Balance and Support Services:

Agriculture demands physical work and women often struggle to manage farming with household responsibilities. Cooperatives can support women by introducing flexible work schedules that enable women to manage their personal & professional lives, establishing community childcare services, enabling women to participate fully in cooperative activities, encouraging men's involvement in household and agricultural duties to promote shared responsibilities.



## CASE STUDIES OF SOME SUCCESSFUL COOPERATIVES

- Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India: In India SEWA has 3.2 million members in 18 states & this cooperative empowers women farmers by providing them financial assistance, enhancing their knowledge & skill, and access to market. It has significantly improved the livelihoods of thousands of women in agriculture.
- GROOTS Kenya: This women-led cooperative movement has empowered more than 5000 women-led groups in Kenya by enhancing their access to land, credit, and leadership opportunities, promoting economic independence and gender equality.
- The Rwanda Coffee Cooperatives: Women-led coffee cooperatives in Rwanda have played a vital role in post-genocide economic recovery, empowering women by providing them fair trade opportunities and enhancing their leadership skills.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

Agricultural cooperatives play a vital role in developing rural economies. They often face challenges in promoting gender equality. Some of the key challenges faced by the cooperatives include:

### 1. Cultural & Social Norms:

Women's participation in cooperative leadership & decision

making is restricted by traditional gender roles in many rural communities.

### 2. Insufficient Female Representation in Leadership:

Numerous cooperatives exhibit male dominated leadership frameworks, hindering women's ability to impact decisions or policies.

### 3. Heavy Workload & Time Constraints:

Women in agriculture have to balance field work with household responsibilities, child care & community obligations. This limits the availability of time for agricultural training, cooperative participation or expanding farm enterprises.

### 4. Low Literacy Rate:

Due to low literacy rate among women in many rural areas they have limited access to technology & extension services. This hinders their participation in cooperatives.

### 5. Discriminatory Policies and

**Laws:** Certain legal frameworks and cooperative bylaws may not fully support women's involvement in cooperatives such as requiring land ownership as a condition of membership.

### 6. Harassment at work and Gender based violence:

In male dominated



work places particularly in commercial farming & market settings women may experience harassments. Access to loans, markets & lands can also be hampered by sexual abuse and exploitation.

## CONCLUSION

For enhancing gender equality in Agriculture, cooperatives require a supportive policy environment that promotes women rights. Government should grant gender equitable land laws that grant women equal rights to land ownership and inheritance. They should promote women's access to credit & financial services.

Strengthening cooperative governance & management practices is essential for promoting transparency & accountability. Raising gender awareness among cooperative members, leaders, staffs is essential. Training programs, workshops & capacity building programs can help to challenge gender stereotypes and can promote understanding of gender equality principles. In conclusion, agricultural cooperatives have the potential to be the catalyst for gender equality in agriculture. By actively involving women in their governance & operations, providing them with access to resources and opportunities cooperatives can empower women farmers.

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