

No Country for Young Women Farmers: Findings from case studies in two Indian states

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Abstract: Although young women farmers constitute a large proportion of farmers, their experiences are often lost between the two categories of rural youth and women. Besides being discriminated against compared to male youth, young women (farmers) are further likely more disadvantaged than their older counterparts (and their male peers) in terms of access to productive resources and are relatively more constrained as economic actors, even though they tend to have more formal schooling and better access to information than older women and/or men. This paper argues that young women farmers merit consideration as a distinct analytical category; it draws on findings from case studies in two Indian states, MP and TN, representing diverse agrarian contexts to highlight the barriers and opportunities faced by young women farmers.

Keywords: young women farmers, India

Introduction

In spite of their significant role of agriculture in India, women lack recognition as farmers and face structural barriers related to land ownership, access to resources and markets, and mobility, which are associated with high levels of gender discrimination and gender-based violence. Despite the substantial body of work focused on women farmers in India, the generational aspects of women farmers remain under-researched. Young women farmers (YWF) are a distinct analytical and empirical category who merit attention. Although they constitute a large proportion of farmers, young women farmers' experiences are lost between the two categories of rural youth and women. Even in the substantial body of work focused on women farmers in India, the generational aspects of women farmers are often overlooked. Besides being discriminated against compared to male youth, young women (farmers) are further likely more disadvantaged than their older counterparts (and their male peers) in terms of access to productive resources and are relatively more constrained as economic actors, even though they tend to have more formal schooling and better access to information than older women and/or men. At the policy level, this silence is even more deafening; the predicament of young women farmers is something of a policy desert. Additionally, in the Indian context, the trajectory of economic growth in recent decades has seen growing non-farm opportunities for young men rather than for young women, so that the future of farming might see an increasing role for young women.

This paper is motivated by the urgent need to know who young women farmers are, what their (farming) experiences are, and the opportunities and challenges they face within broader socio-cultural and economic contexts. This knowledge is vital for the visibility and recognition of young women farmers as well as for policies to support them. While young women farmers in India share several challenges faced by their counterparts in other countries, they also face others that are specific to the social context of India, arising from gendered social norms across caste and class. This is not to suggest that these are uniquely Indian issues, nor is it the case that young women farmers across India are all alike. The principal issue is that we know little about young women farmers in India.

In this paper, we first draw on existing data to provide estimates of the number of young women farmers in India, defined as those in the age group 18 to 45 years and who practice cultivation and/or animal rearing, irrespective of whether or not they have formal ownership of land.¹ We then draw on case studies of young women farmers in two Indian states, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Tamil Nadu (TN), with contrasting agrarian contexts and women's status to outline the key issues young women farmers face. We substantiate our own findings with the available literature in this area.

The theoretical perspective that frames this study draws on core concepts from the interdisciplinary fields of youth studies, gender studies and agrarian studies. We draw on ideas of youth as actors in social and economic renewal, youth as identity, and youth as generation from the stream of "new" youth studies (Jones, 2009). We adopt a relational approach to studying young people's experiences with farming, the dynamics of relations between generations, and their role in the social reproduction of agrarian communities (Archambault, 2014; Berckmoes and White, 2014). At the same time, the category of youth is heterogenous and also 'intersects' with other social categories class and gender (Jones, 2009; Wyn and White, 1997). In this paper, we use a gender lens to focus on young women. Traditional agrarian societies are typically sites of patriarchy in both gender and generational relations – 'patriarchy' in its original sense, as power of male over female, and of old over young—reflected in the cultural emphasis on respect for the older generation, commonly seen historically in peasant societies worldwide (Stearns, 2006). Young people however, are not passive victims within these patriarchal structures, but exercise a 'constrained' agency. Young women farmer experiences in India are framed within this perspective.

How many young women farmers are there in India?

There is not much information about young farmers, in general, in India in spite of the rhetoric of youth being a demographic dividend; we know even less about young women farmers or agricultural workers (Vijayabaskar, et al 2018). In 2012, 56.6% of India's rural youth in the age group 15–29 years derived their livelihood from agriculture, forestry, or fishing (Gol, 2013; Vijayabaskar *et al.*, 2018). According to a recent ILO estimate, female employment in agriculture was 57% in 2018, compared to 19% female employment in industry and 24% in services (WB, n.d).

We rely on nationally representative survey data on employment to map the participation of young women (who are actively working and belong to cultivator households) in agriculture. Accordingly, there were an estimated 25.5 million young women farmers in India in 2011-12 (Table 1). It is evident that agriculture as a source of employment among those workers whose households operate land is more important for women than for men, across age groups (Table 1). For example, 91.9% of older women workers (over the age of 45 years) whose households operate land, reported agriculture as their principal or subsidiary occupation (as opposed to 89.4% of their male counterparts) and for younger women (18-45 years), the figure was 89.2% (against 81.4% of younger men in the same age group). The numbers above also suggest that agriculture is more important as an employer for older women than it is for younger women workers, among households that operate land, although the difference is not substantial. Differently, when one considers all agricultural workers (agriculture as primary and subsidiary activity) and not just from cultivator-households who operate land, the share of younger

¹ Our choice of the 18-45 year age range is based on that of the larger project of which this is a part, titled *Becoming a Young Farmer*, funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada), Insight Grant (PI: Dr Sharada Srinivasan, University of Guelph); the larger project offers a comparative perspective of pathways into farming in Canada, China, India and Indonesia, where the average age of farmers are significantly different from one another.

women is 2.34 times that of older women and comparable times that of older men. Thus, given that a woman works in agriculture, it is more than twice as likely that the woman is between 18 and 45 years than she is older than 45 years. Younger women constitute over a quarter of all workers in agriculture in 2011-12.

These numbers might still not represent the true extent of women's participation in agriculture for other reasons. Rural women who report domestic duties as the main or sole activity but are still engaged in specific agricultural tasks, especially caring for livestock, etc. The status of work captured only documents someone as being engaged in agriculture if they spend either most of the time the past year in agriculture or have spent at least one month in the past year on agricultural activities. Most likely therefore this is a lower bound of the estimates. These national data also mask important variations across region and social groups such as caste.

Considering that the 25.5 million YWF account for close to a quarter of all cultivators and over two thirds of all women cultivators, they merit consideration as a distinct analytical category; such a focus would enable us to better understand that opportunities and constraints they face in farming.

Group (% of total; number in millions)	Agriculture			Primary sector (agriculture, forestry and fishing)		
	All workers	Cultivators-workers	Cultivators-labor force	All workers	Cultivators-workers	Cultivators-labor force
Men (over 45 years)	75.3	89.4	89.3	75.9	89.6	89.6
	32.4	25.8	25.9	32.6	25.9	25.9
Men (18 to 45 years)	65.0	81.4	80.0	65.6	81.6	80.2
	57.5	43.4	43.7	58	43.5	43.8
Women (over 45 years)	84.1	91.9	91.6	84.4	92.1	91.8
	15	11.2	11.2	15	11.2	11.2
Women (18 to 45 years)	78.3	89.2	87.8	78.5	89.3	87.9
	34.7	25.5	25.5	34.8	25.5	25.6
All	72.1	86.1	85.1	72.6	86.3	85.3
	140	106	106	140	106	106

Table 1. Distribution of the workforce National Sample Survey, 2011-12. Source: For details on computation and source see Narayanan and Srinivasan (2020)

Methods

Towards this end, we present material from 22 in-depth interviews of young women farmers from two Indian states TN and MP. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger project titled Becoming a Young Farmer (BYF), that sought to understand youth experiences in becoming and being a farmer. Despite ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences across the states, agriculture is an important sector in both. Yet while in TN, agriculture's contribution to the State Domestic Product has declined rapidly replaced by a vibrant non-farm economy, in MP, agriculture continues to be the engine of economic growth with high rates of growth for over a decade.

Our study sample is not representative of young women farmers across states and/ or the country. In our purposively selected study sites, we sought women between 18 and 46 years of age who were currently active in farming but not as wage labourers. Consistent with the literature, most of these young women in farming do not own land but have access to land to farm independently or with someone else

(husband or other family members). We relied on our contacts to help identify young women who were part of family farms and contributed substantial labour to the family farm. In MP, we reached out to members of women's Self-Help Groups and constructed a list of young women farmers in the village—those who worked predominantly in farming even if they did not own or manage the farm themselves.

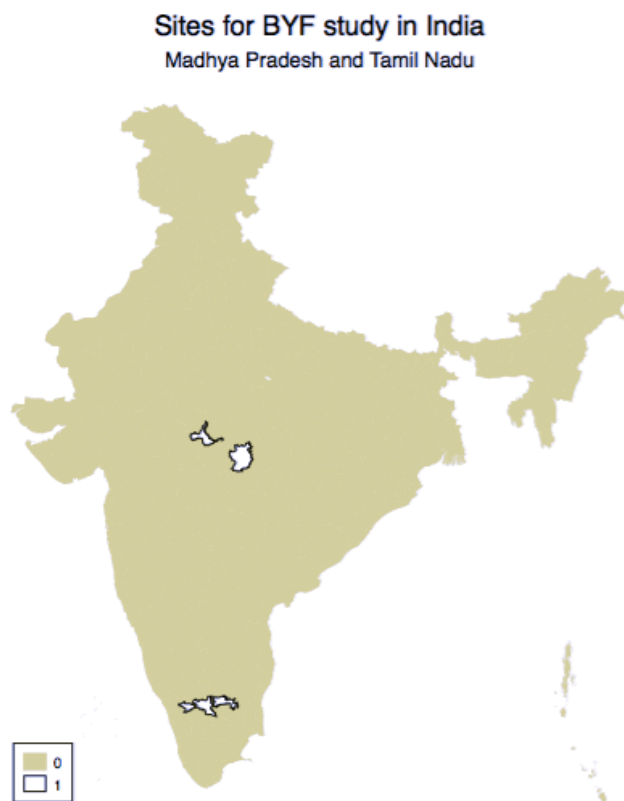


Figure 1. Study sites.

In MP, the young women farmers we interviewed came from over 10 villages across two districts Chhindwara, which is predominantly tribal and where cultivation of wheat and gram dominates, and Sehore, where soyabean, a cash crop, is the more popular crop grown. In TN, we focused on two districts—Erode and Thiruvannamalai. Erode and the rest of western TN or what is referred to as Kongunadu, has been the centre of green revolution in the state as well as a region that has diversified extensively based on investments of agrarian surplus into industry and services. The region also has relatively higher farm holdings compared to the rest of the state especially among the Kongu Vellalas (KV), the numerically dominant caste in agriculture. Thiruvannamalai and other districts bordering Chennai too have a strong agricultural economy traditionally based on tank irrigation and paddy cultivation. Urban expansion and poor tank management has eroded this economy in parts, but at the same time expansion of urban demand has also led to a growing market for horticulture which has led to agricultural diversification and intensification on the periphery.

	Tamil Nadu	Madhya Pradesh	India
Number of Female Farmers interviewed	11	11	22
Female Farmers	11	11	22
Age Started Farming	16	13	14
Age Farming Independently	24	22	22
Mean Age	38	37	37
% Under 35	45%	45%	45%
% Married	100%	82%	91%
% With >12 Years Education	0%	9%	5%
% Working Full-Time	100%	100%	100%
% Full-time, Primary Income Farming	91%	64%	77%
% Full-time, Primary Income - Animal Farmer	9%	0%	5%
% Full-time Primary Income - Plant Farmer	82%	64%	73%
% Full-time, Primary Income - Farmer, Not Specified	0%	0%	0%
% Full-time, Primary Income - Not Farming	9%	36%	23%
% Farmers reporting that a family member in the household has title to land	82%	91%	86%
Average Acres Owned	1.56	12.99	7.84
% Farmers that have Inherited Land	64%	91%	77%
Average Acres Inherited	1.71	7.72	5.39
% Farmers Likely to Inherit Land	27%	27%	27%
Average Acres Likely to be Inherited	1.67	1.26	1.36
% Farmers Renting in Land	9%	0%	5%
Average Acres Rented In	2.00	0.00	0.20
% Farmers Sharing Land	9%	73%	41%
Average Acres Shared	7.00	3.84	4.11
% With Access to Community Land	0%	0%	0%
Average of Community Land			

Table 2. A profile of young women farmers interviewed in India.

Despite the vastly different contexts of the two states, the profiles of our YWF respondents are quite similar (Table 2). The average age of our sample is 37 years, comparable across both states. About 86% belong to households that own some land, average acres owned are 1.56 in TN and 12.99 in MP. On average, the women started farming as adolescent girls and started farming independently in their early 20s. Almost all our respondents except one, were married, again reflective of a larger pattern in which women are married off young and become part of their husbands' family farm. Our sample in TN is less educated than in MP, although overall literacy and educational attainment of women in TN is higher than in MP. Women who remain in farming in TN seem to have low education levels. Another striking difference is that whereas in TN, the respondents report that their primary income is from farming, in MP, although the women spend most of the time farming, fewer report that it is their primary

income source. Beyond this characterization of our young women farmer respondents, there is significant diversity in their individual circumstances. For example, some are widowed, a few are single unmarried women working on the family farm, most however are married. Few have land exclusively in their name, and in many cases the farm is still in the name of the father-in-law (if married) or their parents and grandparents if they are not.

All interviews were conducted in the local languages of the region (Tamil and Hindi), recorded, transcribed and then translated into English by the research team associated with the project, including the authors themselves, and following approved institutional ethics protocols. The transcriptions were then coded according to common themes identified as relevant for the larger project. To maintain anonymity, we changed the names of the respondents. We draw on all their interviews to understand the challenges in becoming a farmer and the predicament of young women farmers in the two study areas but draw especially on four of them to highlight more sharply and holistically their lived experiences as young women farmers. The four women we choose are not exceptional in any way; they were chosen to represent the diverse circumstances, classes and social groups represented in our sample and because their life stories captured particularly well the “constrained” agency of women in a largely patriarchal agrarian society.

Shanthi from TN is 36 years old and was born into a poor family with little land belonging to the landowning Kongu Vellala (KV) Gounders. Married at 16 years to a wealthy man with severe disabilities, she began assisting her father-in-law with his farm of 9 acres, four of which belong to her husband. Her daughter now 19 years, studies in university. Shanthi herself is a qualified teacher who chose instead to be a farmer.

Parvathi is 40 years old and belongs to a middle class KV family, also from TN. Her husband holds MSc and MEd degrees, and worked as a teacher; both her marital and parental family own land and she also has a secure non-farm income. Inspired by a neighbour, a woman farmer, she took up farming, though she had to fight with her father-in-law to allow her to manage the farm.

Our two cases in MP include Kamla and Suman. Kamla is a 25-year old woman farmer from an *adivasi* community that had little land and depended on seasonal migration; Kamla never went to school and until she married, she had to farm her parent's land and take care of them when her brothers completed their education and got jobs in the city. When Kamla got married, aged 23, and relocated to a village a few hours away to live with her husband and his family, she shared responsibility of her husband's family's 4.5 acre-farm as well.

Suman, also from an *adivasi* community, did not aspire to be a farmer when she was young, nor did her family have much land and depended mostly on migration. She was married at the age of 15; the land in her marital home was not farmed although it was located close to a water source. After her son was born, began to farm because she wanted to find work in the village.

Findings

First, young women farmers in our study demonstrate that they take farming seriously, are knowledgeable and passionate about farming. This is significant as most of them are not socialized within their families to farm, an advantage that many young male farmers enjoy. Says Parvathi,

I fondly remember pulling out weeds with my two brothers from the fields when I was young. I was interested in farming but my parents didn't let me put my feet on the soil. I lived like a queen.

Unlike Parvathi, many of the young women farmers we interviewed began farming when they were as young as 8-9 years old, assisting their parents or grandparents on the farm. These usually involved simple tasks such as assisting with harvesting and weeding or grazing cattle, but not those such as ploughing or land preparation. One young woman farmer in Sehore, in MP said, “we watch and learn, I did what my grandmother did”. Another young woman farmer said, “Kisani ke log ... kisani jaldi seekh jaate hain” (If one is from a farming family one learns farming quickly). When not from a farming family, a young woman typically learns from the in-laws or picks up these skills from her peers.

Second, most YWF in our study as well as more broadly seem to become full-time farmers typically after marriage. While land owning caste groups such as Kongu Vellalar Gounders in TN, send their daughters to study, keeping them away from farming, and marry them to men who have non-farm jobs, the presence of land and the practice of farming in their marital homes draw many young women into farming. The support from husbands and sometimes more importantly from fathers-in-law—as the land is in their name—is crucial. Sometimes the transition to becoming a farmer follows the birth of a child. Growing up, Shanti did not engage in farming at all even though her father owned land and her mother has done some farming. Says Shanti,

It was when my daughter was born...My father-in-law decided to teach me all about farming. He got me ready to be a farmer on my own and he did let me become one after I turned 23... I am married into a farming family, so I had to take up farming not out of my own will but out of necessity. Given the hard work and not knowing what to do, I didn't like it at first but have a liking for it now.

Suman was married at the age of 15, she continued to migrate for work periodically as she had been doing in her parental home. However, after her son was born, about two years after her marriage, she preferred looking for work in the village. Although her husband's parents used to do a bit of farming, the main initiative to become a farmer came when she became a Panchayat member (village administrative committee) for a five-year term. Other Panchayat members suggested to her that since her in-laws' land was near a stream, a well on the farm might provide a reliable supply of water. Suman then took advantage of a state government scheme called *Kapildhara*, under the MGNREGA, to construct a well.² That is when, she said, I stopped migrating and started farming.

Third, even when women engage in full-time farming, land ownership eludes them. In all the four cases, the young women did not own the land nor did they expect that they would receive a share.

In Kamla's case, although her brothers left farming and she farms her parental land, there is little chance that she would inherit that land. The land is still in her father's name. When the time comes – and there has been no explicit discussion on when, there usually isn't such a conversation within the family—the land is divided equally among the siblings, but the sisters generally give up their share of land to the brothers. Yet, most of our respondents did not identify this as a barrier. Further, many rationalize this by emphasizing that the support offered by their brothers was more important than their formal rights to land. Parvathi, for example, believes that the 10 acres of land her mother owns will go to her two brothers. She does not have any farmland in her name. She farms eight acres of land which is in her husband's name. Parvathi is aware that there is a law that says land has to be shared equally between a daughter and son. But she loves her brothers and does not want to demand her share of land.

² Kapildhara is a state government programme to support the construction of wells on lands owned by the Scheduled Castes/Tribes and marginal farmers.

One woman farmer in MP suggested that even if her brothers were fine with her claiming her share of land, it would be unfair to the wives of her brothers, who might have given up claims to their own inheritances for the sake of their brothers. Both the fact that women do not demand their lawful share and that they do not acknowledge this to be a barrier reflect the deeply entrenched social norms governing land inheritance and gender relations. Even the instances when women do inherit land, it is driven by family-specific or at times region-specific informal norms. Legal support for equal rights has however enabled women to stake claims though highly unlikely and norms have not changed much.

Fourth, the limited access to land for young women farmers has important material consequences. Because formal ownership of land is often linked to being recognized as a farmer in the eyes of the government, most women farmers are not recognized as farmers. Too often, the criterion for eligibility for a large number of government schemes remains title to land; those in the family who have ownership rights thus mediate a young woman farmer's access to government support. This can potentially be a large constraint. In the case of Kamla, for example, her parents were eligible for a farm loan, although she managed the farm. In the case of Suman, the well under the *Kapildhara* scheme that was crucial for her to take up farming would be granted to her father-in-law, since he was the legal owner of the farm. In most of the villages, acquiring land through leasing in or purchases is near impossible given the rising cost of land. Some women do manage to do this, thus increasing their ability to become land-owning farmers.

Fifth, some of the young women we interviewed, especially in TN, enjoy quite high levels of freedom to pursue farming on their own. Among certain landowning case groups like the KV, it might be possible for women to become full-time farmers as men are in full-time non-farm employment. In MP, both men and women pursue plural activities and combine farm and non-farm activities, most likely on account of the limited opportunities for employment in the non-farm sector for men and women alike. In these cases, the agentic capacity of the young women farmers seems relatively limited.

In many contexts, their status as young daughters-in-law in their marital homes is precarious, especially in north, central and north western India which strongly embody characteristics of Kandiyoti's (1988) classical patriarchal belt.³ Pattnaik and Dutt (2016 presentation) for instance report that among the women farmers they interviewed less than 3% reported being involved in decision-making on major purchases or farm related decisions. In Telangana, the number was higher. A fifth reported participating in farm decisions with 15% reporting that the major say rests with them. Most of these were however single women or from women-headed households (Ashalatha, 2015).

Although Suman was managing land belonging to both her parental and marital households, she has no role in decision-making in either household and as with many others, the earnings from farming are handed over to the family head. As she puts it

My father-in-law makes all the decisions. He gets urea, seeds, etc. and we give him the money. My parents make all the decisions for their land.

Sixth, besides lack of land ownership young women farmers face several other challenges. Access to training and techniques can be challenging for young women farmers. Empirical evidence not only suggests that women in general have much poorer access, control and ownership of land and other

³ The young wife in a context of severe patriarchal oppression is subordinate to the mother-in-law and will have to wait to become a mother-in-law herself to exercise power (Kandiyoti, 1988).

productive resources (Swaminathan et al 2012; Lahoti, et al., 2016), they also have inadequate access to public services, such as training, extension and credit. (Padmaja and Bantilan, 2014) In a study on Gujarat and West Bengal, almost no woman farmer had ever met an extension agent and less than a fifth were aware of common agricultural programs (Pattnaik and Dutt). Few women in Telangana were aware of crop insurance, for example (Ashalatha, 2015). Young women farmers also have to contend with inherent male bias in policies and programs, which are often presented in gender-neutral terms. Extension agents are usually men and their target group is also often men. Social networks that aid in dissemination in technologies are also often gendered so that knowledge disseminated to men tend to remain with the social networks among men (See Magnan, et al., 2015 and Khan, et al, 2018 for examples). If in particular, these extension programmes are conducted outside the village, mobility restrictions as well as care responsibilities prevent younger women from accessing these. For example, a young woman farmer in Sehore, MP, who has completed a Masters' degree and identifies herself as a farmer described:

The agriculture extension officials who visit the village meet only the male farmers. It is hardly ever the case that these male farmers then discuss the matters related to farming with women in the house who also farm along with them...their role has been reduced to just providing assistance with no decision-making power.

In the case of MP, some women have taken up farming and acquired a set of skills with the support of government programs and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Suman, for example, says that she learnt the basics of farming slowly over time and was fortunate to have found support from a large foundation (established as part of a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative, enabling Suman to diversify into other crops and also try out new techniques.

Societal support seems important too in the form of learning from their peers. TN's young women farmers seem more equipped to accessing the latest techniques via social media or approach state extension agents. In contrast, the young women farmers in MP continue to rely on more traditional forms of extension and peer group support.

Parvathi learnt to farm from her mother and father-in-law. She asks her neighbours and friends and also people from the agriculture department. Some share this information willingly, others don't. She is very eager to share information when someone asks her. She is especially keen to help other women farmers, she visits their fields, takes them to the agriculture staff she knows to find a solution when she cannot suggest one. Several other women farmers in this village spoke about Parvathi's support in helping them deal with family members' resistance to their farming, providing knowledge and skills, and accompanying them to the market or to the agriculture department.

Seventh, the young women farmers in our study clearly demonstrate that being and becoming a farmer does not absolve them of their domestic and care work. For example, young women, especially daughters-in-law in rural areas, are often the first to rise and the last to go to bed (Narayanan, et al 2019), taking on roles ranging from fuel, food and water collection, care for the elderly, the sick and for young children, much more than older women do and often without the support of men in the family. These responsibilities are especially acute if the woman is the household head or main breadwinner of the family.

Many of our cases illustrate these clearly and here too unless they have some support from other (and older) family members in sharing responsibilities for household chores or farm work the dual responsibility of farm and domestic work can be overwhelming. Kamla and Shanti's life stories as farmers establish the intersection of age and gender wherein women straddle multiple identities and

responsibilities across different patriarchal relationships—from daughters to daughters-in-law to parents, between natal and marital households. Attending to farm and household work and care responsibilities can also crowd out opportunities. For example, a young woman farmer in Sehore, MP, with two small children said she would have loved to diversify into dairy but said that cattle “needed timely care – feeding and providing drinking water.” With her responsibilities of taking care of her young children, acquiring and maintaining cattle was out of the question.

Eighth, young women farmers also face substantial difficulty in negotiating male spaces such as the market. In particular, they experience severe limits to their mobility because of public spaces being male dominated. Relative to older women, younger women face more obstacles travelling out of the village. An older woman farmer in MP’s Chhindwara said that she had never gone to the market and that the trader came home. Although she could now do so, as an older woman, she chooses not to. In general, “if the market is far away, then women don’t go, but if it is nearby then the women also go and sell at the market” she explains. In our study we found that when women went to the market, they were accompanied by their male spouses or other male members of the family. In general, when itinerant traders are the main buyers of produce, prices are often set by these traders.

There are exceptions however. For example, Parvathi in TN goes to the market to sell at auctions; she makes sure she sells her produce to the five people that she has been dealing with over a long period of time. The one with the best price gets to take the farm produce. They have to use her measuring scale. She decided to do this because she had heard a lot of stories of middlemen cheated farmers by using faulty scale. This is remarkable as not all farmers, let alone a woman farmer, can stand their ground with the middlemen. Parvathi prides in going to the market where produce is auctioned all by herself:

I have made myself very confident, if I feel that way, people stand aside and let me do my business. I don’t feel shy like most women do. Earlier I took my dad and my husband, now I go on my own. I always ride a vehicle, I can take 100 kgs like men do by myself in the vehicle.

Yet challenges remain. Shanthi articulated a few disadvantages that she experiences as a female farmer. If she needs something right away, she cannot ride a 2-wheeler in the night. She also cannot take a man on her 2-wheeler to ride with her, for example she cannot offer a ride to a male labourer from her step-brother’s farm to bring him to work on her land. And at night, a lot more preparation goes into going to the farm to turn off the water.

I am very scared to go in the night, I leave the motor room light on, remove all my jewellery... I am nearly in tears to leave home in the dark of the night, I am in constant fear.

The problem of managing a farm can be acute for young women farmers who are single or widowed. Procurement of inputs, hiring of labour and selling of output – each of these represents a formidable challenge. Not all are able to accomplish these without a hired male farm manager or male relatives. A young widowed farmer in Sehore said “Who cares that a woman is alone or needs help?” suggesting that there is no state support for those like her. She relies overwhelmingly on a hired manager who shares expenses incurred on cultivation and shares the produce while taking responsibility for all purchases and sales.

We also note differences in terms of class and community support in mediating this process of negotiating male dominated spaces. While Shanti, with relatively lesser social and land endowments struggles to negotiate, Parvathi seems to be relatively more successful in such negotiation. In fact, interestingly, Shanti despite being a joint owner of land, finds it a lot more difficult to access such spaces

compared to Parvathi who is confident about her ability to bargain with the middlemen for better prices. In MP, whereas Suman as village administrator was aware and able to access government schemes, Kamla claimed that government schemes only went to those with connections to the village elite. Often these social networks also determine access to government programs or other external support from corporate foundations or self-help groups. A young woman farmer from a marginalized caste or tribe is often triple marginalized. This highlights the importance of social networks in mediating and helping cope with gender related vulnerabilities. Many recent initiatives such as the self-help groups have aided young women farmers in their attempt to navigate male-dominated spaces. A young woman farmer in Sehore, MP said:

More than that (i.e. a savings group), it is a platform for women to meet and discuss their problems...this has really enabled women to present their opinions in front of men and outsiders.

In the case of MP, several programmes that are tailored for tribal communities have provided lifelines to these young women farmers, as have the corporate foundations operating in tribal dominated districts. In Tiruvannamalai, TN, an NGO provides training in organic farming to smallholder Dalit women farmers, assisting them with market access and training them to produce organic manure. In such cases however, their smaller landholding sizes (1-3 acres) and lower caste status prove to be barriers. While collective mobilization did help the women farmers to overcome some of the limitations imposed on them by their gender, caste and economic status, their prospects in farming continue to be constrained by these very institutions.

Parvathi, in TN, asserts that many young women farmers are eager to farm even if they don't own land. But they are neither given the freedom nor allowed to take any important decision pertaining to what and how crops should be cultivated.

If men farm on their own and loose, it is okay, but if a woman loses, you would hear, "I knew this would happen", from her own family members. Men are dominant, so society thinks, a man can be anyway, but if a woman is bad, she cannot bring up her family.

Conclusion

The predicament of young women farmers suggests that they often face formidable and deeply entrenched barriers to becoming and being farmers. While collective mobilization does help the women farmers to overcome some of the limitations imposed on them by their gender, caste and economic status, their prospects in farming continue to be constrained by these institutions. The paper draws on these case studies and reflects on how this knowledge is vital for the visibility and recognition of young women farmers as well as for sound, inclusive policies to support them.

What kind of policy setting would be conducive to and supportive of young women farmers?⁴ In this regard, perhaps the two most transformative policy initiatives for young women in India have been the establishment of a Directorate of Women in Agriculture and the organization of women into self-help groups under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. The former has actively engaged in research and developing technologies for women in agriculture and the latter, like the NGO run self-help groups is often regarded as offering a platform for young women to organize themselves. Such groups can redress some of the disadvantages young women farmers face in accessing information and training

⁴ In 2018, the Government of India committed to allocating 30% of the funds to agriculture in the Union Budget to schemes supporting women in agriculture.

(Raghunathan *et al.*, 2019, for example). Similarly, programs such as the Mahila Samakhya, women's self-help groups and one-third reservation in Panchayats are useful to focus on women's needs more broadly. These initiatives focus on providing training and finance to support livelihoods. Many have actively provided platforms for extension training, production and marketing. Although not specifically framed with young women farmers in mind, as we have shown, they are likely focusing on the vast majority of young women, albeit on married young women. Initiatives that focus on women's collective access/ right to land simultaneously challenge the family farm as the unit of organising production and offer the potential to weaken caste hierarchies, status and patriarchal relations that undergird the family farm (Agarwal and Agrawal 2017; Vijayabaskar *et al.* 2018). In order to achieve these however an essential first step would be to count and recognize women as farmers.

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