

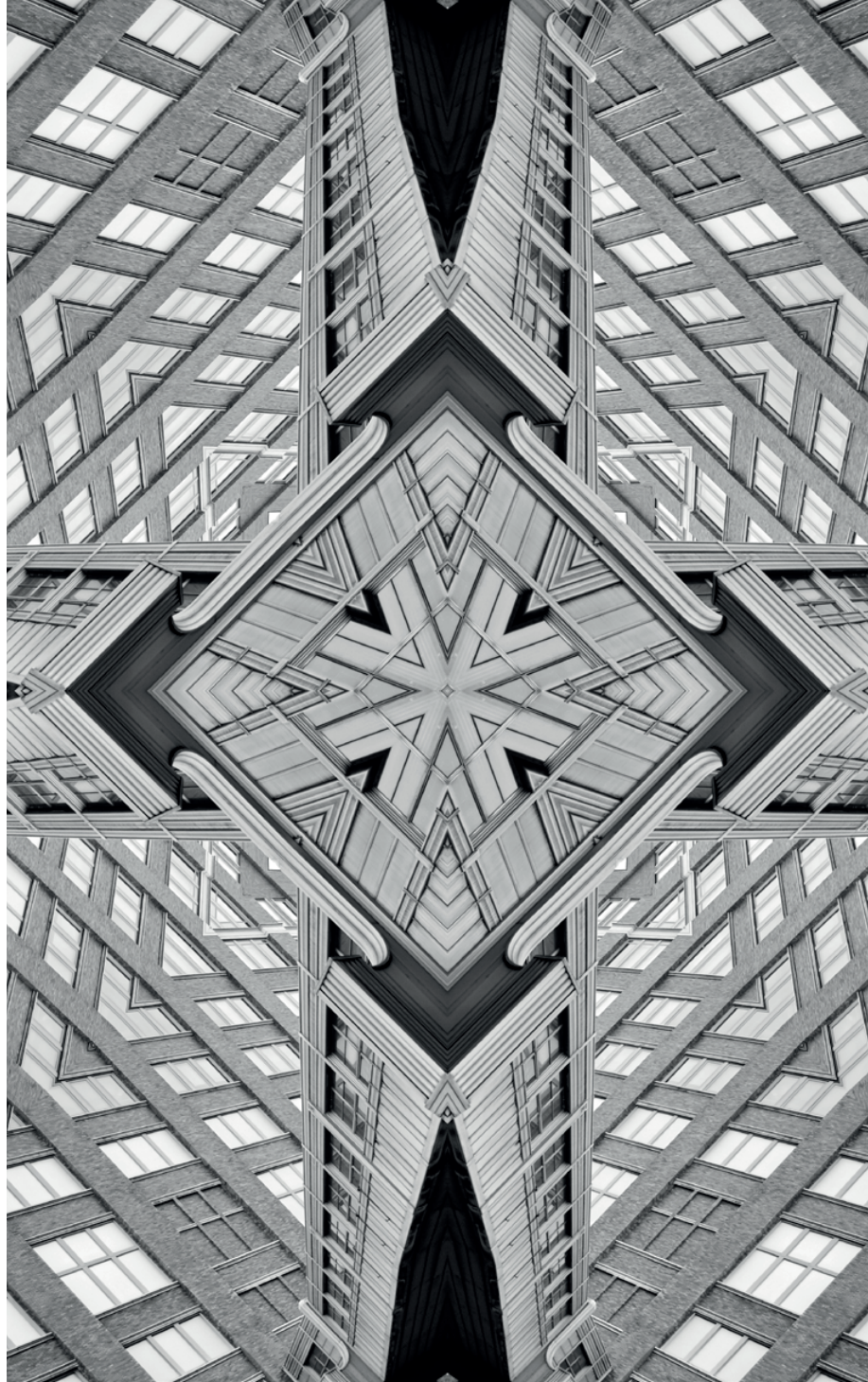
# Issue

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# Brief

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# Gender Gap in Agriculture and the 'South Asian Enigma'

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## **Abstract**

Current data suggests that the global community is far from achieving the 2030 agenda of ending hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition. By the end of 2019, 650 million people suffered from chronic hunger and 135 million experienced acute food-insecurity. Not all regions are equal: the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020 found that some are experiencing less severe incidence of hunger on the GHI scale, compared to others. The most serious levels of hunger are in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This brief focuses on South Asia. It analyses the factors underlying the so-called 'South Asian Enigma'—the paradoxical co-existence of hunger and malnutrition amidst economic prosperity—and dissects the disproportionate impacts on women.

# Economic Growth and Food Insecurity in South Asia

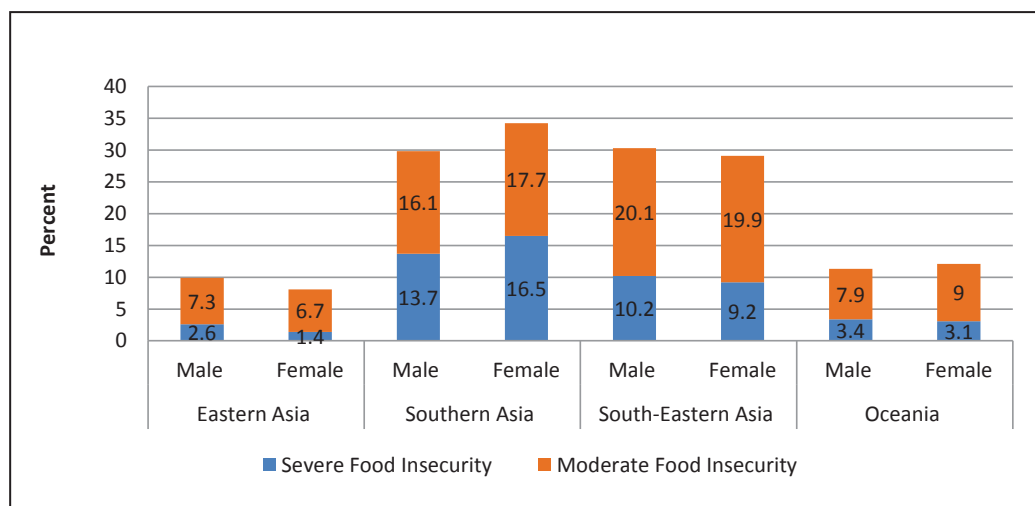
The South Asian region—comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Maldives—has witnessed impressive economic growth in the past few decades. In the ten years beginning 2010, the region’s economy grew at an annual average rate of 6.7 percent which is two times the global average of 3 percent. The Gross National Income (GNI) per capita for the region started peaking from the early 2000s and showed a slight dip only in the year 2020. With an impressive, 7.2 percent growth in 2021, the region is projected to regain its historical growth rate by 2022.<sup>1</sup> The region has also recorded progress on reducing extreme poverty: 216 million people lived below the poverty line in 2015, down to 500 million in 1990.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the strong economic growth and reduction in poverty, however, South Asia continues to face various challenges in nutrition. Indeed, Sub-Saharan Africa for instance—a region which not too long ago recorded the worst rates of undernutrition—today fares better than South Asia. Some 255 million people in South Asia are undernourished—the largest number in the world in absolute terms. The region reports the highest acute undernutrition among children, with child wasting rates of 14.9 percent in 2019 compared to 6.9 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa. At 33.2 percent, the region has the highest proportion of children stunted and suffering from chronic undernutrition.<sup>3,4</sup> The region also has the highest prevalence of low-birth-weight children.

A crucial factor in the high incidence of stunting in children in South Asia is the poor nutritional status of mothers before and after pregnancy.<sup>5</sup> The region has the highest prevalence of anaemia among women of reproductive age. The regional average is 49 percent, with India, Pakistan, Maldives and Afghanistan reporting prevalence of more than 40 percent. Child mortality rates in South Asia, at 4.1 percent, remain at worrying levels.

“Despite the strong economic growth and reduction in poverty in South Asia, the region continues to face challenges in nutrition.”

**Figure 1**  
**Prevalence of Food Insecurity in Asia and the Pacific, by Subregion and Gender (Average for 2017-2019)**



Source: FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2021

Assessments based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) show that 386.8 million people in South Asia experience severe food insecurity and 849.8 million people experience moderate to severe food insecurity.<sup>6</sup> This accounts for 82 percent of the severely food insecure, and 71 percent of those suffering moderate to severe food insecurity, in Asia. Data shows a significant degree of gender gap as well: food insecurity among women was at 34.2 percent in South Asia between 2017 and 2019, compared to 29.8 percent among men (See Figure 1).

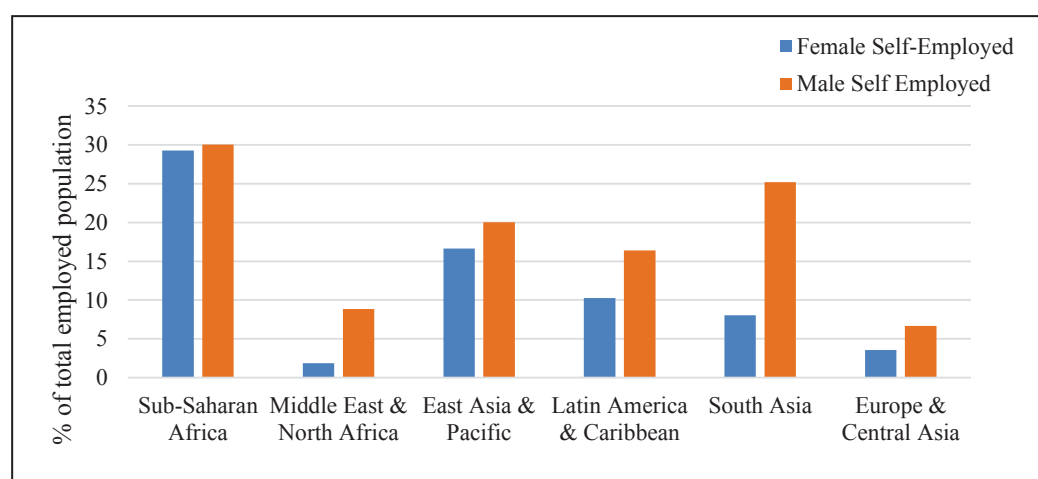
The South Asian story is characterised by the paradoxical co-existence of economic growth and persistent undernutrition and food insecurity. The phenomenon is commonly known as the ‘South Asian enigma’, and the pattern is more stark for women.

# The Gender Dimension of the ‘South Asian Enigma’

The gender gap in poverty rates is statistically more significant in South Asia. While the global average is 104 women for every 100 men in poor households, in South Asia, the corresponding ratio is 109 women for every 100 men. This gender gap in poverty is also evident in the working cohort. The rates of poverty among the working population in South and South-West Asia, at 30.9 percent for females and 25.4 percent for males, are highest in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>7</sup>

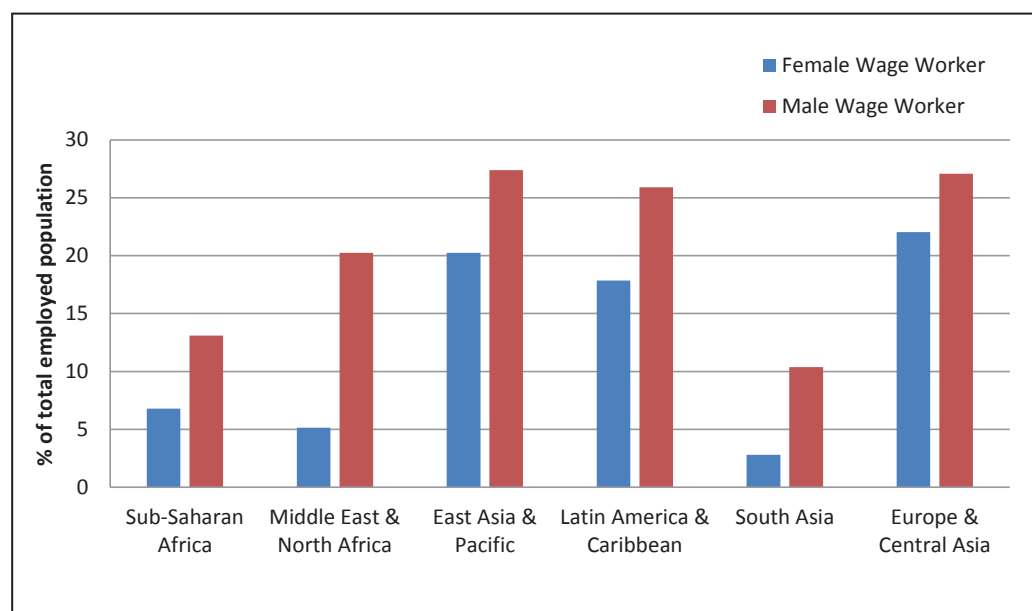
Female employment trends in South Asia show that women are increasingly excluded from the labour market across South Asian countries. This is evidenced in the low female labour force participation rate and persistent gender gap in female and male employment rates.<sup>8</sup> For women who are in the labour market, the quality of employment is very poor. A high proportion of the women in the labour force are engaged in casual and self-employed jobs that are informal in nature (See Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2**  
**Self-Employment, by Sex (2019)**



Source: World Bank, 2020

**Figure 3**  
**Wage Workers, by Sex (2019)**

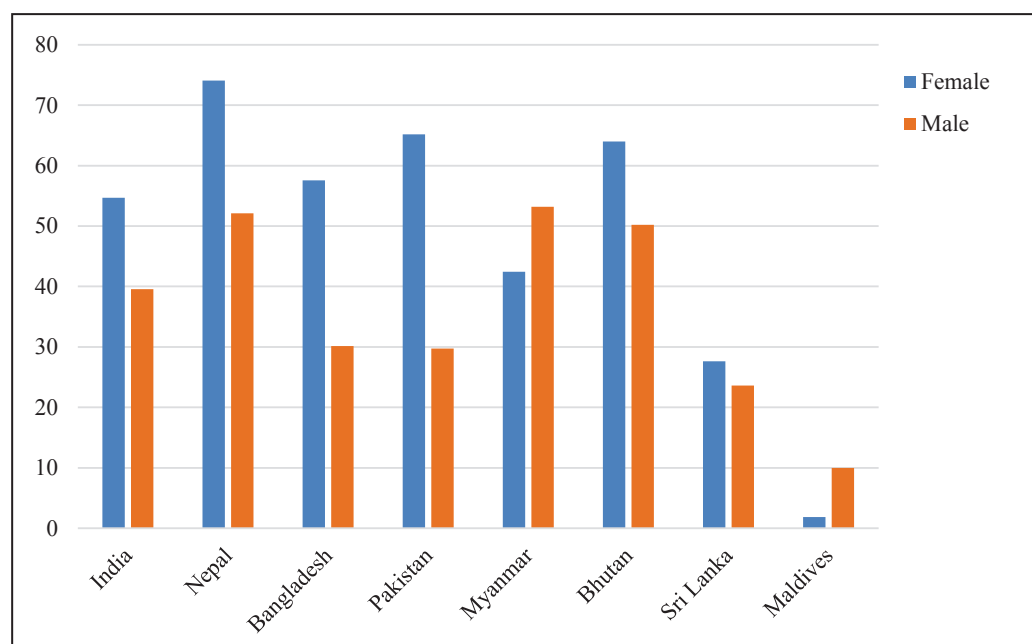


Source: World Bank, 2020

For women in South Asia, the agriculture sector is the single largest employer: 69 percent of the women in the region are engaged in agriculture, with the proportion varying across countries (See Figure 4). The services sector is also a significant employer of women in the region; in recent years, there has been a slight shift in the patterns, with the magnitude varying across countries. Women in South Asian countries are paid much less than their male counterparts; the highest gender wage gap is reported in Pakistan, at 32.8 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Women and girls in South Asia lag behind their counterparts across the globe in other development indicators. For example, they spend more time on unpaid care and domestic work compared to the men and boys: in Pakistan, girls and women spend 11 times more hours in domestic chores—such as fetching water and fuel—than the males in their families.<sup>10</sup> Countries in the region are also recording less progress in bridging the gender gap in literacy, and in secondary and tertiary educational attainment. The only exceptions to these patterns are Maldives and Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup> There is also gender disparity in access to finance, with only 32.3 percent women in South Asia having their own bank account compared to 42.8 percent of men. This is higher than in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the Global Findex 2011, only 17 percent of South Asian countries report a female-to-male ratio above 80 percent in business accounts, compared to 39 percent of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>12</sup> Women in South Asia also have poor access to other productive resources like land and inputs.

**Figure 4**  
**Percentage Employment in Agriculture (By Sex, 2019) - South Asian Countries**



Source: World Bank, 2020

Thus, South Asia, a region of high economic growth rate has the dubious distinction of being the worst performer on indicators of gender equality and in terms of addressing gender discrimination in development outcomes. This has implications for food and nutrition outcomes in the region, as women are key in breaking the cycle of intergenerational malnutrition.<sup>13</sup> There is a strong link between gender inequality, and hunger and food insecurity. Gender differences in food and nutritional outcomes are driven by social determinants such as gender roles, access to resources, voice, and agency. Indeed, countries ranking high on the GHI are those with poor track records of addressing gender inequality.<sup>14</sup> This linkage is evident in the nutritional outcomes in South Asia.<sup>15,16</sup> It highlights the complementary and mutually reinforcing nature of SDG goal 2 (Zero Hunger) and 5 (Gender Equality). Addressing this requires strengthening women's agency through their increased participation in the economy.

# Feminisation of Agriculture

The agriculture sector has the largest share of women employment in South Asia at 57 percent. The proportion ranges from 28 percent in Sri Lanka to a far higher 74 percent in Nepal; Maldives is at 2 percent and is the exception.<sup>a</sup> Following liberalisation measures in the 1980s and '90s, South Asia has seen a surge in out-migration—or the act of leaving their rural home for the towns or cities. In Nepal, one in every four households has at least one member who has out-migrated, and 88 percent of this outmigration was by male members of the household.<sup>17</sup> In India, the proportion of migrant population is 29.9 percent.<sup>18</sup> The proportion of male out-migrants is estimated at 8 percent, but given the size of the country's population, the figures are substantial in absolute terms.<sup>19</sup> As many men leave the household, the women take on a bigger role in agriculture. This phenomenon is described as the “feminisation of agriculture”. India and Nepal report the highest levels of feminisation of agriculture in the region.

Narratives linking agricultural feminisation and women's empowerment is polarised, and the concept of feminisation is defined in both a limited and an expansive sense.<sup>20</sup> In the limited sense, it refers to an increase in the proportion of women's farm related work (paid/unpaid) and increased responsibility on family farms.<sup>21</sup> In this narrative, women's work load increases while they continue to lack access to productive resources, knowledge, and technology and have limited decision-making power, if at all. With near-universal mobile-phone ownership, men continue to remotely control household and farming decisions.<sup>22</sup>

In the expanded sense, meanwhile, the concept of ‘feminisation’ refers to ways in which women's agency is built by engaging with the social process of agriculture. The expanded conceptualisation refers to ways in which women gains right and ownership over productive resources, power in decision-making, and recognition of their contributions in previously male-dominated areas.<sup>23,24</sup> This process of feminisation is also known as ‘managerial feminisation’. The second narrative views feminisation as an opportunity for improving gender equality and women's position in agriculture. This means that the effect of ‘feminisation of agriculture’ on women's position in the sector depends on the ways by which the socio-cultural and gender norms shape the process.<sup>25</sup>

“The feminisation of agriculture is seen by various analysts to be both limiting to, and expanding women's agency.”

a Women in the Maldives are largely engaged in the fisheries sector.



# Feminisation of Agriculture

A study among mixed farming households in Sindhuli district of Nepal, reveals feminisation of a limited nature in the context of agricultural transition.<sup>26</sup> The study used a concept of women's agency that combines decision-making power and adaptive preferences for agricultural engagement within the household. The adaptive preference for the role played by women in the region was dictated by prevailing gender and social norms, with women continuing to play a predominant role in subsistence production and traditional agricultural work. Day-to-day farm management and supervision continued to be women's domain in both subsistent and cash crops, while they had little or no role in decision-making related to income earned from the different production systems.

In the eastern hills of Nepal, male out-migration during the period of armed conflict in the late 1990s, had increased women's role and responsibility in agriculture. In the process, women took over traditional roles performed by men, exercised decision-making powers, actively engaged with the market and government, and claimed social spaces for negotiations.<sup>27</sup> The political context that emerged post-conflict enabled women's engagement at the higher ends of certain value chains. Collectivisation and the emergence of women's cooperatives also expanded the space for women to engage in commercial crop cultivation. A 2015 study found that macro-level gender-sensitive and inclusive institutional arrangements and policies, can challenge and alter gender and social norms at the micro level to create opportunities of engagement for women in traditionally male-dominated, high-value agriculture production systems.<sup>28</sup>

Clear intersectionality in the impact of feminisation was revealed in the middle Hills of Nepal, where women from poor lower-caste households experienced increased work burden in agriculture, with no corresponding increase in farm production.<sup>29</sup> They had less access to exchange labour compared to higher-caste women, and when exchange labour was available, they were expected to provide two times the labour in exchange for one male labour. Socially organised ethnic groups like *Gurung* were able to dictate the labour price, with men and women receiving the same wage rates. It was relatively easier for *Gurung* women to hire male labourers. The caste, class, ethnicity-based differential impacts are compounded by the level of remittance received by these households. Households higher up in the social ladder reported higher levels of remittance, which gave the women in the households greater autonomy to hire labour.

Similar labour-hiring challenges were reported in rice-producing eastern Uttar Pradesh villages in India, where the low remittance did not allow the women to engage hired labour and the women take on additional work.<sup>30</sup> The household structure—whether nuclear or extended—was another mediating effect on women's position in the event of male out-migration.<sup>31</sup> Increasing work load in terms of household work and outside work was reported more from migrant households, resulting in women from these households spending less time on

# Feminisation of Agriculture

agriculture and shifting towards less intensive farming.<sup>32</sup> This is corroborated by evidence from Madhya Pradesh of increased work load for women and the subsequent abandonment of agriculture by women who were left behind by male out-migrants.<sup>33</sup> Similar patterns were observed in the middle hills of Nepal.<sup>34</sup>

A general decline in the share of men and women in agriculture, with the decline higher in the case of men, indicating feminisation, was evident from the data on economic activities in the India census of 2021. Male out-migration resulted in more women taking on the role of main cultivators and an increase in women agricultural labourers. However, this has not translated to rights over agricultural property or in decision-making. With no viable alternative livelihood opportunities, they are forced to take on economic activities that are left behind by men. The authors describe the process of feminisation as “feminisation out of compulsion” or “feminisation of agrarian distress”. Further, the authors argue that the concentration of women in agriculture labour in India could also be reflective of what is described as the ‘feminisation of poverty’.<sup>35</sup>

Given the crucial role played by women in agriculture, gender inequalities that constrain women’s participation across the agricultural value chain will undermine the food and nutrition security in the region. There is an imperative to design appropriate policies and programmes for mainstreaming gender concerns in agriculture. This in turn requires an understanding of the status of women in agriculture.

“Male out-migration results in women taking on a bigger role in agriculture; it has not translated to property rights, however.”

The overall low status of women in South Asia also plays out in the agricultural sector and has implications for their livelihoods. Across South Asian countries, women encounter gender-specific constraints that limit their access to productive resources which in turn has impacts on the quality of their participation in economic activities. Further, the nature and process of feminisation of agriculture, a phenomenon common across South Asia, has a profound influence in restructuring gender roles and gender relations in agriculture in the region. Strategies for mainstreaming gender in agriculture need to account for these factors.

**G**endered yield gap in agricultural productivity is estimated to be in the range of 20-30 percent.<sup>36</sup> This is attributed to the difference in the levels of resource use between men and women. Empirical evidence shows that the gendered yield gap could be bridged if women use the same level of resources as men. Closing the gender gap in resource access and use would improve agricultural productivity, while also improving quality of women's engagement in agriculture. Gender gap in land ownership and control is a critical determinant of gender gap in women's status and agency in agriculture.<sup>37</sup>

In turn, access to material resources, technology and extension services in agriculture is contingent on ownership rights of farm land. To begin with, most agricultural development programmes are linked to asset ownership, as the very definition of a farmer is linked to possession of a land title. Since women do not own land, they are not officially recognised as farmers and are bypassed in agricultural extension and credit services. Strong gender and social norms govern the intra-household distribution of income and other material benefits in rural South Asia. Therefore, exclusive male rights on land does not automatically result in the welfare of all the members of the household. In rural economies of South Asia, land is not just a productive resource, but a symbol of status and source of security. In the absence of titles to land, even women classified as 'cultivators' are deprived of decision-making authority and autonomy, reinforcing gendered roles and relations in agriculture.<sup>38,39,40</sup>

Women across Asia own less land than men, with South Asia reporting the highest gender-gap; men also own larger holdings.<sup>41,42</sup> Male operational holdings in Bangladesh and Pakistan are double the size of those of the women. Female land ownership is 2 percent in Pakistan, 9.7 percent in Sri Lanka, 10 percent in Bangladesh, and 13.5 percent in India. Even among women who do own land, they do not always have control over such land.<sup>43</sup> Bhutan is the only country in South Asia where more women own land: 70 percent of farm land are owned by women.<sup>44</sup> This is attributed to matrilineal inheritance practices and a strong legal environment.<sup>45</sup>

Analysts have found various obstacles that limit women's rights over land in South Asia, and the primary ones relate to patriarchal social norms. In many South Asian countries, families prefer sons who are expected to be the future caretakers of the elderly parents; this sits at the core of why women's land rights are limited.<sup>46,47</sup> Inheritance rights dictated by religious practices also view women as inferior to men. Under the Sharia law, for example, Muslim women are entitled to only half the share of property received by their male counterparts. *Tanazqul* – a religion-dictated practice of putting a premium on male inheritance rights—has deprived many women in Pakistan and Bangladesh of their property rights,

as they are compelled to give up their share of the inheritance. In Bangladesh, women receive only 43 percent of their hereditary property.<sup>48</sup> In India, even as the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, bestows equal rights for women on land and property, the law is poorly enforced.<sup>49</sup> Inheritance rights of Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists are also governed by the Hindu Succession Act. Inheritance among Parsis and Christians are governed by the Indian Succession Act, 1925, under which the son and daughter are treated equally, while Muslim women are governed by Shariah.<sup>50</sup>

In Bangladesh, joint titling of the husband and wife is promoted by the Khas Land Management and Distribution Policy. The Nepalese government issues Joint Land Ownership Certificates which helps transfer men's exclusive land rights to joint ownership with their wives. In India, land under joint ownership was about 2 percent in; in Nepal 0.4 percent; Pakistan, 1.8 percent; and 2.19 percent in Bangladesh.<sup>51</sup> In India, legal rights to inheritance and ownership of land and property by women is enshrined in the Constitution. The Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) called for removal of gender discrimination in property ownership, advocated women's land ownership, and suggested changes to bring in gender inclusiveness in land-related laws.

Despite these efforts, however, inherent bias in land and inheritance laws remains prevalent across the states.<sup>52</sup> Land is a state subject, and the different state laws have worked against the constitutional provisions that reinforced women's rights to inherit and own land.<sup>53</sup> Women have not been a target beneficiary in any state-led land reforms. This highlights the difference in legal and social recognition and the difference between legal provisions and enforcement.

“Various obstacles limit women's property rights in South Asia, and the primary ones relate to patriarchal norms.”

# Mainstreaming Gender in Agricultural Policies

Closing the gender gap in agriculture would require designing and implementing gender-sensitive policies. In South Asia, most of the policies are gender-blind and do not account for the unequal power relations between men and women that are dictated by tradition and social norms.

Addressing the gender gap in land ownership, to begin with, requires a change in approaches at the macro, meso and micro levels. At the macro policy level, a starting point is reviewing legislations related to land and the associated legislations dealing with inheritance, marriage, and property to eliminate loopholes for gender discrimination in implementation. At the meso level, educating and gender sensitisation of the bureaucracy, developing gender-specific guidelines and rules of implementation, and adjusting bureaucratic procedures for joint titling and other provisions that ensure women's rights over land, could address issues of gender discrimination at the implementation stage. At the micro level, imparting legal literacy to women, improving women's educational attainment, and sensitising the community on the developmental benefits of women's land ownership can help modify restrictive gender and social norms.

Delinking land title ownership from the official definition of 'farmer' could help improve women's and tenant cultivators' access to productive resources.<sup>54</sup> In India, modifying policies on farm mechanisation—such as introducing additional subsidy for machines for women farmers—has resulted in micro-level action in altering social norms in women's land ownership. Many men register small pieces of land in the name of the women of their household to avail this subsidy. Albeit tokenistic, this has resulted in the transfer of land in the name of women in several states in India. Moreover, the promotion of "custom hiring centres"—or farm machinery service centres managed and run by women's collectives—has increased women's access to more modern agricultural tools and implements. Using ICT tools and farmer field schools for delivering extension services could improve women's access to these services.

Gendered value chain development in agriculture has been touted as a means of improving women's participation across the value chain. Interventions aimed at horizontal integration of gender concerns across the value chain can strengthen women's role and bargaining position in roles they already play across the agricultural value chain. Vertical integration across the value chain through technological introduction and skill-building of women farmers on modern practices and technology is expected to improve the quality of participation of women farmers at the higher end of the agricultural value chain. Recognising this, international agencies like USAID, DANIDA and FAO,<sup>b</sup> as well as regional

b USAID – United States Agency for International Development; DANIDA – Danish International Development Agency; FAO- Food and Agricultural Organisation

# Mainstreaming Gender in Agricultural Policies

economic forums such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and European Union (EU) have adopted gendered value chain as a key development strategy.

The promotion of appropriate governance structures and institutions like Women Producer's Collectives that engage in end-to-end support for women farmers have been found to be effective in improving women's access to inputs, extension services, and credit. Being part of collectives helps build scale in marketing and processing, improves bargaining position, and strengthens the quality of participation across the value chain. India's National Policy on Farmer Producer Organisations and the *Mahila Kisan Sashakthi Karam Pariyojana* are examples of policies that provide scope for developing gendered agricultural value chains in the country. Promotion of land leasing by women's collectives with state support, even in states where leasing of agricultural land is legally prohibited has enabled participation of even landless women agricultural labourers in the agricultural value chain in these states. Collectivisation as a means of empowerment has also been well-established by the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement. Women in SHGs have better control over decision-making, derive higher incomes, and perform better on aggregate measures of empowerment.<sup>55</sup>

Gender mainstreaming of programmes implemented by agencies working on agriculture—including agricultural universities, regional agricultural research coalitions, and civil society organisations—can improve gender inclusiveness for better uptake and impact of these programmes. For instance, the Government of India stipulates that all beneficiary-oriented schemes under the Ministry of Agriculture should ensure inclusion of a minimum of 30 percent women farmers and spend at least 30 percent of funds on women farmers.<sup>56</sup>


Collecting gender-disaggregated data on the various programmes/interventions in agriculture and periodically monitoring them would provide useful insights on their impact on women farmers' empowerment. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), for example—a survey-based index developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI)—is widely used by countries and organisations to measure gender parity and empowerment in agriculture.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, addressing the issue of women's time poverty, given their multiple gender roles in household and care work, can go a long way in realising gender-equitable development outcomes for women in agriculture. Provisioning of clean water and fuel would reduce the drudgery in household work, free up time for agricultural and other economic activities, as well as leisure and rest, and result in overall well-being outcomes for women farmers.

# Conclusion

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**K**ey to overcoming hunger and food insecurity in South Asia is strengthening women's position in the household and community, and building their agency. Subsequently, closing the gender gap in agriculture and improving the quality of participation of women in agriculture are potential pathways to addressing issues of hunger, food insecurity, and poor nutritional outcomes in South Asia. Gender mainstreaming of agricultural development, requires including women's voice and incorporating women's concerns throughout the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages of agricultural policies and interventions.

Gender-sensitive strategies and policies for improved access to resources, arresting dispossession, and facilitating agency for women in agriculture, would play a pivotal role in addressing food and nutrition security concerns of women and children. These strategies will also effectively reduce poverty. 

“Closing the gender gap in agriculture is a potential pathway to addressing issues of hunger and food insecurity in South Asia.”

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