

The “Missing Women” of the Agricultural Sector

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While women constitute up to 37 per cent of the agricultural workforce, their status is not recognised. Statistics do not collect suicides of women farmers as land is seldom registered in their names. There needs to be a change in legislation and criteria to support women farmers.

The farmers’ agitation in Maharashtra seems to have ended with the state government promising to waive loans. The agitation by farmers has once again brought to light the issues that farmers face. Crop loss, being debt ridden and failing to receive adequate prices for their crops are still driving farmers to take the extreme step of killing themselves.

That the data collected by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) on farmer suicides is untrustworthy has long been acknowledged. The statistics have been accused of being manipulated to artificially reduce suicides in the agricultural sector. There is for instance, no explanation why, in 2014, farmer suicides across the country fell to 5,650 from the 2013 tally of 11,772. NCRB created a separate category to record suicides of ‘agricultural labourers’. These were people who worked in farms seasonally or as tenants. In 2014, 6,710 agricultural labourers had committed suicide. Therefore, the real tally of farmer suicides in 2014 was 12,360.

While the manipulation of overall farmer suicide data has been well documented, there is another sort of fudging that receives even less attention. According to the latest available data, which is for 2015, 12,602 farmers (including agricultural labourers) committed suicide. Of these, only 998 were women. The disproportionate rate of suicide throws up some questions. Are women farmers better equipped to deal with the vagaries of agriculture? Or is it because there are fewer women farmers when compared to men?

According to a story by IndiaSpend, a data driven website, there are 36 million women farmers in India. Here, ‘farmers’ refers to women in whose name agricultural lands are registered. In addition to these, there are 61.6 million women who work as agricultural labourers, adding up to almost a 100 million women who are employed in the agricultural sector¹.

In Maharashtra, the government has certain criteria to determine if a farmer’s family is eligible to receive compensation if he/she has committed suicide². One of the criteria is that

¹ India’s Quiet Women Farmers Slip Into Crisis: <http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/indias-quiet-women-farmers-slip-into-crisis-90104>

² Maharashtra farmers’ suicides: Many families fail eligibility test for dole: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/aurangabad/Maharashtra-farmers-suicides-Many-families-fail-eligibility-test-for-dole/articleshow/35810822.cms?from=mdr>

the farmer should possess land in his/her name. In a patriarchal society, land is rarely ever registered in the name of women. In fact, there are certain superstitions that blame women for poor harvests and droughts. Therefore, even if a woman who is working in the agricultural sector commits suicide, her death is likely to not be classified as a farmer suicide.

In the past 20 years, statistics show that the suicide rate is highest among 'housewives'. Consistently every year, at least 20,000 suicides are by those categorised as 'housewives'. This is higher than farmer suicides, which has been averaging around 13,000 every year.

But once again, this data seems to be fudged. Journalist P Sainath, who has extensively written on the agricultural sector in India, argues that many of the suicides categorised as 'housewives' are actually women farmers. "Women farmers' suicides are routinely undercounted because conventional societies mostly do not acknowledge women as farmers. And only a few have their names on title deeds or pattas. One result of this is that the "housewives" category explodes in those years where states claim nil women farmers' suicides. In some states, "housewives" (including many who are farmers but not so acknowledged) make up 70 per cent of all women suicides in some years."³

As the innovative strategies employed by the NCRB come to light, other methods are being adopted to cover up farmer suicides. During the rabi season of 2015, unseasonal rains and hailstorms wreaked havoc in Maharashtra, destroying crops. The government statistics showed that 601 farmers had killed themselves between January and March 2015. However, when the Centre asked for data on suicides related to hailstorms, the state government had responded that only three farmers had committed suicide. The bizarre explanation given was that only three farmers had written suicide notes specifically saying that they were committing suicide because of the rains and hailstorms.⁴

There is another plausible explanation as to why suicide among women farmers is low. When their husband or the family patriarch commits suicide, women are left behind to look after the children and the household. In 2015, nearly 20 per cent of farmers and over 27 per cent of agricultural labourers who committed suicide were between the ages of 18 and 30 years. Once again, an overwhelming number of them were male. It is very likely that they had children, who had to be tended by their widowed wives. Additionally, 71 per cent of farmers and 60 per cent of agricultural labourers who committed suicide were aged between 30 and 60 years. In such cases, the widowed wives could well have elderly people to look after in addition to children.

³ The slaughter of suicide data: <http://psainath.org/the-slaughter-of-suicide-data/>

⁴ State government's logic for its low farmer suicide count: Only 3 blamed rains: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/State-governments-logic-for-its-low-farmer-suicide-count-Only-3-blamed-rains/articleshow/47013870.cms?inttarget=no>

However, the NCRB does not collect the family details or marital status of the farmers, which makes it harder to derive conclusive inferences.

A study titled “Rural Distress on Women Farmer” conducted in Tamil Nadu in January 2017 highlights the conditions faced by women farmers, especially after the death of their husbands, reinforces this inference⁵. The study points out, “women member of the family face the consequences of the death severely along with the burden of debt, which is also informal and private along with taking care of elderly persons, young children, disabled members of the family. All the women members of the deceased are also farmers and they have equally or more contributed to the farming for many years and depend on agriculture for their future survival.”

The government, in its National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, outlined the efforts that would be made to encourage women employment. While this is an encouraging step, it is surprising that women farmers are getting neither help nor recognition from the government. According to the Census of India 2011, about 65.5 per cent of economically active women in the country are engaged in agricultural and constitute about 37 per cent of the agricultural work force. Micro-level studies have shown that women spend considerably more time engaged in agricultural activity than men.

Legislation and compensation criteria must be suitably altered so that women farmers do not fall through the gaps in the system. At the village revenue level, women farmers must be recognised so that they can access entitlements.

⁵ Rural Distress on Women Farmer: <http://tnlabour.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/180117-women-farmes-studyf-1.pdf>