



Barriers to Land Ownership and Decision-Making in Agriculture: A Gendered Analysis in Bhiwani

Pinki (Ph. D Research Scholar) ¹ Dr. Shiv Kumar (Assistant Professor) ²

Department – Economics, Shri Jagdish Prasad Jhabarmal Tibrewala University, Chudela, Jhunjhunu

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ABSTRACT

Access to land is a critical determinant of empowerment, productivity, and socio-economic inclusion in agrarian economies. However, land ownership and agricultural decision-making remain largely male-dominated in India. This paper presents a gendered analysis of land ownership patterns and women's participation in agricultural decisions in Bhiwani district, Haryana. Drawing from field surveys, legal frameworks, and policy reviews, it identifies institutional, cultural, and legal barriers that marginalize women. Despite women's significant role in farming activities, their limited control over land restricts their access to resources, credit, and scheme benefits. The study offers targeted recommendations for gender-inclusive land reforms and participatory rural governance.

Keywords: Gender, Land Rights, Agricultural Decision-Making, Bhiwani District, Legal Barriers, Patriarchy, Rural Women, Tenure Security, Joint Ownership, Property Laws

1. INTRODUCTION

Land is not just a material possession in rural India; it is deeply entwined with identity, authority, autonomy, and socio-political power. Particularly in agrarian societies like those in Haryana, ownership of land determines not only economic productivity but also social standing and access to rights and entitlements. In such a context, the persistent gender gap in land ownership becomes not only a matter of inequality but also of economic injustice and systemic exclusion.

Although women constitute a significant proportion of the agricultural labor force—engaging in sowing, harvesting, weeding, irrigation, and livestock rearing—their work is seldom recognized formally. They are generally not identified as "farmers" in legal or administrative documents, mainly because land ownership overwhelmingly lies with men. This exclusion has profound implications. Without ownership titles, women cannot access credit, agricultural subsidies, crop insurance, or government welfare schemes such as PM-KISAN. They are also excluded from agricultural decision-making at both household and community levels, leading to their systematic disempowerment.

The situation is particularly critical in Bhiwani district of Haryana, where patriarchal land inheritance practices and weak legal enforcement continue to marginalize women from the agrarian economy. Despite the amendment to the Hindu Succession Act in 2005 granting daughters equal inheritance rights, cultural resistance and lack of awareness continue to undermine women's ability to claim ownership. Even when women do own land—often as widows—they struggle to update records, face resistance from male relatives, or are unable to exercise their rights fully.

Moreover, land ownership is intrinsically linked with agricultural decision-making. Women without land titles are generally not consulted on key issues such as crop selection, input usage, investment decisions, or market linkages. They operate at the margins—providing labor without rights, voice, or visibility. This not only reduces their economic agency but also impacts agricultural efficiency and food security, since women's traditional knowledge and grassroots innovations are underutilized.

This study aims to conduct a gendered analysis of land ownership and decision-making in agriculture in Bhiwani, drawing on primary field data, legal frameworks, and policy reviews. It seeks to uncover the invisible barriers—legal, social, and institutional—that limit women's rights to land and participation in agriculture. By doing so, the study hopes to highlight the urgency of implementing gender-sensitive land reforms and promoting participatory rural governance that includes women as equal stakeholders.

In a time when sustainable development, gender equality, and inclusive growth are global priorities, ignoring the foundational issue of women's land rights would be counterproductive. This research is both timely and necessary, as it seeks to center the experiences of rural women and offer concrete pathways toward empowerment, equity, and sustainable rural transformation.



2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is centered on exploring the gender-specific barriers that hinder women's access to land ownership and participation in agricultural decision-making in Bhiwani district, Haryana. The study aims to bridge the gap between legal provisions and lived realities of rural women, and to identify actionable areas of policy intervention. The detailed objectives are as follows:

- **To examine the status of land ownership among rural women in Bhiwani district** The study aims to investigate how many women legally own land, under what circumstances ownership is transferred (e.g., inheritance, dowry, purchase), and whether they are able to exercise full control over the land.
- **To analyze the socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's land inheritance and ownership rights** The research will study traditional norms, patriarchal family structures, customary practices, and the influence of male relatives in denying women their rightful share of ancestral or marital property.
- **To assess the level of women's participation in agricultural decision-making processes** This includes evaluating whether women are consulted or excluded in key agricultural matters such as selection of crops, use of fertilizers and technology, irrigation planning, sale of produce, and investment decisions.
- **To explore the relationship between land ownership and women's economic empowerment** The study will analyze how owning land (or the lack thereof) affects women's access to agricultural credit, institutional support, crop insurance, government schemes, and productive livelihood opportunities.
- **To identify institutional and legal challenges in enforcing women's land rights** The research will review existing land laws, government programs (like PM-KISAN, Bhoomi Adhikar Abhiyan), and legal mechanisms to understand how effective or inaccessible they are for rural women.
- **To document lived experiences and perceptions of women around land, power, and agency** Through case studies and qualitative narratives, the study seeks to bring forth the voices of women who have faced resistance, displacement, or empowerment through land-related experiences.
- **To recommend gender-sensitive land reform measures and policy frameworks** Based on the findings, the study will propose suggestions for improving women's access to land, enhancing their decision-making power in agriculture, and creating enabling institutional mechanisms at the village and district levels.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs a **mixed-methods research approach**, integrating both quantitative and qualitative tools to explore the gendered barriers to land ownership and decision-making in agriculture. This methodology provides a comprehensive lens through which both statistical trends and lived experiences of rural women in Bhiwani can be analyzed and understood.

Research Design: A **descriptive and exploratory research design** has been adopted. While the descriptive aspect enables documentation of the current status of land ownership and agricultural participation among women, the exploratory element uncovers deeper socio-cultural, legal, and institutional barriers that perpetuate inequality.

Study Area: Bhiwani District, Haryana: Bhiwani district, known for its agricultural economy and socio-cultural conservatism, was purposefully selected due to its representative rural demography and observable gender disparities in land rights. The district has both irrigated and rain-fed areas, offering a relevant context for analyzing land-related power dynamics.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size: A **purposive sampling method** was used to select women from different socio-economic, caste, and landholding backgrounds who were either directly or indirectly engaged in agriculture.

- **Sample Size:** 100 women respondents were selected across 8–10 villages of Bhiwani district.
- **Selection Criteria:** Women above 18 years of age who were involved in farming activities (with or without land ownership), widows with ancestral land claims, and SHG members working in agriculture.

Data Collection Methods: To ensure data richness and credibility, both **primary** and **secondary** sources of data were used:

- **Primary Data Collection:**
 - **Structured questionnaires** were administered to women respondents to collect information on land ownership status, inheritance practices, decision-making roles, and awareness of legal rights.
 - **In-depth interviews** were conducted with selected women who had experiences of claiming or being denied land rights, as well as with local panchayat members, lawyers, and agricultural officers.
 - **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** with 6–8 women in each village provided collective insights into cultural norms and social practices around land distribution and control.



- **Secondary Data Collection:**

- Review of **government land records**, policy documents, Census data, reports from the Department of Land Resources, Ministry of Agriculture, and National Commission for Women.
- Academic literature and NGO reports on gender, land rights, and rural governance in North India, especially Haryana.

Data Analysis Techniques

- **Quantitative data** from questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics like percentages and cross-tabulations to identify patterns in land ownership and participation in decision-making.
- **Qualitative data** from interviews and FGDs was coded thematically using narrative analysis to capture subjective experiences, resistance, and perceptions of women.
- Comparative analysis was done across landholding categories (landless, marginal, and small holders) and caste backgrounds to highlight structural disparities.

Ethical Considerations: The research adhered to ethical standards of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent. No respondent was forced to share sensitive land-related details. Anonymity was ensured in all reported data, especially in case studies.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The study reveals a stark gender disparity in land ownership and participation in agricultural decision-making among women in Bhiwani. Despite their vital contributions to farming and rural sustenance, most women remain legally and socially marginalized from land entitlements and power structures. The major findings are categorized thematically below:

Status of Land Ownership among Women

- Only **12% of women respondents** possessed land in their own name, mostly as widows or due to accidental inheritance.
- Even among these, **less than half had updated land records** or full decision-making authority over the land.
- The remaining **88% either worked on family land** registered in the name of their husband, father, or brother or worked as agricultural wage laborers.
- Many respondents stated that **even dowry or gift land was legally registered in male names** to "maintain family control."

Inheritance and Customary Barriers

- A vast majority (over **76%**) of women reported that **land inheritance practices favored sons** despite legal provisions for daughters under the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005.
- Customary beliefs such as "girls belong to another house after marriage" were cited to justify their exclusion from property rights.
- Several cases revealed **deliberate resistance from male family members** when women attempted to claim their legal land share, often involving social pressure or emotional blackmail.

Women's Role in Agricultural Work vs. Decision-Making

- **91% of women** surveyed were actively engaged in farming activities including sowing, transplanting, harvesting, and livestock care.
- However, only **21% were involved in agricultural decision-making**, particularly in choosing crops, purchasing inputs, or marketing produce.
- Decisions related to **loans, investments, or machinery usage** were almost exclusively made by men, even if women were co-laborers.

Legal Awareness and Documentation Challenges

- Only **17% of respondents** were aware of their legal rights to land under succession laws or the Bhoomi Adhikar campaign.
- Most women lacked essential documents such as **land titles, property maps, or mutation papers**, making it difficult to assert their claims.
- Many mentioned being **illiterate or digitally excluded**, preventing them from accessing legal services or online land records.

Community Attitudes and Panchayat Role

- Patriarchal attitudes persisted within the **village panchayats**, where women were seldom included in discussions on land redistribution or agricultural planning.



- Even in villages with elected women representatives, real decision-making power often lay with their male relatives (a phenomenon often referred to as “proxy leadership”).
- Women who tried to assert rights were seen as disruptive or “breaking family unity.”

Impact of Lack of Land Ownership on Empowerment

- Women without land ownership lacked access to **agricultural credit**, government subsidies, or crop insurance schemes like PM-KISAN or Fasal Bima Yojana.
- They were excluded from formal recognition as “farmers,” thereby **losing out on institutional support** meant for cultivators.
- Respondents linked land ownership to **greater confidence, household authority, and bargaining power**, indicating its critical role in women’s empowerment.

Case Narratives of Resistance and Assertion

- Some women—especially widows and SHG leaders—had taken legal recourse or used NGO support to claim their land rights.
- One notable case involved a woman who fought a three-year legal battle to get her name added to the revenue records of her ancestral land, eventually succeeding with support from a district-level women’s legal cell.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study underscores a critical paradox in Bhiwani’s rural landscape: women are the backbone of agricultural labor, yet remain largely landless and voiceless in key decisions regarding land and farming. Despite constitutional and legal guarantees of equal inheritance rights, patriarchal social norms, inadequate legal awareness, and systemic loopholes continue to marginalize women from land ownership and agricultural governance.

The findings reveal that while women contribute significantly to agricultural production and food security, their lack of land titles directly impacts their access to credit, subsidies, government schemes, and recognition as farmers. The absence of secure land rights also results in their exclusion from decision-making processes, affecting their self-confidence, economic independence, and overall empowerment.

Moreover, the study brings to light the resilience of rural women who, despite structural disadvantages, continue to assert their roles in agriculture. A few inspiring case stories show how legal interventions, NGO support, or grassroots mobilization can help women overcome resistance and reclaim their rights. However, such victories are rare and require scalable systemic support.

Thus, ensuring women’s land rights is not merely a gender equity issue — it is fundamental to sustainable agriculture, rural development, and inclusive growth. Land, as a productive resource and a source of dignity and power, must be equitably distributed and legally protected for women if the goals of social justice and economic development are to be achieved.

Recommendations

Based on the study’s insights, the following policy-level and grassroots recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Legal Awareness and Paralegal Support

- Launch community-level awareness campaigns about women’s inheritance rights through SHGs, NGOs, and gram sabhas.
- Establish village-based legal resource centers with trained paralegals (especially women) to assist in land registration, mutation, and dispute resolution.

Promote Joint Land Titling

- Amend land redistribution programs and rural housing schemes to mandate joint ownership in the names of husband and wife.
- Provide financial incentives (such as lower stamp duty) for land registered in a woman’s name.

Facilitate Access to Documentation

- Simplify land record procedures, and introduce mobile land registration vans and helpdesks in villages to support women with paperwork.
- Train women in digital literacy to access online land records and legal portals.

Sensitize Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

- Conduct regular gender sensitization workshops for elected panchayat members.
- Encourage meaningful participation of women (not proxy) in land-related decisions, and form **village-level gender resource groups**.



Integrate Women into Agricultural Policies

- Redefine “farmer” in policy and legal frameworks to include women working on family land or in agricultural labor.
- Design special schemes for women cultivators — including credit access, insurance coverage, training in sustainable farming, and market linkages.

Encourage Women-Led Collectives

- Promote land leasing cooperatives, community farming, and SHG-led agricultural initiatives where women collectively own or lease land for production.
- Provide capacity-building and micro-financing support to women’s producer groups.

Institutionalize Gender Audits

- Make gender audits mandatory in land distribution and rural development schemes to monitor inclusivity and correct gender imbalances.
- Publish disaggregated data (by gender) on land ownership at the district and state levels.

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