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WOMEN SCIENTISTS IN INDIAN AGRICULTURE: SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS, INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Sweety Chakraborty[1]*, Oendri Ghosh[2]

[1]Division of Plant Pathology, ICAR- Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi

[2]Department of Plant Pathology, College of Agriculture, Govind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Uttarakhand

**Corresponding author email*: sweetychakraborty05@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Women scientists have significantly shaped the trajectory of Indian agriculture through contributions in crop improvement, plant protection, biotechnology, soil science, natural resource management, climate resilience, and agricultural extension. Their scientific leadership within institutions has strengthened national food security and sustainable agricultural systems. This article examines the historical evolution, technological contributions, research innovations, and institutional impact of women scientists in Indian agriculture, highlighting their role in advancing precision breeding, molecular diagnostics, integrated pest management, and climate-smart agriculture.

KEYWORDS:

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture continues to serve as the structural foundation of the Indian economy, contributing significantly to national food security, rural employment, and socio-economic stability. Nearly half of India's population remains directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture and allied sectors for livelihood. Over the past five decades, Indian agriculture has undergone a remarkable transformation from traditional, subsistence-oriented farming systems to a diversified, technology-intensive, and market-responsive production framework. This transition has been catalyzed by sustained public investment in agricultural research, education, and extension under apex institutions such as the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).

The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, often associated with the leadership of eminent scientists such as M. S. Swaminathan, marked a turning point in India's agricultural trajectory by introducing high-

yielding varieties, improved agronomic practices, and input-responsive cropping systems. However, the broader narrative of agricultural transformation extends beyond singular leadership. It encompasses the cumulative efforts of numerous scientists among whom women researchers have played an increasingly visible and indispensable role.

Over time, women scientists have transitioned from peripheral participation to central contributors within India's agricultural research ecosystem. Their engagement spans diverse and highly specialized domains including classical plant breeding, molecular genetics, genome editing, plant pathology, agricultural entomology, soil microbiology, climate modeling, bioinformatics, agricultural engineering, and policy research. The integration of advanced tools such as marker-assisted selection, CRISPR-Cas systems, next-generation sequencing, remote sensing, and decision-support modeling reflects the depth of their scientific involvement in contemporary agricultural innovation.

Beyond laboratory research, women scientists have contributed to the strengthening of institutional governance, interdisciplinary collaboration, and farmer-oriented technology dissemination. Through coordinated research projects, frontline demonstrations, participatory varietal selection, and climate-smart advisory systems, their work directly influences productivity enhancement, nutritional security, environmental sustainability, and resilience to climate variability.

In the context of emerging challenges including land degradation, water scarcity, climate change, pest resurgence, and nutritional deficiencies, the role of women scientists becomes even more critical. Their contributions align closely with national priorities such as sustainable agricultural intensification, doubling farmers' income, enhancing nutrient-use efficiency, and promoting low-carbon agricultural systems.

This article critically analyzes the multidimensional contributions of women scientists to Indian agriculture. It situates their scientific achievements within broader institutional frameworks, examines their leadership roles in research and governance, and evaluates their impact on national agricultural transformation. By foregrounding their contributions, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender-inclusive scientific advancement strengthens the resilience, productivity, and sustainability of Indian agriculture.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

The participation of women in Indian agricultural research has evolved gradually alongside the institutional and scientific transformation of the country's agricultural system. From marginal and indirect involvement in the early twentieth century to active leadership in cutting-edge scientific domains today, the trajectory reflects broader socio-economic changes, educational reforms, and policy interventions aimed at expanding access to higher education and research careers.

Understanding this evolution requires situating women's entry into agricultural sciences within three major phases: the pre-institutional era (pre-1970s), the Green Revolution expansion phase (1960s–1980s), and the consolidation and diversification phase (post-1990s). This section focuses primarily on the early and Green Revolution phases.

Early Participation (Pre-1970s)

Before the large-scale institutional expansion of agricultural education and research, women's participation in formal agricultural science was extremely limited. During the colonial and immediate post-independence periods, agricultural research was primarily concentrated in a few central institutions and was dominated by male scientists due to socio-cultural norms, limited access to higher education for women, and restricted professional mobility.

Expansion during the Green Revolution Era (1960s–1980s)

The Green Revolution marked a transformative period not only for agricultural productivity but also for institutional restructuring and human resource development in agricultural sciences. During this era, women scientists transitioned from being primarily extension-oriented professionals to laboratory-based researchers, field scientists, and principal investigators. Participation in coordinated research projects under ICAR strengthened their scientific visibility. However, leadership positions remained limited, and decision-making bodies were still male-dominated. Women's contributions were often substantial but under-recognized in institutional narratives.

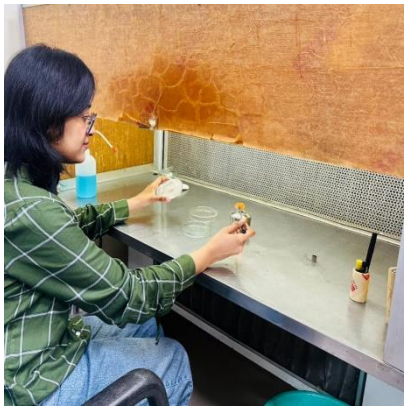
PRESENT SCENARIO OF WOMEN SCIENTISTS IN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Over the past three decades, the participation and influence of women scientists in Indian agricultural research have expanded substantially, reflecting broader transformations in higher education access, gender equity policies, and the scientific modernization of agriculture. The shift from input-intensive Green Revolution paradigms to knowledge-intensive, technology-driven agricultural systems has created

new research domains that demand interdisciplinary expertise an arena in which women scientists have increasingly established strong professional identities.

Institutional expansion under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) have provided structured pathways for women to enter, sustain, and advance within agricultural research careers. Although gender disparities remain in certain hierarchical and technical segments, the contemporary research ecosystem demonstrates measurable progress in representation, scientific leadership, and research productivity.

This analyses the present scenario across multiple dimensions: representation, disciplinary engagement, leadership roles, research contributions, institutional support systems, persisting structural barriers, and emerging opportunities in the evolving agricultural innovation landscape.


DISCIPLINARY ENGAGEMENT AND SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS

The present generation of women scientists is deeply integrated into both foundational and frontier agricultural research domains.

A. Molecular Breeding and Genomics

Women researchers contribute extensively to:

- Quantitative Trait Loci (QTL) mapping
- Genome-wide association studies (GWAS)
- Marker-assisted selection (MAS)
- Genomic selection frameworks
- CRISPR-Cas mediated gene editing

These contributions are critical in developing crop varieties resistant to drought, salinity, heat stress, and emerging pathogens. Their work supports climate-resilient and nutritionally enhanced crop development.

B. Plant Pathology and Virology

Women scientists lead research in:

- Molecular diagnostics (RT-PCR, qPCR, NGS)
- Host–pathogen interaction mechanisms
- Epidemiological modeling of disease spread
- Integrated Disease Management (IDM) strategies

Rapid pathogen detection and resistance breeding programs directly reduce crop losses and enhance food security.

C. Entomology and Integrated Pest Management

Research contributions include:

- Biotype characterization
- Host plant resistance mechanisms (antixenosis, antibiosis, tolerance)
- Semiochemical-based pest control
- Biological control agent development

Their work supports reduced pesticide dependence and promotes environmentally sustainable pest management systems.

D. Soil Health and Microbiome Research

Women soil scientists are advancing:

- Soil enzymatic profiling
- Microbial consortia development
- Rhizosphere microbiome studies
- Nutrient use efficiency (NUE) modeling
- Carbon sequestration and soil organic matter stabilization

These areas are central to regenerative agriculture and sustainable intensification.

E. Climate-Smart and Digital Agriculture

With increasing climate variability, women researchers are contributing to:

- Crop simulation modeling
- Climate vulnerability assessment
- Remote sensing and GIS-based crop monitoring
- Decision Support Systems (DSS)

- Precision agriculture analytics

The integration of digital tools reflects a transition toward data-driven agricultural management.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of women's participation in agricultural research also mirrors broader structural transformations in higher education and public research systems. Increased access to postgraduate education, competitive recruitment processes, gender-responsive institutional policies, and mentorship initiatives have contributed to improved representation. In conclusion, women scientists are no longer peripheral contributors but indispensable architects of India's agricultural resilience and sustainability. Their expanding role across research, extension, governance, and innovation ecosystems strengthens national food security, environmental stewardship, and inclusive rural development. A sustained commitment to gender-responsive institutional reforms and leadership development will ensure that the future of Indian agriculture is not only technologically advanced but also socially equitable and scientifically robust.

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