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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Distress in the Fields: Why the Feminisation of Agriculture Is Not Empowerment

 INDIAN EXPRESS

25 July 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES

GS1

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THE LIFT LINE

A rising number of women in the fields looks like empowerment on a chart, but when a woman does more farm work without owning the land, holding the credit card or drawing the income, what has risen is not her status, only her burden.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The feminisation of agriculture is a favourite intersection of GS1 (society, role of women) and GS3 (agriculture, employment). The examiner rewards candidates who can distinguish a genuine structural shift from a distress-driven one, and who can connect a social phenomenon to the hard economics of land titles and institutional credit rather than treating it as a soft welfare topic.

The deeper point is that the same statistic, more women in farming, can signal either advance or distress depending on what lies beneath it. This editorial trains you to interrogate the number rather than celebrate it, which is exactly the analytical move UPSC prizes.

GS Paper 1: role of women and women's organisations; social empowerment; the effects of urbanisation and migration on society.

GS Paper 3: issues related to agriculture, farm employment, agricultural credit, and inclusive growth.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: women form a large and rising share (over 40 per cent) of the agricultural workforce, and agriculture employs the overwhelming majority of working rural women, yet women own only about **13.9 per cent of operational holdings (Agriculture Census 2015-16, up from 12.8 per cent in 2010-11)**, accounting for roughly **11 per cent of the operated area**; the **Mahila Kisan**

Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), launched in 2011 as a sub-component of the DAY-NRLM under the Ministry of Rural Development; the **Kisan Credit Card (KCC)**; and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). For **Mains**, argue why recognising women as farmers, not merely helpers, is the **precondition** for credit, insurance and scheme access.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Since about 2019 to 2020, the share of women in India's agricultural workforce has climbed. The Periodic Labour Force Survey shows female labour force participation rising, and a large part of that rise sits in agriculture and allied activities, often as unpaid workers on family farms. On the surface this is a story of women re-entering work.

Read against the wider labour market, a different picture emerges. Male out-migration from villages, the slow creation of non-farm rural jobs, and the pandemic-era reverse migration all pushed household labour back onto the farm, and much of that returning burden fell on women. When men leave for construction sites and cities while women stay to manage the standing crop, the woman's recorded participation goes up without any gain in ownership, wages or decision-making power. Economists call this **distress feminisation**, participation driven by the absence of better options rather than the presence of new opportunity.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

More labour, not more ownership

The heart of the problem is the gap between work and title. Women do a rising share of sowing, weeding, transplanting, harvesting and livestock care, yet the land is almost never in their name. The Agriculture Census 2015-16 put women's share of operational holdings at only about **13.9 per cent** (up from 12.8 per cent in 2010-11), and their share of operated area lower still. Without a title, a woman is invisible to the systems built around the landowner.

The credit and recognition trap

Because the Kisan Credit Card, crop insurance, minimum support price procurement and most input subsidies are keyed to land records, a woman who farms but does not own is locked out of institutional credit and pushed toward informal lenders. She is a farmer in the field and a non-farmer on paper. The **Mahila Kisan** idea, that a woman who cultivates is a farmer in her own right, remains more aspiration than legal status.

DIMENSION	WHAT THE DATA SHOWS	WHAT IT MEANS
Workforce share	Women a large, rising share of farm workers	Feminisation of field labour
Ownership	~13.9% of operational holdings	Work without title
Credit access	KCC and MSP keyed to land records	Excluded from institutional finance
Recognition	"Farmer" defined by ownership	Woman counted as helper, not farmer
Wages	Large share as unpaid family labour	More burden, no measured income

Why this is distress, not advance

Genuine structural empowerment would show up as rising women's landownership, rising access to formal credit, and rising control over farm income. Instead the ownership needle has barely moved (roughly one percentage point across a Census cycle), while the workload has grown. A rise in participation that is not matched by a rise in assets, credit or autonomy is a warning sign, not a milestone.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use the frame **participation versus control**. Participation measures whether a person works; control measures whether she owns the asset, holds the credit line and keeps the income. Empowerment is a rise in control, not merely in participation. When participation rises but control does not, you are usually looking at distress absorption, the household pushing its weakest-bargaining members into unpaid work because the alternatives have vanished. Apply this test to any workforce statistic: ask not only how many women are working, but on whose land, for whose income, and with what say over the proceeds. The answer converts a cheerful headline into an honest diagnosis.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Male out-migration + shrinking non-farm rural jobs -> women pushed onto family farms (participation up) -> but land title stays with men (~13.9% holdings women-owned) -> no KCC, no MSP access, no insurance, income not controlled -> distress feminisation, not empowerment -> [resolution] joint titling + Mahila Kisan recognition + credit delinked from sole ownership -> participation converts into genuine control

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Title the land jointly.** Push joint and individual land titling for women, and let digital land records recognise women cultivators, so ownership begins to track the work they already do.
- 2 **Delink credit from sole ownership.** Extend Kisan Credit Cards, crop insurance and MSP access to women cultivators through tenancy certificates, self-help-group guarantees and recognition of cultivator status, not just title deeds.
- 3 **Institutionalise the Mahila Kisan.** Scale up MKSP-style livelihood support, women's producer organisations and extension services designed for women farmers rather than treating them as add-ons.
- 4 **Create the non-farm ladder.** Since distress feminisation is driven by the absence of alternatives, expand rural non-farm employment and skilling so that farming becomes a choice, not a fallback.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly asked about the role of women in the workforce, about the effects of migration on rural society, and about agricultural distress and credit. This editorial links those threads to the specific and current phenomenon of feminisation of agriculture, letting you write an answer grounded in both social theory and farm economics.

Practice question: “The feminisation of Indian agriculture reflects distress absorption rather than women’s empowerment.” Critically examine, and suggest measures to convert rising female participation into genuine control over land, credit and income. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: PMFIAS on Feminisation of Agriculture, SPRF: Workers or Owners? The Case of Women Farmers in India

Source: Distress in the Fields: Why the Feminisation of Agriculture Is Not Empowerment — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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