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FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE

SYLLABUS:

GS 3 > Economic Development >> Agriculture

REFERENCE NEWS:

Women's labour force participation in India is rising, but much of it is **unpaid, informal, or low-paid**, highlighting a gap between **participation** and **true employment quality**. **Agriculture dominates** rural women's work, but often in unpaid forms.

More women join the labour force, but are they really employed?

Rising Participation:

- Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) rose from **31.2% (2011-12)** to **41.7% (2023-24)**, driven mainly by rural women.
- Urban women's participation remains much lower than rural.
- High concentration in **Bihar & UP** (80%+ women in agri; 50% unpaid).

Nature of Employment:

- Much of the increase is in **unpaid household-based work** (classified as "helpers in household enterprises"), not in regular or salaried jobs.
- Decline in regular, salaried, and casual work categories despite rising participation.
- Large sections of women also recorded as attending **domestic duties**, which NSSO counts separately.

Sectoral Trends:

- **Agriculture dominates** rural women's work, but often in unpaid forms.
- Secondary (industry) and tertiary (services) sector shares for women remain small.

Wage Disparities:

- Women, especially in rural areas, earn significantly less.
- Charts show urban regular salaried women earn better, but rural women remain concentrated in low-paying or unpaid roles.

Key Concerns:

- Growth in women's labour force participation is not translating into **quality employment or fair wages**.
- Much of the rise reflects **distress-driven participation** (unpaid helpers, self-employment in family farms/enterprises), not empowerment.

FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE:

"Feminisation of agriculture" refers to the increasing presence, responsibility, and dependency on women in agriculture not only as labourers, but increasingly as cultivators, managers, and even decision-makers often driven by male out-migration, economic necessity, or structural factors. It also includes the growing

share of women in unpaid or family farm work, taking over tasks that men earlier handled, and being burdened with both agricultural and domestic labour.

Share of women in agricultural workforce	Women now constitute over 33% of the agricultural labour force in India and 48% of self-employed farmers.
Increase in unpaid work	Number of women agricultural workers who are unpaid family workers rose drastically from ~23.6 million (2017-18) to ~59.1 million in 2023-24.
Rural female participation	In rural areas, ~76.9% of women are engaged in agriculture (2023-24), up from lower levels, showing that a strong majority of rural female labour force is in agriculture.
Wage / sector trends	The share of employment in the primary sector (agriculture) has increased (or pulled back) slightly – many returning to agriculture or being forced into agriculture. Secondary/tertiary sectors aren't absorbing sufficient female labour.
Land ownership	Despite increased participation, female land ownership remains low — only about 12-14% of land holdings are in women's names.

KEY DRIVERS OF FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE IN INDIA:

- **Male out-migration for work:** Men migrate to urban centres or non-farm rural jobs, leaving women to manage cultivation, livestock and allied activities.
 - India's large internal migration (Census 2011 ~45.6 crore internal migrants) and multiple studies (including PLFS commentary) link rising female shares in farm work to male migration. States with high out-migration (e.g., parts of UP, Bihar) show large shares of women in agriculture.
- **Growth of labour-intensive contract farming and allied sectors:** Horticulture, floriculture, tea/coffee and plantation works are labour-intensive and often recruit women for tasks such as plucking, pruning, sowing—seen as reliable and skilled for repetitive tasks.
 - Tea plantations in Assam and West Bengal traditionally employ large numbers of women for plucking; horticulture/flower farms in several States increasingly use female labour. Contract farming arrangements in labour-intensive crops have expanded women's roles on fields.
- **Limited alternative non-farm employment for rural women:** low female literacy, restricted mobility and social norms constrain women's access to non-farm jobs, making agriculture one of the few viable livelihoods.
 - PLFS/other labour surveys show a large proportion of rural women remain in primary sector work while secondary/tertiary absorption of women is low—explaining why 2 out of 3 rural women work in agriculture.
- **Patriarchal norms & household gender roles:** cultural expectations frame women's farm labour as an extension of household chores (unpaid family work), discouraging recognition as independent farmers.

- The number of women classified as **unpaid family workers** in agriculture rose from ~**23.6 million (2017–18)** to ~**59.1 million (2023–24/25)** — showing both growing involvement and invisibility in formal labour metrics.
- **Land and asset inequalities (lack of land rights):** women’s low land ownership prevents them from being recognised as cultivators, reduces access to credit/inputs and keeps them in dependent, unpaid roles.
 - Women own only about **13–14%** of land holdings nationally — a structural barrier to transforming labour into empowered, remunerative farming.
- **Mechanisation & technology that excludes women:** farm machinery, input delivery and extension services are often designed for male farmers (physique, time availability, male-centric scheduling), limiting women’s access and productivity gains.
- **Economic distress and livelihood necessity:** falling male agricultural incomes, shocks (price volatility, climate events) and the COVID shock have pushed women into more agricultural work to sustain household income.
 - Post-COVID analyses and labour surveys showed increases in rural female labour force participation, much of it in agriculture and informal self-employment rather than secure wage jobs.

IMPACTS OF FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE:

Is This Empowerment or Reinforcement of Inequality?

The feminisation of agriculture is a **double-edged phenomenon**. Whether it means empowerment depends heavily on context.

POSITIVE IMPACTS:

- **Keeps farms functioning and sustains rural livelihoods:** When men migrate or leave farming, women’s increased participation prevents labour shortages and helps sustain agricultural production and household food security.
- **Increased female labour force participation (visibility of women’s contribution):** Women now constitute **over 42% of India’s agricultural workforce** (PLFS/FAO reporting). This rising share makes women’s contribution more visible in national statistics and can push policy attention toward gender-sensitive reforms.
- **Potential for women’s economic empowerment if accompanied by rights & resources:** Where women gain access to collective platforms (SHGs, women-led FPOs) and markets, feminisation can translate into income control, entrepreneurship and bargaining power — e.g., documented successes of women’s SHGs and FPO pilots in Maharashtra/Andhra (programmatic examples; see national good-practice writeups).
- **Skill specialisation in labour-intensive value chains:** Labour-intensive crops and activities (floriculture, horticulture, tea plucking, seedling work) create niche, women-intensive employment opportunities (e.g., tea gardens in Assam/West Bengal). This can raise household incomes when market access and fair wages follow.
- **Policy leverage compels gendered policy responses:** Rising female participation has triggered policy conversation on joint land titling, gender-sensitive extension and portable entitlements (e.g., schemes linking women farmers to credit and training). PLFS trends are being used to justify these reforms.

- **Large increase in unpaid family work:** Number of women in agriculture classified as **unpaid family workers** jumped from about **23.6 million (2017–18)** to **~59.1 million (2023–24/25)** — showing growing participation but rising invisibility and lack of remuneration. This means feminisation often represents unpaid caregiving disguised as “farm work.”
- **Persistence of low land ownership & lack of asset control:** Despite doing more farm work, women hold **only about 12–14% of operational land holdings / land ownership** in India (research & government estimates). Lack of land title blocks access to formal credit, subsidies and government schemes, so women remain dependent and excluded from decisions.
- **Wage gaps and worse job quality:** Women often receive **lower wages** (estimates typically show 20–30% lower pay) and are concentrated in casual, seasonal or piece-rate jobs rather than secure salaried employment. Even when labour participation rises, quality of employment does not.
- **Time poverty and double burden:** Women combine farm tasks with unpaid domestic and care work (fetching water, fuel, childcare), limiting time for training, market access or political participation. This “double burden” reduces potential productivity gains and perpetuates gender inequality. (UN/FAO literature and PLFS analyses emphasise time-use constraints.)
- **Limited access to technology, mechanisation and extension services:** Farm machinery and extension services remain male-oriented (tools sized, training schedules and channels assume male actors), so women benefit less from productivity-enhancing technologies. This perpetuates lower labour productivity and drags down farm incomes.
- **Regional concentration & entrenched disadvantage:** In states such as **Bihar and Uttar Pradesh** a very large share of working women (often **>80%**) are employed in agriculture and a majority among them remain unpaid — indicating regional pockets where feminisation is accompanied by severe deprivation rather than empowerment.
- **Risk of feminisation being “cheap labour” trap:** Employers and value-chain actors may prefer women for repetitive, low-paid tasks (viewing them as more “docile” or willing to accept lower wages). Without legal protection and decent work, feminisation risks entrenching gendered low-wage sectors. Evidence from plantations and horticulture shows such patterns.
- **Policy invisibility and mis-targeting:** Many schemes still target the “male farmer” as beneficiary. Because women are often recorded as “helpers” or unpaid, they miss out on credit, subsidised inputs, insurance and social protection despite doing the work — undermining program effectiveness. PLFS data has been used to highlight this mismatch.

WAY FORWARD:

Key government schemes & platforms:

- **Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana** a component of DAY-NRLM: promotes women’s collectives, training, access to technology and credit; supports women-led Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs).
- **Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM / NRLM):** promotes SHGs, microfinance, livelihoods and FPO linkages for women.
- **Kisan Credit Card (KCC):** access to formal short-term credit; issue women-named KCCs and concurrent training increases credit uptake by women.
- **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) & crop insurance:** financial risk cover; mandate simpler claim procedures and female beneficiary recognition.

- **Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN)**: income support; prioritise payments to women-headed households or co-titling.
- **eNAM (National Agriculture Market)**: market linkage platform; training women to list produce and access better prices.
- **e-Shram / Social Security Portals**: register informal women agri-workers for social security (e-Shram has 29 crore+ registrations platform model).
- **One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)**: portability of food rations for migrant women and families.
- **NABARD / RKVY / State schemes**: funding for women FPOs, capacity building and infrastructure.

Best practices & successful models:

- Kerala's Kudumbashree: SHGs federate into producer companies to aggregate produce, reduce transaction costs and improve bargaining power.
- NABARD-supported women FPO pilots (multiple states) show better market access and credit linkage when governance is women-centric.
- **Deccan Development Society (Telangana)** / community seed banks & women's collective models. Women's collectives managing seed diversity, organic produce, local value addition — higher incomes, food security and leadership development.
- **SEWA / Ahmedabad model**: Cooperative marketing, direct-to-consumer sales and collective bargaining for women vendors/farmers.

Land & property rights

- **Joint titling / automatic co-titling** of land provided under government schemes (new allocations, pattas) evidence shows ownership transforms access to credit and agency. Simplify inheritance claim procedures and awareness drives on legal rights.

Finance & markets

- **Issue KCCs and PM-KISAN payments in women's names** / allow joint accounts.
- Preferential credit windows and collateral-free loans for women FPOs via NABARD/PSBs.
- Market support: preferential mandi tie-ups, minimum support price (MSP) facilitation for women groups, and women-focused e-market onboarding drives.

Recognition & remuneration

- **Recognise women as cultivators** (not "helpers") in land/beneficiary databases so they qualify for subsidies, insurance and schemes.
- Explore **wage parity enforcement** and incentivise hire of women with fair pay in value chains.

Extension, training & technology

- **Gender-responsive extension**: recruit and train more female extension officers/para-extension workers; schedule training in local languages and timings convenient for women.
- Promote **women-centric mechanisation** (smaller implements, community hiring centres for machines).
- Scale **digital literacy + voice-first tools** (BHASHINI-style), Digital Sakhi models and farmer helplines.

Aggregation & value-addition

- Scale **women-led FPOs**, cooperatives and micro-processing units (value addition increases margins).
- Support branding (GI, organic, women-produced labels) and linkages to institutional buyers and export value chains (tea, spices, organic produce).

Social protection & care support

- Provide **rural creches, midday meal support for children, water & fuel infrastructure** to reduce time poverty.
- Extend pension and health insurance portability for women farm workers registered on e-Shram.

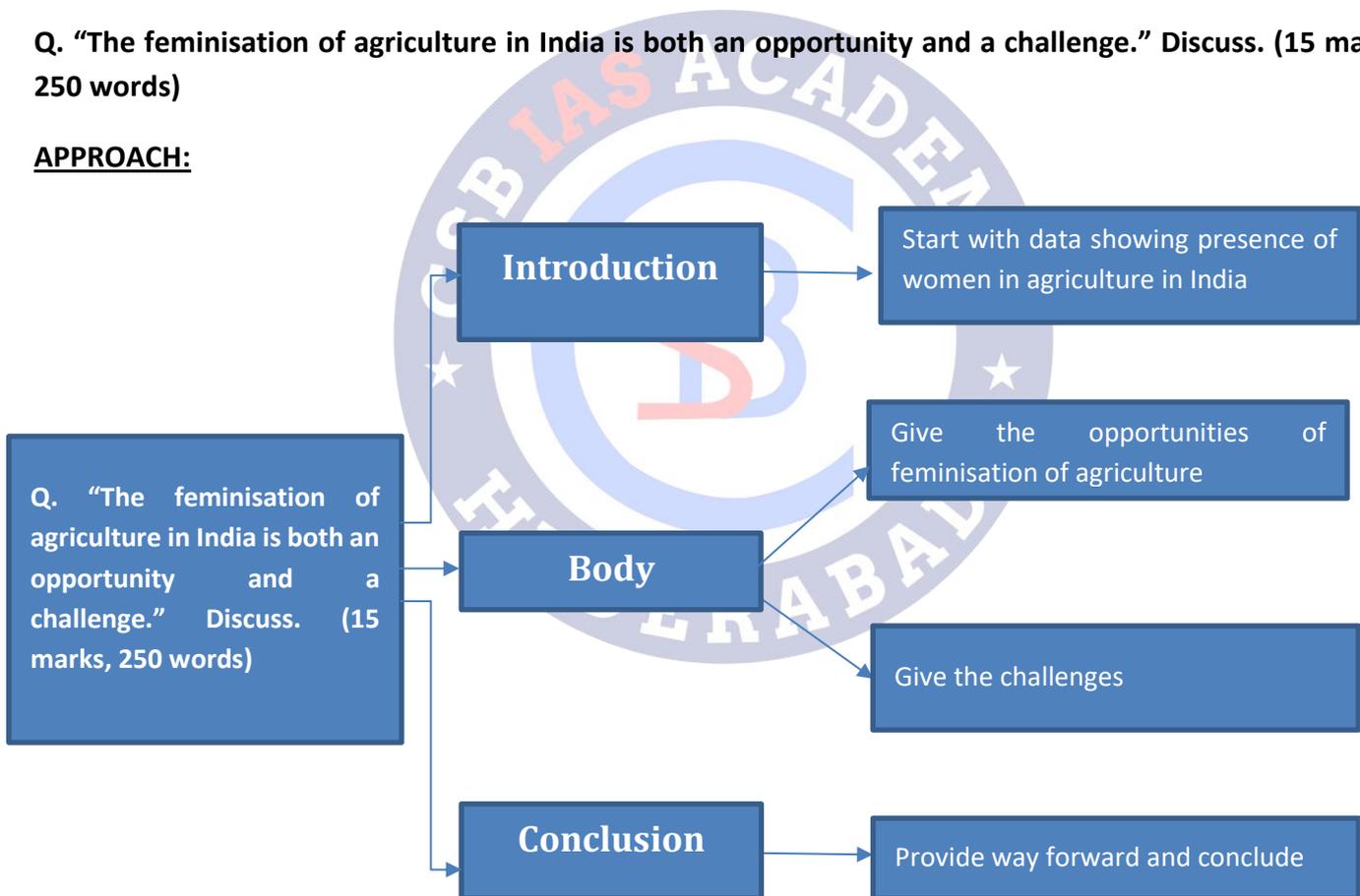
Data, monitoring & affirmative policy

- Mandate **gender-disaggregated data** in all agricultural databases (land records, PM-KISAN, KCC, PMFBY) and use targets for women’s inclusion in schemes.
- Set **benchmarks**: e.g., % of KCCs in women’s names; % procurement from women FPOs.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. “The feminisation of agriculture in India is both an opportunity and a challenge.” Discuss. (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

The **feminisation of agriculture** refers to the increasing role of women in agriculture as cultivators, labourers, and managers, often due to male out-migration, livelihood distress, or structural inequalities. As per PLFS 2023-24, women constitute **over 42% of India’s agricultural workforce**, yet nearly half remain unpaid, reflecting a paradox of rising participation but poor quality of employment.

Opportunities in Feminisation of Agriculture

1. **Sustaining Agriculture & Food Security:** With men migrating to cities, women keep family farms running, ensuring rural livelihoods and food supply. Bihar & UP where >80% of women are engaged in agriculture.
2. **Recognition of Women's Contribution:** Their visible presence in agriculture strengthens policy focus on gender-sensitive schemes. 59 million women engaged as unpaid family workers by 2024–25, showing their crucial but hidden role.
3. **Collective Empowerment:** Women-led SHGs and FPOs enhance bargaining power, access to credit and markets. Kerala's **Kudumbashree**, **SEWA cooperatives**, **Deccan Development Society** seed banks.
4. **Niche Employment in Value Chains:** Labour-intensive crops (tea, floriculture, horticulture) create steady employment opportunities for women. Tea plantations in Assam employ mostly women in plucking operations.

Challenges in Feminisation of Agriculture

1. **Unpaid & Low-Paid Labour:** Nearly **half of women in agriculture remain unpaid**, rising from 23.6 mn (2017–18) to 59 mn (2024–25).
2. **Landlessness & Resource Exclusion:** Women own only **12–14% of land holdings**, limiting their access to credit, subsidies, and crop insurance.
3. **Wage Discrimination & Job Quality:** Women earn **20–30% less** than men for the same agricultural work. They are concentrated in seasonal, informal, or low-paying jobs.
4. **Time Poverty & Double Burden:** Farm work is combined with unpaid domestic chores, limiting women's productivity and opportunities for skill training.
5. **Technological & Institutional Barriers:** Agricultural machinery is male-centric; extension officers are mostly men, excluding women from training and decision-making.

Way Forward

- **Land & asset rights:** Joint titling, simplify inheritance procedures.
- **Inclusive schemes:** Ensure KCC, PM-KISAN, PMFBY directly in women's names.
- **Women-centric FPOs & SHGs:** Link to markets, value-addition, branding (GI/organic).
- **Gender-sensitive extension & mechanisation:** recruit women officers, design women-friendly tools.
- **Social support infrastructure:** rural creches, water/fuel access to reduce time poverty.
- **Data & accountability:** gender-disaggregated agricultural databases with targets for women's inclusion.

The feminisation of agriculture in India reflects both **distress-driven participation** and **potential empowerment**. Converting women's labour into real economic agency requires **legal reforms, asset ownership, market access, and social protection**. Only then can feminisation drive **inclusive agricultural growth and rural development**.