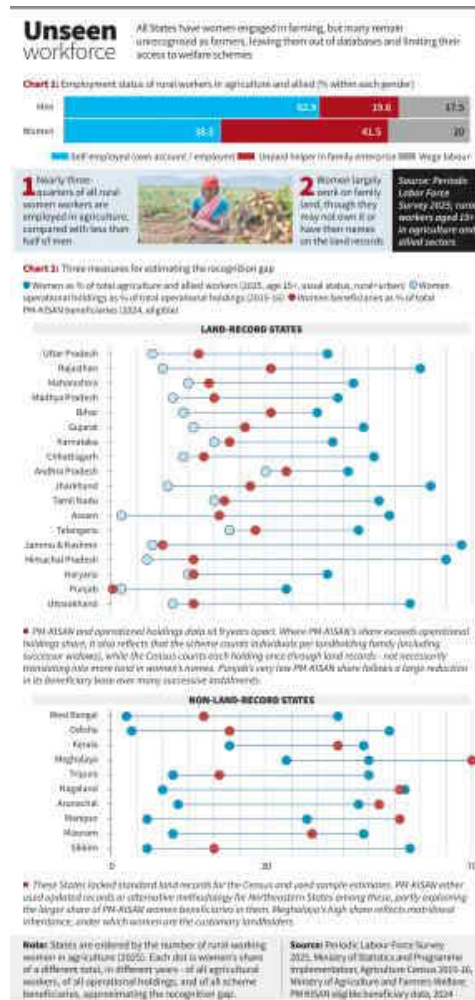


ECONOMIC NOTES

Towards recognising women farmers

Maharashtra's passage of the Women Farmers' Empowerment Bill, granting women independent recognition as farmers irrespective of land ownership, brings into focus the structural bias against the female agricultural workforce, highlights the need for a database of women farmers and using it to ensure access to welfare schemes



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The Maharashtra Act recognises women engaged in agriculture for at least one agricultural season a year, irrespective of the nature of the land

THE GIST

- In July 2026, Maharashtra passed the Women Farmers' Empowerment Bill. This is the first Indian State legislation to give enforceable legal form to the activity-based, land-delinked definition of 'farmer'

- It explicitly recognises categories such as landless cultivators, landless livestock rearers, agricultural labourers, plantation labourers and pastoralists. In principle, this creates a route through which women who do not own land can obtain an independent agricultural identity and gain access to welfare schemes

- But recognition must then translate into access. Linking these certificates to Agri Stack and issuing Farmer IDs to women is essential to integrating them into the broader digital agricultural ecosystem

Picture a farmer. The image that comes to mind is of a man. But when one looks at who is actually farming, she is increasingly likely to be a woman. This perception-reality mismatch is caused by age-old practices of collecting data, designing policies and defining who a farmer is. It makes millions of women who work on farms, make agricultural decisions and contribute to production nearly invisible. That may, however, finally be beginning to change.

In July 2026, Maharashtra passed the Women Farmers' Empowerment Bill, granting women independent recognition as farmers irrespective of land ownership, through a Woman Farmer Certificate. This is the first Indian State legislation to give enforceable legal form to the activity-based, land-delinked definition of 'farmer' that the National Policy for Farmers set out in 2007 but never operationalised. The Bill arrives nearly two decades after that policy, and 15 years after a comparable law was first proposed at the national level (a lapsed bill introduced in the Rajya Sabha in 2011). It is, in effect, the culmination of three decades of women farmers' movements backed by civil society organisations.

State-level efforts have also sought to recognise women farmers before this. Kerala's Kudumbashree collectives have enabled women to participate in group farming, while Odisha's KALIA scheme has reached landless and sharecropper women. But a women farmers' registry delinked from land records had been missing. Maharashtra's legislation, therefore, represents a potentially important shift, from recognising the

owner of agricultural land to recognising the person who actually farms. This matters because women's participation in agriculture has risen sharply.

The recognition gap

In 2025, agriculture employed roughly 110 million women and 127 million men (rural, as per the PLFS, Census adjusted), bringing the sector close to gender parity. Women's agricultural workforce has more than doubled since 2017-18, and nearly three-quarters of all rural women workers are now in agriculture, compared with less than half of men. Regrettably most women work without pay. In 2025, more than 41% of female agricultural workers were unpaid, against 20% of men (Chart 1). By contrast, nearly 63% of men were own-account workers compared with 39% of women. While women's position has improved over time, the gap remains stark. This is where the question of recognition becomes critical, as women are increasingly farming but are not necessarily recognised as farmers.

The worker-owner dichotomy

In India, women largely work on the family lands, even though they may not own it or have their name on the land records, as patriarchal norms have meant that the land records are primarily in men's names. Subsequently, only 14% of operational agricultural land holdings (as measured primarily through land records) are with women (according to the Agricultural Census 2015-16). The person whose name is in the records gets included in the database and receives the benefits. As a result, not only does the recognition of women agricultural workers as farmers remain ambiguous, but they are also unable to access key Central and State agricultural schemes and incentives linked to land titles (land records).

All States have a large population of women engaged in farming who are never counted as farmers. Since each State uses its land revenue records as the source of truth for administrative purposes, the structural bias against women is carried forward into scheme access and databases. This ultimately translates into women farmers being unable to access credit, subsidies, technology, extension services and other related opportunities. For instance, only 23% of women have been beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme, which provides direct financial assistance of ₹6,000 per year to eligible landholding farmer families to support their agricultural expenses and household needs. For some States, the gap widens (See Chart 2).

Even in States where the share of women in the agriculture workforce is more than 50%, the share of women beneficiaries in most States is less than one-third. The exceptions are revealing. Meghalaya, where women account for 70% of beneficiaries, followed by Kerala with 44% stand apart. These States have institutional or social arrangements that provide women with greater recognition or access to land and agricultural resources. In some northeastern States, customary tenure and matrilineal systems matter; in Kerala,

collective farming through groups such as Kudumbashree provides an alternative route to participation and recognition.

At the other extreme are States with some of the widest gaps. In Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, women make up nearly two-thirds of the workforce but represent a small fraction of beneficiaries. The binding constraint, therefore, is not land itself but the identification system built on it. Where the land record is the gatekeeper, women are more likely to be filtered out; where an alternative mechanism exists, women's access rises substantially.

Year of the Woman Farmer

While the Maharashtra legislation came after decades of advocacy, it is well timed. With the United Nations naming 2026 the International Year of the Woman Farmer, Maharashtra has taken a potentially transformative first step and paved the way for other States. The Maharashtra Act broadens the definitions of 'agriculture' and 'farmer' to recognise women residents engaged in agriculture for at least one agricultural season a year, irrespective of the nature of the land, through a 'Woman Farmer Certificate'.

Importantly, it explicitly recognises categories like landless cultivator, landless livestock rearer, agricultural labourer, plantation labourer, and pastoralist. In principle, this creates a route through which women who do not own land can obtain an independent agricultural identity and gain access to state welfare schemes and credit. But recognition on paper is only the beginning. Implementation will require either self-registration or identification of women farmers by the Gram Sabha, including women who have no land or no land titles in their name. In both cases, this will require a robust information campaign.

This also provides for a new database of women farmers. Connecting this database with existing agricultural databases and avoiding duplication or exclusion will need to be worked out, presenting an opportunity for States to work together. A standardised system across States, for establishing common definitions for identifying women farmers, issuing certificates, and maintaining databases, would make it easier to link the identities of women farmers across schemes and administrative platforms, while avoiding multiple registrations.

But recognition must then translate into access. Linking these certificates to the Agri Stack (a digital platform developed by the Union Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare) and issuing FarmerIDs to the women is essential to integrating them into the broader digital agricultural ecosystem. However, for recognition to translate into empowerment, continuous efforts at the local level will be needed to make women farmers aware of the schemes and effectively ensure their access.

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