



Everyday Violence against Women in Agriculture

Introduction

Women constitute a substantial part of the workforce in India's farming sector but have little recognition or support as farmers. Despite their participation in agriculture, women face discrimination in terms of unequal wages, access to land, water, credit and other agricultural inputs, markets, extension services, and information on new technology and practices. Violence at the workplace is pervasive and impacts their wellbeing and economic opportunities.

This study on 'Everyday Violence Against Women in Agriculture' unpacks the everyday violence faced by rural women in spaces such as farms, markets, and other agricultural worksites, and their access to redressal mechanisms. The study is informed by qualitative research conducted in seven districts across 3 states - Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Telangana in 2021. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic period, and reflects the multiplied harassment faced by the women in the face of a global crisis.

Objectives, Scope and Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the research team under the guidance of the Advisory Committee¹ defined violence in the broader sense of everyday harassment that constrains women from performing their agricultural tasks and living a life of dignity. This includes denial of rights over resources that are critical in the agrarian space as well the denial of a decent and safe workplace environment. The central research questions were as follows:

1. How do women define their workspaces in the agriculture sector?
2. What is the nature and the form of everyday violence/harassment they experience at their work sites?
3. Who are the likely perpetrators of violence?

4. What are the manifestations and consequences of this continuum of violence/harassment in their lives, at work and at home?
5. What are women's experiences with regard to available redressal mechanisms? Are these accessible and are there support services to facilitate women's access to justice?

The primary research included in-depth interviews (IDI), focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KII). The research covered various occupational categories, including agricultural wage workers from the ST, OBC and Denotified Tribes. It also included migrant agricultural wage workers, sharecroppers, small and marginal women farmers, including widows and women from farm suicide-affected households and women sugarcane cutters.

1. The Advisory Committee was formed to guide the research team in developing the research methodology and support with the literature review. The advisory committee comprised of Renu Khanna, Suneeta Dhar and Amita Pitre.

Key findings

Precarious Workplaces, and Violence against Women

The study first focuses on **defining the agricultural workplace**, given the undefined and precarious nature of work. Key related findings are:

1. **Work routines and unpaid care work**

The study emphasises that women in agriculture bear a double burden of work. Not only are they compelled to do work at home, but they also do a range of tasks in the fields. Moreover, the work they do at home is unpaid and limits their capacity and time to engage in income-earning activities.

2. **Long hours and undefined working arrangements**

With a focus on sugarcane cutters, the study finds that women work for 12-14 hours a day with no paid leave whatsoever. They live in temporary shelters in the vicinity of their workplaces and face an even greater threat of abuse and sexual exploitation.

3. **Labour-intensive work**

Not only are women expected to do a wide range of tasks, but these tasks are also labour-intensive. For instance, many women are compelled to fetch water and firewood, and help load bundles of sugarcane onto trucks. Often women wake up as early as 3 am to start their day, much to the detriment of their health and bodily rest.

4. **Debt-based work**

In sugarcane farms, with high rates of indebtedness and financial precarity, women workers have little option to earn money. They are forced to borrow money from contractors and work under debt conditions.

5. **Multiple jobs and travel**

Given the low rates of labour productivity in agriculture and that agriculture is in crisis, women are forced to work multiple jobs, such as agricultural labour, MNREGA work, and work in rice mills and on construction sites. Women need to travel long distances to their work, resulting in long workdays, and this adds to their ongoing work burden.

6. **Childcare at the workplace**

Given their long working hours, low pay, and lack of access to any organized childcare services, women often take their young children with them to their workplace. At the workplace, they are frequently subject to sarcastic remarks and rebuked for paying attention to their children. Moreover, these workplaces are often unsafe for children, and they have no access to education, anganwadi services, and healthcare. On sugarcane sites, little children are prone to accidents like coming under the tractors that load the sugarcane.

7. **Working on family lands**

The study finds that working on family lands is among the safest options for women, as it provides them with a feeling of safety and solidarity with other women workers

8. **Unsafe workplaces**

Women farmers' workplaces are farms, forests, markets, common lands used for grazing or for collecting fuel or fodder, roads, and the home. Women are not secure in any of these sites. The inadequate sanitation facilities for women at worksites, with men loitering around, men who may also be drunk and passing lewd comments create unsafe conditions for them. Moreover, the tall field crops like sugarcane provide cover to possible abusers, and create conditions of unsafety.

9. **Pervasive violence against women**

Women shared that they did not have access to basic facilities like toilets and need to carry water for all washing and cleaning during their travel as they migrate. They stay in crowded places, usually in some shed-like temporary shacks that are made of plastic sheets. Several women migrant agricultural workers spoke of their own experiences of being accosted and assaulted by farm owners. The migrant agricultural labourers live in the fields, and it is a common practice to send the husband to irrigate the fields at night. The women who are alone with their children reported being sexually abused while the men were sent away.

10. **Multiple marginalisations**

The study finds that discrimination against women is aggravated based on caste, marital status, and economic factors. Women from already challenged positions in the social hierarchy are much more susceptible to further exploitation and abuse.

11. **COVID-19 impacts**

The study also found that COVID-19 led to increased violence against women in the face of job scarcities and excess supply of labour. They were paid less for the same work, many were left stranded in their workplaces, and many more were pushed into further debt conditions as they borrowed from informal money lenders. All of these situations contributed to an increased risk of experiencing violence.



Nature and Forms of Harassment

The forms of everyday harassment ranged from casting aspersions on their character, denial of basic amenities and services, physical and/or mental abuse, seeking sexual favours, denial of rights over land, and refusal to comply with the women farm managers' instructions at work. The severity of the forms of violence differed according to the socio-economic location of the woman, the marital status, presence of disability, to name a few.

The manifestation of violence included direct impacts on the mental and physical well-being of the women, along with indirect impacts on the farm yields and their productivity at work.

This section outlines the different forms of violence women farmers and agricultural labourers faced.

1. **Familial violence against single women and women from farm-suicide affected households**

Women who are single, or widowed, are often at a higher risk of experiencing violence in the workplace because of their perceived "unattached" status. They are often denied rights to their husband's share of family land and harassed by their in-laws. Families see them as an unwanted burden and a potential claimant to the family land/property. Women from farm-suicide affected families face harassment and threats from their brothers-in-law and fathers-in-law when they demand a share of the family land. They are also subjected to sexual harassment by the male members in the family. In some families the women are not allowed to cultivate their husband's share of land, let alone getting the land transferred in their names.

2. **Sexual violence**

Sexual violence and harassment are associated with risk factors in the workplace such as physical, structural, infrastructural, or spatial arrangements. On farms, for example, these included inappropriate staring or gazing, speech containing sexual content, denigration, or insinuation, and demands for sexual favours.

3. **Domestic violence faced by women farmers**

The study showed a direct relationship between workplace harassment against women farmworkers and an increase in domestic violence. Not only does returning late from work invite violence at home, but they are also blamed for the sexual violence they face. Women's interactions with agents, drivers, guards, or other men at their worksites also results in increased domestic violence by their families/spouses. This continuum of violence becomes cyclical in nature as domestic violence inhibits women's work capacity leading to more workplace harassment and violence.

4. **Caste-Based violence**

A key finding that emerged in the study was the direct and structural violence faced by women from the marginalised caste groups and communities. Interviews with women farmers working in the cane cutting industry in Maharashtra, highlighted the exploitation of women at the hands of men from the upper-caste community. The women reported sexual harassment by contractors, sub-contractors, agents, and drivers largely belonging to the upper caste. Women did not feel safe to express themselves, and untouchability practices were also persistently experienced.

Perpetrators of Violence

The study highlighted the perpetrators that not only enable such violence but enact this violence on women:

1. **Violence by employers**

Violence against women in agriculture often happens at the hands of their employers or their supervisors. In many cases, these employers have the power to dismiss the women from work, and also not re-hire them. The forms of violence used range from casting aspersions on their character, use of abusive language, and physical violence. "Witch branding" is employed as a tactic to harass the women and drive them away from their land/houses.

2. **Violence by landlords**

Landlords were found to be exploitative, taking advantage of women tenants' financially challenging situations. They would stalk, accost, and extort the women, to the extent that some women reported giving up on wage work despite facing the threat of acute poverty. Women working in a maize field shared that the landowner would try to harass the women, if one of them was left behind alone, after others had left. In a devious way, he would assign some extra work and force a woman worker to stay back alone.

3. **Violence by government and other officials**

Men in positions of power such as money lenders, bank and block office employees, MNREGA functionaries, forest guards, and agents also created unsafe conditions for women. Women reported unwelcome visits by money lenders every time they sold their crops. The pressure to repay the family debt led many women into selling parts of their land and/or jewellery. Their grievances are often dismissed, and their complaints are met with threats of termination from work or non-payment of wages.

4. **Violence by family members**

As elaborated earlier, families enact various forms of violence against women. This can be seen in the form of intimate-partner violence, violence by in-laws, or by the woman's natal family members. Single women, and women from farm-suicide affected households are extremely susceptible to this form of abuse.

As discussed earlier, the perpetrators of violence are often those in positions of power and often belong to higher caste and class groups. Dalit and adivasi women are among the most exploited.



Impact of Violence on Women's Lives

1. **Physical and psychological impact**

Women farmers reported a spectrum of negative emotions due to intensive workplace violence - fear, anger, shame, humiliation, helplessness, guilt, and even confusion. These feelings contribute to them not speaking up, due to fear of being harassed again. Social and occupational repercussions of speaking out, prevent women survivors from reporting such instances, and this further isolates them. Of those who said that they did report, went on to say that they did not receive adequate compensation from the court and suffered significant wage and financial losses due to medical and other expenses. Women who experience violence at their workplace often do not return to that workplace and lose opportunities for more work. The disadvantages of gender gaps in education, skills, and experience base are thus compounded.

2. **Occupational impact/ economic costs**

The study finds that incidents of violence result in denial of access to productive resources and employment opportunities. It also results in women leaving their work and/or workplaces. However, in some cases, women continue to work

as they fear of losing their jobs. Financial insecurity and meeting household needs, then, becomes a precipitating factor for them bearing workplace abuse. Women are also socially barred from employment opportunities if they choose to pursue a case legally. Women experience a decline in their work productivity including on farm work, as a consequence of the stress and mental distress they undergo.

3. **Social impacts**

Sexual violence in the workplace has disrupted their social dynamics and severely impacted women's support systems. Women are unable to confide in their families, especially as their husbands suspect them and this often leads to more violence at home. The women also reported facing further harassment when news of their harassment spreads. They are blamed for the abuse and the social pressure starts mounting against the woman as the guilty party. For widowed women or single women, sexual violence and harassment often becomes a catalyst for rumours, gossip, and blame they face including by their parents, or in-laws, who in turn put pressure on them to continue working at unsafe workplaces.

Redressal Mechanisms

1. **Women devise individual and collective response to everyday violence**

Interviews indicated that women deployed ingenious ways of coping and negotiating their everyday risks – including addressing the day-to-day harassment on sugarcane cutting sites. Given that there exist no formal spaces for their complaints, they rely upon and mobilise their informal networks for protection and support.

2. **Help-Seeking by women at the workplace and barriers to reporting**

This study revealed that while women farmers understood the gravity, scope, and consequences of the workplace violence, there are several factors that contribute to barriers in reporting and seeking help. For instance, women experience shame, fear of not being

believed, and being victim-blamed and so on. The study revealed that these are critical inhibiting factors that influence who women seek help from.

3. **Inadequate police response and lack of awareness of rights**

In the few instances where women did report instances of violence to the police, the official response was highly inadequate. In many cases, employers in the agriculture sector and the authorities do not take actions against the perpetrators or end up protecting them and leaving survivors with no recourse. Women farmers informed that police constables were neither sympathetic to them, used intimidation tactics, including derogatory language about their character, and blamed them for provoking the situation.

Key Recommendations

Given the pervasive nature of violence experienced by women in agriculture, it is imperative that efforts to increase awareness about workplace harassment/violence be undertaken and a demand for safe spaces for all women be highlighted. Encouraging women farmers to organise into groups could enable them to make their demands and create safer spaces. The recommendations also focus on the need for budgets to be allocated by Ministries of Women and Child Development, Rural Development etc. for such awareness raising activities, especially related to the implementation of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Work Place Act (2013). It also recommends that there is need to collect data and further study the nature of violence against women in agriculture using feminist research methodology and locating it within the broader agrarian context. There is need

for gathering disaggregated data to account for women farmers and the several precipitating factors that make some women more vulnerable to abuse than others and this will be an important requirement to building evidence about the form of violence against women in agriculture.

The study has suggestions specifically for village administration, which include mobilizing various village level functionaries and institutions like Anganwadi Workers, Gram Panchayats to be sensitised, trained and equipped to address cases of violence against women, and to offer redressal information to survivors. The newly established Gender Justice Centres by NRLM, Ministry of Rural Development, should be a space for supporting women survivors.

Conclusion

This study outlines the nature, forms, and impacts of everyday harassment on women farmers in the context of the agrarian distress in India. The study reveals that a complex set of factors including arduous working environments including low wages, the nature of insecure migration, marital status of women, their caste locations and hierarchies in society, the lack of access to safe housing for women farmers and migrants, and the dangerous working conditions they face on a daily basis, and their lack of safe working spaces, needs to be addressed centrally.

It highlights the potential for women leaders to amplify each other's voices and create feminist alliances and build peer support. It also underlines the power of feminist research and the value of feminist research methodology.

Finally, even though there are indications of some positive actions, the study flags that implementation of laws and policies to address discrimination and end workplace violence against women is challenging in the context of unorganised and rural work space.



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The study was conceptualised by the members of the Feminist Policy Collective (FPC) and Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM) and supported by Society for Health Alternatives (SAHAJ), Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI), and Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM). The study was done across seven districts of Gujarat, Telangana and Maharashtra in the year 2021. The study team included Seema Kulkarni, S. Ashalatha, Sejal Dand, Swati Satpute and Arjita Mittal.

The detailed report of the study could be found <https://makaam.in/fpc-makaam-study-report/>