

With a Little Help : Young women farmer experiences in India

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Keywords: young women farmers, youth, agriculture, farming, gender, India

JEL Code: Q19; J13; J16

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1. Introduction

In spite of their significant role of agriculture in India, women lack recognition as farmers, and face structural barriers related to land ownership, access to resources and markets, and mobility, which are associated with high levels of gender discrimination and gender-based violence. There exists a substantial body of work in India focused on women farmers in India; yet the generational aspects of women farmers in India remains under-researched. Young women farmers (YWF) are a distinct analytical and empirical category who merit attention, not the least because a majority of women farmers in India belong to the age group 18-45 years (Narayanan and Srinivasan, 2020). Young women farmers' experiences tend to get lost between the two categories of rural youth and women. This paper, a part of a larger study on young farmers' pathways into farming, is motivated by the urgent need to know who young women farmers are, what their (farming) experiences are, and the opportunities and challenges they face within broader socio-cultural and economic contexts.³ In this paper, we present four case studies of young women farmers, two each from Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh. The two states offer significant contrasts in terms of the role of agriculture in the larger economy and systematic differences in socio-demographic characteristics and levels of economic growth.⁴ While our study sample is not representative of young women farmers more generally, we chose these four case studies to showcase the details of the experiences of young women in how they become farmers, what they do as farmers, and why they would like to continue farming. These four case studies were chosen from the 22 women farmers we interviewed in the two states. The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we present the methods used and the profile of women farmers we interviewed. In Section 3, we present the two cases from Tamil Nadu, Shanthi and Parvathi, while in Section 4, we present two case studies from Madhya Pradesh, Suman and Kamla. In Section 5, we discuss our learnings from these four cases, drawing on our interviews to illustrate some of the key findings, to conclude our discussion.

³ This paper is part of a larger four-country study of young farmers' experiences, titled *Becoming a Young Farmer*, and complements Narayanan and Srinivasan (2020) that offers a situation analysis of young women farmers in India.

⁴ For more on the choice of these states, see Vijayabaskar et al (mimeo).

2. Methods

In the villages we visited in both states, when we asked for names of young farmers, women were not mentioned. This was the case even when we interacted with women who were active in farming. We therefore sought women between 18 and 46 years of age who were currently active in farming but not as wage labourers. Consistent with the literature, most of these young women in farming do not own land but have access to land to farm independently or with someone else (husband or other family members). We relied on our contacts to help identify young women who were part of family farms and contributed substantial labour to the family farm. In MP, we reached out to members of women's Self-Help Groups and constructed a list of young women farmers in the village—those who worked predominantly in farming even if they did not own or manage the farm themselves. In addition to young women farmers, we also interviewed older women farmers, young (and older) male farmers as well as women and men not involved in farming.

While the two states represent large ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences, agriculture is an important sector in both states; both are major producers of several commodities in India. While in Tamil Nadu, agriculture's contribution to the State Domestic Product has declined rapidly replaced by a vibrant non-farm economy, in Madhya Pradesh, agriculture continues to be the engine of economic growth with high rates of growth for over a decade. The social contexts within which women undertake farming in Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu can broadly be characterized as belonging to the North-South socio-cultural and demographic regimes discussed earlier, with women in Tamil Nadu experiencing relatively higher autonomy, mobility, well-being and status compared to their counterparts in Madhya Pradesh. Also, Madhya Pradesh contains a large tribal population and gender norms within tribal communities tends to be more egalitarian.

In Madhya Pradesh, the young women farmers we interviewed came from over 10 villages across two districts Chhindwara, which is predominantly tribal and where cultivation of wheat and gram dominates, and Sehore, where soyabean, a cash crop, is the more popular crop grown. In Tamil Nadu, we focused on two districts—Erode and Thiruvannamalai. Erode and the rest of

western Tamil Nadu or what is referred to as Kongunadu, has been the centre of green revolution in the state as well as a region that has diversified extensively based on investments of agrarian surplus into industry and services. The region also has relatively higher farm holdings compared to the rest of the state especially among the Kongu Vellalas, the numerically dominant caste in agriculture. Thiruvannamalai and other districts bordering Chennai too have a strong agricultural economy traditionally based on tank irrigation and paddy cultivation. Urban expansion and poor tank management has eroded this economy in parts, but at the same time expansion of urban demand has also led to a growing market for horticulture which has led to agricultural diversification and intensification on the periphery. In each of these districts our respondents were drawn from across 10 villages.

Despite the vastly different contexts of the two states, the profiles of our YWF respondents are quite similar. On average the women started farming as adolescent girls and started farming independently in their early 20s. Almost all our respondents except one, were married, again reflective of a larger pattern in which women are married off young and become part of their husbands' family farm. Our sample in Tamil Nadu is less educated than in Madhya Pradesh. A look at the female education attainment in the two states reveals that female literacy for TN is 73.44% and that for MP is 59.24% (Census 2011). Also, educational attainment for women in TN is higher than for women in MP and the availability of off-farm opportunities are better for women in TN, especially if they have done some schooling. In fact, it was hard to find single young women in farming given that women were either studying or working off-farming. Women who thus remain in or are entering farming seem to have low education levels. Another striking difference between the two groups is that whereas in Tamil Nadu, the respondents report that their primary income is from farming, in Madhya Pradesh, although the women spend most of the time farming, fewer report that it is their primary income source. Beyond this characterization of our young women farmer respondents, there is significant diversity in their individual circumstances. We draw on all their interviews but focus on four of them to highlight lived experiences as young women farmers.

Table 3: A profile of young women farmers interviewed in India

	Tamil Nadu	Madhya Pradesh	India
Number of Female Farmers interviewed	11	11	22
Female Farmers	11	11	22
Age Started Farming	16	13	14
Age Farming Independently	24	22	22
Mean Age	38	37	37
% Under 35	45%	45%	45%
% Married	100%	82%	91%
% With >12 Years Education	0%	9%	5%
% Working Full-Time	100%	100%	100%
% Full-time, Primary Income Farming	91%	64%	77%
% Full-time, Primary Income - Animal Farmer	9%	0%	5%
% Full-time Primary Income - Plant Farmer	82%	64%	73%
% Full-time, Primary Income - Farmer, Not Specified	0%	0%	0%
% Full-time, Primary Income - Not Farming	9%	36%	23%
% Farmers reporting that a family member in the household has title to land	82%	91%	86%
Average Acres Owned	1.56	12.99	7.84
% Farmers that have Inherited Land	64%	91%	77%
Average Acres Inherited	1.71	7.72	5.39
% Farmers Likely to Inherit Land	27%	27%	27%
Average Acres Likely to be Inherited	1.67	1.26	1.36
% Farmers Renting in Land	9%	0%	5%
Average Acres Rented In	2.00	0.00	0.20
% Farmers Sharing Land	9%	73%	41%
Average Acres Shared	7.00	3.84	4.11
% With Access to Community Land	0%	0%	0%
Average of Community Land			

We present four case studies of young women farmers (YWF), two each from Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh. This set of case studies offer an in-depth view into how young women become farmers, their experiences as farmers and the challenges they face. They highlight similarities but also differences across the respondents. The concluding section draws implications from the four case studies to reflect on experiences of other YWF in this study but also what they illustrate of young women farmers' experiences more broadly.

3. Tamil Nadu

Shanti⁵

Shanti is getting ready one early morning to get to her coconut grove of 1.5 acres. She has hired a person who has offered the best price to pluck the coconuts and buy them. This time the hire picks 900 coconuts. If there were no water shortage, she would have got 1000 coconuts. She usually keeps about 30 coconuts for her own use. She keeps track of the trees that have few coconuts and doesn't let him climb those as it costs Rs.15 to climb each tree. These few coconuts eventually fall by themselves which are for her own use. Shanti always gets someone who offers the best price for the coconuts unlike her father-in-law who always gave it to the same person even if the price he got was less. This she has to do, to make sure she gets a good price each time.

The coconut grove needs regular supply of water, and every six months they need fertiliser. Shanti buys fertiliser from a local store. With the shortage of water in the last 2 years, the yield has dropped considerably. But she will continue to nurture the coconut trees so she can get a regular income and live off it. The coconut grove is not labour demanding.

Shanti is 36 years old and belongs to the landowning caste, Kongu Vellala (KV) Gounders. She lives with her husband and daughter. Her husband suffers from severe physical and mental disabilities and cannot help her with farm or household work. They have a daughter who is 19 years old and attends university. Shanti is keen to give her daughter a good education and marry

⁵ Actual names are not used for the four cases of young women farmers.

her into a good family. She is determined that her daughter should have a better life than her. Shanti lost her father when she was 10 years old. Her natal family did not own much land. When one of the largest landowning families sought her hand in marriage for their son, her mother and maternal uncles decided this was in her best interest even though the husband had severe disabilities. She was married off when she was 16; she had no say in it at all. She was very young and didn't know what to expect. Post-marriage, she lived in the same village as her natal family, with her husband and in-laws. Her daughter was born after two years of marriage.

Until her father-in-law's death, Shanti worked with him on his land. After his death, her husband's share of nine acres is entirely her responsibility. Five acres come from her mother-in-law's side and is jointly in her name and her husband's. The remaining four acres (out of the total 10.5 acres from her father-in-law) is in the name of her husband alone. Since she finds it difficult to manage all the land, she leases out five acres. Of the remaining four acres, 1.5 acres is the coconut grove, two acres for sugarcane, the last 0.5 acre was all rocks which she has now got cleared and is ready for farming. She paid nearly rupees three lakhs to prepare the land. Due to the drought like situation in the last two years, she has not cultivated sugarcane, as it is a water-intensive crop.

Shanti got 0.75 acre of land from her father. Her father had two wives and she is the only daughter with two older stepbrothers. Initially her brothers didn't talk to her but now they do. She sold her share of the land to them and shared the money with her mother who works as an agricultural labourer.

Growing up, Shanti did not engage in farming at all even though her father owned land and her mother has done some farming.

It was when my daughter was born. My father-in-law decided to teach me all about farming. He got me ready to be a farmer on my own and he did let me become one after I turned 23.... I am married into a farming family, so I had to take up farming not out of my own will but out of necessity. Given the hard work and not knowing what to do, I didn't like it at first but have a liking for it now.

Shanti realizes the value of owning land; almost every KV family owns land. If someone here didn't own land, they lease it in (*kuthagai*). It takes a year for sugarcane, three months for corn, and three months for sesame seeds.

Leasing out of land is almost entirely based on trust; landowners would lease out only to people they know well. A written agreement is not common. Now a days, leasing out is for a maximum of three years, after which period the land is leased out to a different person. This, Shanti explained was due to the law (land to the tiller) that entitles a person who has cultivated the same land for 10 years or more to own the land.⁶

Shanti has undergone teacher training, and she would like to teach classes five or six at a private school. The salary would be about Rs. 5000-6000 a month. It's not a big amount but she would have loved to teach. "With my teacher's salary, I would have to spend on the bus fare and work for somebody. I wanted to work on my own land instead, I don't have to be afraid of anyone in my own land, "*nane raja, nane manthiri (I'll be king and counsel)*". This in her view is the best thing in having decided to farm on her own.

The income from farming was okay until two years ago. It was good enough to put food on their plate and for her daughter's education. With the water shortage, Shanti had to get a bank loan using five acres of land as collateral to run the household.

I have nine acres of land, it's worth a lot of money, but there is no cash in hand. It feels like I have so much butter in my hand but can't eat it all.

She also recalls her father-in-law giving away some land to the government to build a road between his land. With not enough extra earnings from farming, she is not able to repair her own home which was built 100 years ago on 15 cent land and is in dire need of repairs. She now lives

⁶ This is however a perception among landowners because of the enormous costs involved in eviction of tenants. In Tamil Nadu, though there was an effort to pass such a law in the 1970s, but it did not get Presidential assent. However, the laws for eviction are hard to enforce and this has led to fear that leasing out to unknown persons may pose problems.

in a rented place. People around her always think she has a lot of land and that she is doing well but they don't understand that everything needs money to maintain.

At 36, Shanti is a young farmer; the women farmers in her area are older than her. Most of the younger women are married and have children; some unmarried women work in the land, but as wage labourers. Women in her age group typically do not farm on their own. Most of the agricultural labourers are much older. Men get paid Rs. 400 and women get paid Rs. 200 as daily wages.

When she started farming by herself, there were relatives and other people in the surrounding area who wondered if she could farm and if she did, would she be able to outperform them. If she does well, they get jealous. Shanti doesn't let these things bother her.

Shanti feels any person who works on the farm is a farmer, be it a man or woman. Lot of people have land and treat it as a business and don't get in and work. They are farmers. She feels that people who don't own land but work in the fields should be called farmers. Lot of women work in their husbands' farms even if they don't own them. It's only correct that their wives are also called farmers.

As a woman, she doesn't feel inferior to male farmers.

I think it's all in the effort you put in, and the produce we get. I am educated, I can ask people for advice and get help to get my work done.

Once when she cultivated sugarcane in two acres, she sold the harvest to a local factory. It usually took three months to get paid. Swallowing her pride, she requested the factory to be paid soon considering her circumstances and they did. If she does not know something, she asks a few people around.

When she needs farming advice, she asks people she knows the same question and decides on the best information that suits her farmland. She does not watch any TV shows on agriculture.

She does watch Youtube shows to learn about organic farming that she is interested in trying in the future.

She is on a Whatsapp group on her phone with her stepbrothers and she talks to them when in doubt. But she does not have anyone to physically help her in the farm.

Shanti has not met anyone or attended any training programme from the agriculture department. She did go and meet someone once to get a subsidy for drip irrigation, which she has not implemented yet due to water shortage. A lot of people in her area are interested in drip irrigation and some have installed it but it is not of much use in light of the water scarcity. If she had this installed and it worked, it would save her a lot of time going back and forth to the fields to water twice a day, for about an hour in the morning and evening. She usually rides on her two-wheeler to get to the farm.

Shanti says she is not part of any *vivasaya kuzhu* (farmers' group) as this is aimed at farmers who have 3-5 acres of land. What she did not mention is that these groups consist mostly of male farmers.⁷

There are loans available for farmers. In her view, it's good to understand how it works. Farmers get an interest-free agricultural loan for 13 months. She pays it off at the end of the term and gets another 13 months loan after a week. If she doesn't pay it off, the interest is charged from the very next day. She makes sure she keeps track of her 13 month loan period.

Shanti is a lone woman farmer. When she got married, she knew her husband was incapacitated. From what she was told, her husband was not so modern and she assumed he probably could still take care of the land. When she moved into the marital home, she soon realized, her husband could do nothing.

⁷ This was evident in a farmers' group we met during fieldwork. We did not explicitly request to meet young women farmers. It was an all male farmers group that we interacted with.

I was so scared and felt very bad for myself. It was my father-in-law who made me a farmer and guided me till he was alive. My mother comes and helps me in the farm whenever she can.

Sometimes, Shanti finds it difficult to find good help from labourers as they ask for a lot of money, a common grievance among farmers. She also gets people from her stepbrother's farm to work for her. She doesn't find it difficult managing them.

I am nice to them, treat them with respect, give them coffee and snacks. I also let them rest a bit in between their work. When my mom comes, she also rests, so it's only fair that I do the same with all labourers as most of them are elderly. When I do this, they are certain to come back and work for me.

Shanti takes all key decisions related to farming and the household, after going through the pros and cons. Sometimes her husband remembers things well and at other times he acts like a three-year old. He cannot work as he does not have the capacity or knowledge. In that scenario, she has to take care of everything, attend to farming, talk to someone, attend festivals and events be it a wedding or a death ceremony, which often are undertaken by male members of the household.

I have to take the initiative and arrange for my daughter's wedding too. I have to represent myself and my husband in everything, good and bad.

Shanti articulated a few disadvantages that she experiences as a female farmer. If she needs something right away, she cannot ride a 2-wheeler in the night. She also cannot take a man on her 2-wheeler to ride with her, for example she cannot offer a ride to a male labourer from her stepbrother's farm to bring him to work on her land. And at night, a lot more preparation goes into going to the farm to turn off the water.

I am very scared to go in the night, I leave the motor room light on, remove all my jewellery... I am nearly in tears to leave home in the dark of the night, I am in constant fear.

Shanti also explained that everyone knew that her husband was incapacitated and that she managed all matters by herself. Many were sympathetic and helpful. When she goes to the market which is an all-male space, she is often helped by some of the men there. When she approaches a man to help her or takes a man's help, sometimes they try to take advantage of her by making sexual advances or seeking sexual favours. This reveals that these seemingly mundane activities are shaped by gender norms which affects the work of running a farm for her as a woman farmer.

Shanti cannot go to work or do any other business; she has only her land to work with to turn things around and live a good life. Recently she has spent rupees 1.5 lakhs to prepare one acre of rocky land to be fit for farming. She plans to sell this piece of land which she hopes would fetch about rupees 50 lakhs. A few years ago, this would have been worth rupees one crore, but she was not willing to sell then. She is now planning for her daughter's wedding. She plans to buy a new house worth rupees 30 lakhs as well as jewelery. She would also like to gift a car worth about rupees 10 lakhs to her daughter. She does not wish her daughter to suffer like she did, and would like her daughter to be married well. Her daughter being their only child will inherit all their land.

My daughter doesn't know farming now as she is focusing on graduating her BSc. She is most welcome to get into farming with her husband if she wishes. It's not a bad occupation once everything is in place. It is calming to look at the greenery in one's own land.

Once my daughter is married, I want to start organic farming in a small way for my personal satisfaction, not for money. I want to grow fruit trees in two acres, and teak in another acre. I would like to cultivate a lot of organic vegetables to market them.

Shanti's hope is that farmers will earn better from their produce with much needed government support. Currently it is the middlemen who are making the most profit from farmers' harvest. She feels there's a change coming as the government is asking farmers not to sell their land.

A part of Shanti still wants to pursue becoming a teacher for which she has already trained. She needs to pass an exam to become a government school teacher. The age of retirement for women is 58 years so she hopes to be able to teach for at least 10 years. If this were to happen, she would lease out their land (*kuthagai*).

Will Shanti become a full-time farmer growing organic vegetables, fruits, and teak and tending to her coconut farm that's been there throughout her married life? All this will depend on nature, the benefits government has to offer, and the price consumers are willing to pay for farmers' produce for their hard work.

Parvathi

I fondly remember pulling out weeds with my two brothers from the fields when I was young. I was interested in farming but my parents didn't let me put my feet on the soil. I lived like a queen.

Parvathi is 40 years old and belongs to a middle class Kongu Vellala family. In many ways her family is typical of the KV community— the family owns land and also has a secure non-farm income. She lives with her husband, adjacent to her mother's house.

She recalls that when she was young, her dad cared only about her, not his sons. He didn't even talk to them. He wanted her to study, but Parvathi was not keen; she used to think, “we have so much land why bother to study”. Those were the days when only half the girl population went to school. Now, how did this girl who enjoyed life being pampered by her dad, become a full-time farmer?

Parvathi was married when she was 15 years old. She was happy with her married life, had two children. Her husband holds MSc and MEd degrees, and worked as a teacher. When she was 25 years old, her second child (son) was in kindergarten and they lived in a rental house. The house owners were a bank manager and his wife Mala, who was a farmer.

Mala, was very active with domestic chores, took care of her kids and husband, and was a fulltime farmer. At 40 years, she worked much harder than most men. After her morning chores at home, she was ready to farm at 7:00am. Mala became very interested in farming and credits Mala for making her a fulltime farmer. Mala used to say to her,

You are born into a farming family, your husband has land, you should learn to farm on your own; it gives a lot of satisfaction, you will have money of your own.

It was around this time that Parvathi lost her maternal grandfather, who took care of all the farming for his daughter, her mother, an only child. Her dad was into bad habits and did not take care of any farming. Her mother felt that her two sons should study and not depend on farming or get negatively influenced by their father. Both brothers are married and live in cities. One of her brothers is a college professor and another works in the software industry.

Parvathi decided to step out of the comfort of her house and help her mother with farming, being inspired by Mala. She said with pride,

I wanted to help my mother like a son would. This was in 1997-1998, my brothers were studying in the city. I learnt to ride a two-wheeler.

She started farming when she was 25 years old, and in 1999, when Parvathi was 27 years, started fulltime farming on her own, one that didn't happen so easily. Her father-in-law leased out the five acres of land that was rightfully her husband's. They then bought three more acres with her husband's earnings. She had to fight with her father-in-law to take care of these three acres on her own. It was doubted if she could manage on her own. The first year he took care and since then she has been cultivating.

Parvathi has tried different crops—banana, paddy, sugarcane, turmeric and tapioca. She says all farmers in the area cultivated paddy, sugarcane and tapioca for over 20 years. Over the last 10 years, banana has picked up. For paddy earlier they used to rely on canal irrigation. Water supply came to a standstill with the drought, following which many farmers including herself suffered a

loss in paddy cultivation. This led to her trying banana. She tried banana for a year and figured it was cost effective. She asked her neighbors who cultivate banana for advice, as well as the agriculture department.

She manages the farm all by herself—decides what to cultivate, hires labor, buys all fertilizers, manure, and keeps track of planting, watering, harvesting and marketing.

When she was young, she remembers, people used to cultivate mainly cotton and turmeric. They are labor intensive. But most farmers are giving up these crops due to the work involved, shortage of labor, and costs involved. Other crops are relatively easier.

The only organic farming Parvathi does now is with the paddy she grows in half an acre of land that they use for the household. For all other crops she uses fertilizers. Most farmers are able to manage only when they use fertilizers. Yield is more—half of the yield helps take care of the farm, and the other half is good to help them survive. Her brother's friend undertakes organic farming on two acres of land. Production is less compared to when fertilizers are used. She explained that,

If one person decides to convert to organic farming, it's not enough. All farmers in the area should work towards it. If I decide to go organic and the neighbor uses fertilizers in their land, some of it gets washed on to my land. This I feel is not 100 percent organic. Everyone should have the resources and the time to convert to organic farming. It takes about three years for the entire land to become totally organic after all the effects from the fertilizers are washed away. About 50-60 percent of people here are aware of organic farming. They all hesitate to switch as the yield is not enough for survival.

Parvathi learnt to farm from her mother and father-in-law. She asks her neighbors and friends and also people from the agriculture department. Some share this information willingly, others don't. She is very eager to share information when someone asks her. She is especially keen to help other women farmers, she visits their fields, takes them to the agriculture staff she knows to find a solution when she cannot suggest one. Several other women farmers in this village spoke about Parvathi's support in helping them deal with family members' resistance to their farming,

providing knowledge and skills, and accompanying them to the market or to the agriculture department.

She does not watch Youtube, but reads *pasumai vikadan*, a Tamil magazine on matters related to agriculture. She thinks that most of the (success) stories reported in the magazine is not true. She believes, nothing like talking to a farmer in person, understanding how it works for them, the costs involved, the hardships they go through, and what really works for them.

She recalls the farming her maternal grandfather and her mother engaged in,

My *thatha* (grandfather) did not use any medicine [fertilizer] for his crops, he used only dung from cows and goats that he owned. There were two permanent employees who worked on the land. The two months when they did not have work on the farm, they went around and collected leaves of native plants (*erukkai elai, kolunji*) and stored them with organic waste. They also collected the leaves and fruits that fell from the neem trees and used all this while preparing the fields for paddy cultivation. These days we don't have anyone to do all that.

Parvathi is very determined to harvest at least a kilogram more than other farmers. For this to happen, she strictly follows watering and manure schedule. She also explains that banana has to be cut at the right time, otherwise they ripen and it is difficult to sell.

She also makes sure she sells her produce to the five people that she has been dealing with over a long period of time. The one with the best price gets to take the farm produce. They have to use her measuring scale. And she also allows her neighbor farmers to use her scale to buy or sell their produce. She decided to do this because she had heard a lot of stories of middlemen cheated farmers by using faulty scale. This is remarkable as not all farmers, let alone a woman farmer, can stand their ground with the middlemen.

Parvathi says she can bargain for a better price only if she has a produce that other farmers don't have. If every farmer has the same produce, it's a big drawback.

Parvathi prides in going to the auction all by herself,

My inspiration for farming came from Parvathi. I have made myself very confident, if I feel that way, people stand aside and let me do my business in *yelam* (auction). I don't feel shy like most women do. Earlier I took my dad and my husband, now I go on my own. I always ride a vehicle, I can take 100 kgs like men do by myself in the vehicle.

At the auction, price for the produce and cows are determined in certain ways. For cows, they touch the fingers and say the price. For banana, she says if the buyer raises his eyebrows, the price is less, if he opens and closes his eyes, then they will take the banana. In a government tender, to get the price she wants, she has to pay six percent commission. Once they put their produce down, they are also charged for loading and offloading, so in all she pays seven percent which she says is a big loss for her.

Parvathi says that if nature cooperates, they don't get a good price for their produce; if there is a good price, they don't have enough water to get a good harvest. She feels that if a farmer can decide the price, agriculture will be an ideal occupation, they don't have to depend on anybody for benefits. But right now, for small farmers, if they are totally dependent on farming, even eating becomes difficult. She says people in farming treat their crop like babies, treat them like they have life, and don't mind the hardships they go through, but not getting enough money back is hurting.

The real benefit she says is for the big farmers who own 100- 200 acres. Small farmers like her have to bribe even to get a farmer card. According to Parvathi there are no big farmers in her area; the largest land owned by a single family is 15 acres.

Parvathi strongly feels that the government should do more to help farmers. They have to get us a good price for our harvest. They should make sure that government officials and staff don't take bribes from farmers. We don't need any assistance from the government, but if they help and do everything fairly, existing farmers can have a better life and more farmers or new, younger farmers will choose agriculture as their main occupation.

There's shortage of power, government can help us get solar power. Free power is given to industries, agriculture is as important. She says, one can live without those industries but not without food from agriculture.

Parvathi assures that women farmers are eager to farm even if they don't own land. But they are neither given the freedom nor allowed to take any important decision pertaining to what and how crops should be cultivated.

If men farm on their own and loose, it is okay, but if a woman loses, you would hear, "I knew this would happen", from her own family members. Men are dominant, so society thinks, a man can be anyway, but if a woman is bad, she cannot bring up her family.

She says, women should be encouraged, motivated and given confidence and not put down; for a woman farmer to flourish, the entire household has to co-operate.

The 10 acres of land her mother owns will go to her two brothers. Her mother gave her some land to build her own home which is in Parvathi's name. The house is now worth 60 lakhs. She does not have any farmland in her name. She farms eight acres of land which is in her husband's name.

Parvathi is aware that there is a law that says land has to be shared equally between a daughter and son. But she loves her brothers and does not want to demand her share of land. Her mother in an interview explained that as a woman who owns land she cannot deprive her daughter of her share but she also has to think of her sons. "I am obliged to give my sons their share of land but I definitely want to give my daughter some land...."

As far as her children are concerned, Parvathi explained that 60 percent of her husband's land would go to their daughter and 40 percent to the son even though her daughter is not interested in farming at present because she feels girls always care and show more affection to parents. But it becomes difficult if they don't get the right life partner.

She says girls have to be made independent, they should not suffer due to lack of finance. She has married her daughter to a farming family who own 10 acres. She intends to buy three acres of land for her daughter.

In the coming years, Parvathi would like to lease in more land, but can't find any nearby. Ten families live off her land. She supports Palanichamy's son, for his education, clothes. Palanichamy, a Scheduled Caste labourer stays on the land. She also pays his son when he works in the farm. She hopes to be able to support more families if she could lease in more land.

Parvathi would like her son to get into farming and he has shown some interest. If he gets married to a girl who is not interested, then it's his choice. She's keen on bringing her husband as well into farming. He used to go to the farm when he was young but moved to teaching. He then leased out his land. Her husband recently retired as a government school headmaster and earns a good pension. She wants him to start helping her in farming soon. This would be very helpful for Parvathi as there's a lot of work involved in full-time farming.

Besides encouraging other women to take up farming, Parvathi has slowly brought one of her brothers into farming. She has helped him lease in two acres of land and he's managing it now, albeit on a part time basis.

4. Madhya Pradesh

Suman Parteti

Suman is a new farmer. There are not many in the village who share her trajectory. Even though her parents had a small patch of land, less than an acre, it barely supported the family and her parents did not farm. She married into a family that had 11.5 acres of land. Her in-laws too however did not farm much due to water constraints and because the undulating fields made for poor yields. Suman, like others in her marital household, used to migrate often for work, just as she had done in her parental home before marriage. In fact, much of her early life involved

migrating for work. Suman never went to school as a child and because her parents were very poor, she was forced to work to bring in some money. In her words

My parents ... migrated a lot and farmed a little...my cousins wanted to take me to school with them and I did go for a day but the very next day my father took me to work. I started working as a maid for different houses for some years. I discontinued after I got married. Such was the situation in my parents' house that all three of us (sisters) could not study. Even when I got married, I migrated frequently and worked long hours as hired labour in cities.

Suman says that her parents were not educated enough to realise the importance of educating her and they regret it now...

It would have helped me in taking decisions in life; maybe I could have become an *anganwadi* (nutrition) worker. But nothing can be done now.

Farming was not what Suman aspired for when she was younger. Suman was married at the age of 15, not uncommon in her community, and she continued to migrate for work periodically, earning Rupees 150-200 (USD 2-3) per day. However, after her son was born, about two years after her marriage, she preferred looking for work in the village. At this time, she became a Panchayat member (village administrative committee) for a five-year term. This proved to be a turning point for Suman. Farming, she says, was mostly her decision. Although her husband's parents used to do a bit of farming, the main initiative to become a farmer came when she was part of the Panchayat. Other Panchayat members suggested to her that since her in-laws' land was near a stream, a well on the farm might provide a reliable supply of water. Suman then took advantage of a state government scheme called *Kapildhara*, under the MGNREGA, to construct a well.⁸ People then suggested she sow maize and wheat, now that the farm had access to water. Suman worked as a hired labourer for a while and saved enough to install a motor for the well. She also started putting away money as savings by joining a savings and thrift group called the

⁸ Kapildhara is a state government programme to support the construction of wells on lands owned by the Scheduled Castes/Tribes and marginal farmers. The labour for the construction came out of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a workfare programme that entitled each rural household 100 days of unskilled manual work and prescribed wages, based on work done.

Parath Mahila Samuh in the village. At that time, she did not really get much information from the State agriculture department and in the first season mainly learned from her peers. “That is when” says Suman “I started farming and stopped migrating.”

Suman says that she learnt the basics of farming slowly over time and was fortunate to have found support from a large foundation (established as part of a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative). The foundation, active in that part of Chhindwara, was forthcoming with technical information about farming. After acquiring basic farming skills, Suman sought to diversify into other crops and also try out new techniques. She started growing vegetables. Until a few years ago maize, millets and rice were the major crops in the village. Then they shifted to soybean since its yield was high. In the past couple of years, as the soybean yield has decreased, there has been an increase in millet and maize production. But these crops too depend on rainfall. She adds that the farmers keep changing the crop based on the prices that they get in the market. In general, she markets the crop along with her husband in a nearby town, selling mainly to traders based there. Her experiments as a farmer have had mixed results. Though she started with organic farming, she decided to use chemicals, seeing others in the village use them. The results were disappointing. She feels that the chemical fertilisers that are commonly used affect the soil quality and crop yield negatively but also decrease the immunity of people consuming that produce in the long run. “We require more of it every time now and more labour to take care of the land”, she says. Now with the help of the Foundation, the farmers in the village have begun vermicomposting in their fields and many use fewer chemical inputs than before.

She says that the corporate foundation also made an effort to start beekeeping and dairy farming in the village but that did not continue, according to her, because of a lack of response on the part of villagers. Efforts made by *Parath Mahila Samuh* too to start poultry farming have failed to bear results since the farmers are not really forthcoming. Consequently those like her who are more enterprising lose out on opportunities.

She adds that the help and support advanced by such organizations have been crucial given that the agriculture department officials hardly ever come by. Farmers like her go to the staff of these organizations in case they need any help or information. They also have training sessions for

vermicomposting and for the construction of retaining walls. Some farmers in the village also learnt land levelling and have benefitted from it.

Today, they are a family of seven –her in-laws, husband, two sons (19 and 13 years) and a daughter (16 years). “We take our decisions together as family” says Suman. “My husband takes my opinion into account for everything, be it farming, food ... anything.” Her parents-in-law help her out in housework and farming when she is away on errands or meetings. Her own parents’ response to her efforts as a farmer has also evolved. Suman says “I am more industrious and enterprising than my siblings and my parents realise that now - now that they can see that things are changing.” She adds that her parents also regret not sending her to school since they now believe in her capability. They rely on her for support and advice for many matters in their own life. “What I have realised is that it’s essential to be educated, not only for better work opportunities but also for better marriage prospects. So we made sure that we educated our kids.”

According to her, a successful farmer is one who has all the means like machines, water sources, knowledge about technology and of course, sufficient income only through farming. There should be no need to migrate to make ends meet. She adds that someone who has a small farm does not really count as a farmer. Someone with 15-20 acres of land and produce is a successful farmer.

Despite her transition to being a farmer, the odds are still stacked against her – coming as much from her identity as a young woman farmer – as from the larger challenges for agriculture in the region. Things are not easy, she says. It is very difficult to get hired labour in the village because people prefer to migrate to cities where they are paid a higher wage. Farmers like Suman can’t afford to pay as much and the family therefore end up doing all the work themselves. She says “One day’s worth of work takes two days to complete but there is no way out.”

Suman recently took a loan from the group (*Parath Mahila Samuh*) and opened a tea-stall. My husband works there while I take care of the land and migrate for work if I get some time. I have joined another group started by the Foundation which has 10 women members currently. She says that while such groups incentivise them to save, she still refrains from borrowing because of fear of default. They want to buy a tractor but she feels that it would be risky to take a loan given

their financial condition. In case of emergency, she borrows from the *Parath Mahila Samuh* which charges 2 per cent interest otherwise she has to go to local money lenders who charge 5 per cent. The agriculture department provides 50 per cent subsidy to farmers for farming equipment. She says she has been planning to get fencing done in her fields and also buy pipes but even with a 50 per cent subsidy, it would require Rupees 25000, which she cannot afford at the moment.

Suman does not own the land that she farms and it is still in the name of her father-in-law whose father bought the land. However, she and her husband have recently bought 5 acres of land in her name, renting out 3 acres of their land in order to pay for the registration of the land. This has provided the basis of her efforts to be a successful farmer. There is not much land that she can inherit from her own parents, nor from her marital household. Even if she could, norms of inheritance are not particularly supportive of women gaining access to land. Suman says: “Women do have a claim to their father’s land legally but most choose to give up their share for their brothers. Women who insist on their share are generally ostracized from the family.” She explains: women lay claim to parental land only if their parents and brothers are willing to share. Otherwise the tendency is to give their share to the brothers to avoid creating discord in the family. The parents believe that the woman has land in her marital home and hence she does not need to take her inheritance from whatever little land the parents have. But it’s a different thing if you are buying or selling the land within family, she adds. That is fine. She explains that people from outside the village buy land from the farmers at lucrative rates. In general, she adds, most people prefer to work on their own farms rather than rent it as people in the village have a tendency to go back on the contract they decided on since these contracts are based on trust and not legally enforceable.

She believes that there is a need to improve the social cohesion in the village. There is also a need to educate the children in the village. However, the biggest problem for farming according to her is water scarcity. These are the challenges faced by farmers in her village at large.

Kamla Ukey

Kamla Ukey's story is a contrast to Suman Parteti's. Kamla faces most of the constraints that other young women farmers such as Suman typically face; in addition, Kamla also farms in a context that is highly resource-constrained and where there is little by way of support to farmers, especially to those who are not part of dominant social networks within the village. This is her story.

Kamla is a 25-year old woman farmer from an *adivasi* community. She can't recall exactly when she started farming but says she was probably just 8 or 9 years old. Her entry into farming was a matter of course. The youngest of three siblings, her parents were poor with just an acre of poor quality land and they migrated frequently to find work. They were reluctant to send Kamla, to a distant residential school, the only available facility at that time. Consequently, Kamla never went to school. She started helping her parents with farm work, learning the tasks by observing others who farmed, and accompanied her parents when they migrated for work. Even as a child she was involved in many farming operations – assisting with tilling, sowing, and harvesting. When a new road was built connecting a nearby town, opportunities in the village expanded. Her parents stopped migrating and started farming full time, finding work within the village when required. As a child, she dreamt of becoming a doctor and still rues that she could not study.

Her two older brothers – she can't recall how much older they are to her – did study, but they dropped out after completing primary and secondary school respectively and started working as drivers in Panduna, a nearby town, where they settled. Their departure left her with the responsibility of taking care of her parents and also of the little cultivable land that they own – a farmer on her parents' land.

Kamla got married two years ago, aged 23, and relocated to a village a few hours away to live with her husband and his family. Her husband lives with his parents, a married older brother, a younger brother and sister, the youngest of whom is around 22 years. Her husband's family owns a 4.5 acre-farm and the family farms this land jointly. She and her husband farm one part of the

family plot and are involved with the operations for the entire 4.5 acres farm. However, since most of her husband's family migrate for work, the responsibility of the farm rests mainly with her and her husband. She is now a farmer twice over.

She finds it challenging to divide her time between the two households (her natal and marital) and two tasks – farming and domestic and care work. In general, she spends a week at her marital home and 15-20 days in her natal home. Sometimes on these visits, she takes the two bullocks her husband's family owns to her parents' farm to work the field and brings them back. Kamla says her husband is very supportive. He visits her parents intermittently to help with the farm. In contrast, her brothers offer no support, monetarily or otherwise.

Although Kamla identifies herself as a farmer, she and her husband continue to rely on migration. She has migrated about eight times in the past two years and each visit has been at least a weeklong. She earns about 200 rupees per day for work like construction of linter roof. She spends around Rs.1000-1200 rupees per week on food while she stays in the city and the rest, she saves for two households – her husband's and her parents'. She adds that most farmers her age have to look for some off-farm activities to make ends meet.

Kamla shares many constraints that other young women farmers face. For example, in her narrative, she never refers to the two farms she works on as hers; indeed they are not hers. Although her brothers left farming and she farms her parental land, there is little chance that she would inherit that land. The land is still in her father's name. When the time comes – and there has been no explicit discussion on when, there usually isn't such a conversation within the family—the land is divided equally among the siblings, but the sisters generally give up their share of land to the brothers. Kamla adds that daughters can keep the land depending on their situation but adds that they don't. She says what women farmers here commonly say. “The brothers help out in kind or cash if the sisters are in need of help.” In her marital home, the land belongs to her father-in-law and will be divided among the three brothers upon his passing. Yet, it is not only whether or not one gets any land; it is also about the quality of the land they might inherit. Kamla notes with concern:

The part of land that my husband and I work on currently is quite barren while his brothers have more fertile land. If they get that after division of land, then we will be stuck with the barren part; with farming and migration.

The other constraint is a familiar one. In her marital household, as daughter-in-law, she is expected to shoulder the bulk of the domestic and care work, in addition to farm work. Further, there is not much scope for her and her husband to retain their earnings, as they contribute all their earnings to the expenditure of two households and to farm expenses. Yet she has no role in decision-making in either household. As she puts it

My father-in-law makes all the decisions. He gets urea, seeds, etc. and we give him the money. My parents make all the decisions for their land.

Her aspirations are somewhat ambivalent. She identifies herself as a farmer and is motivated to diversify her crops and get a higher produce and be more profitable – qualities she associates with being a better farmer. At the same time, she also feels that there are insurmountable constraints to farming. Water is the foremost. She adds that if there were enough water then maybe they would not have to migrate and could sustain a living on the farm itself. On her parental land, they grow maize and a bit of *kutki* (millets) and flat beans. Maize and gram are the crops on her marital farmland, but they grow gram only if it rains since their farm is not irrigated.

We don't sell much; we get around 5-6 big bags of produce (80-100kgs) but we sell may be 10 kgs since most of it consumed at home. We go to Tamia to sell it to the shopkeepers and then buy spices and oil from the market. We don't end up saving anything because everything is so costly.

She also faces challenges in accessing loans. She says that there are no money-lenders that she can approach in times of need. According to her, there is a provision for loans at low interest rates for individuals above the age of 50 years in the village but her parents have not been able to avail this facility. For additional income, she works on others' fields, migrates or tries to find

work under the MGNREGA, if at all. Occasionally, they rent out the more fertile parts of their land. Of the MGNREGA, Kamla says:

We don't depend on it because it is difficult to get and even when they do get it, there are times they don't receive the payment...we can formally complain against this but the fear of being ostracized from the village prevents me from pursuing this matter further.

She laments too that she has not received any help or guidance from any government official/agency or even the corporate foundation that has been quite active in the region otherwise. Although she has attended a couple of sessions on innovative farming techniques by them, they have not been of much benefit to her because of paucity of water. She has inherited a few tools from her mother but has to rely on the prominent farmers in the village for renting tools required for farming. She emphasizes that only those who are associated with the gram panchayat or know those in the village administration benefit – they are the ones who get work provided under MGNREGA and who do not feel the need to migrate. The members of the village's women's savings group are also decided based on how well connected they are. Those generally excluded from this network migrate and/or start poultry and dairy farming. Kamla herself has two cows, two oxen and some poultry at her husband's place. There are three calves at her parents' place that they bought recently. She continues:

We do not even get information about any scheme or any assistance given by the government. There are a select few in the village... people with larger land holdings and better connections... who ensure that others do not get information about the new schemes. People are too involved in their own farms and tend not to share even among themselves... We generally get all the information when we go out and meet others and see what they are doing.

Kamla and her husband started using urea just 5-6 years ago; until then they had been using manure. She notes that yields are better now, the plant stronger and the cob bigger. She says "I noticed that people were using urea when I started going out of the village for work. I learn the most from my peers, some within and some outside the village."

Another major constraint is access to land – which Kamla says is a sensitive issue. There isn't much land around and people generally do not sell. Several people in the village have encroached forest land. Encroachment is common, it seems. Kamla recounts

If someone has captured land then it's not possible to get it back because people get violent over it. My mother-in-law has been taking care of her parents' land for a long time (since she has no siblings or relatives in her natal village), but the neighbours have been trying to illegally capture the land by threatening to beat her up. We have tried going to the tehsil (district administration) and they charged us Rupees 2000-3000 to settle the dispute but nothing has come of it yet. This is just one example of the issues that we face here.

For Kamla, expansion of the farm is difficult. She and her husband are directing efforts to secure the land that belongs to her husband's mother. If this does not materialize, she and her husband plan to open a small shop later, preferably in some city, once they have saved enough. For this reason, her husband encourages her to learn sewing and tailoring. She reiterates that her lack of education as a major impediment in getting better job opportunities. She says that she favours city life to village life because of easier access to basic amenities. But she also realizes that moving away from the village would mean that there would be added expenses like food and accommodation. While she dislikes the village life, she likes the simple and clean environment in the village. While she still wishes to study, she is bogged down by responsibilities and non-availability of a school where someone her age could study.

According to her, a successful farmer is one whose produce is good, and makes profits from farming. With the constraints she faces, Kamla is open to the prospect of shifting fully to non-farm activities, even though she identifies herself as a farmer. She stresses on water constraints and work as the primary reasons she and her husband would settle in the city.

5. Conclusion

The four case studies highlight several similarities and differences. First, young women farmers in this study demonstrate that they take farming seriously, are knowledgeable and passionate

about farming. This is significant because as girls and women are not socialized to take over the land or lead farming, an advantage that many young male farmers enjoy. Their success depends on family support even without independent access to land. Most of them began farming when they were as young as 8-9 years old, assisting their parents or grandparents on the farm. These usually involved simple tasks such as assisting with harvesting and weeding or grazing cattle. One young woman farmer in the second field site, Sehore, in MP said, “we watch and learn, I did what my grandmother did”. Another young woman farmer said, “Kisani ke log ...kisani jaldi seekh jaate hain” (If one is from a farming family one learns farming quickly). When not from a farming family, a young woman typically learns from the in-laws or picks up these skills from her peers.

Second, most YWF in our study as well as more broadly seem to become full-time farmers typically after marriage. This is especially the case in recent years with daughters being sent to school and then being married relatively young. While land owning caste groups such as KV grounders in Tamil Nadu, send their daughters to study, keeping them away from farming, and marry them to men who have non-farm jobs, the presence of land and the practice of farming in their marital homes draw many young women into farming. The support from husbands and sometimes more importantly from fathers-in-law—as the land is in their name—is crucial.

Third, the case studies illustrate even when women engage in full-time farming, land ownership eludes them. Yet, most of our respondents did not identify this as a barrier. Further, many rationalize this by emphasizing that the support offered by their brothers was more important than their formal rights to land. One woman farmer in MP suggested that even if her brothers were fine with her claiming her share of land, it would be unfair to the wives of her brothers, who might have given up claims to their own inheritances for the sake of their brothers. Both the fact that women do not demand their lawful share and that they do not acknowledge this to be a barrier reflect the deeply entrenched social norms governing land inheritance and gender relations. Even the instances when women do inherit land, it is driven by family-specific or at times region-specific informal norms. Across some caste groups in Tamil Nadu (not discussed here) property is equally inherited by sons and daughters although even here there are wide variations. Even within the KV caste discussed here, there are instances of land being passed on

to daughters (mainly in the absence of sons), but it is never the norm. Legal support for equal rights has however enabled women to stake claims although highly unlikely.

Fourth, the limited access to land for young women farmers has important material consequences. Because formal ownership of land is often linked to being recognized as a farmer in the eyes of the government, most women farmers are not recognized as farmers. Too often, the criterion for eligibility for a large number of government schemes remains title to land; those in the family who have ownership rights thus mediate a young woman farmer's access to government support. This can potentially be a large constraint. We saw this in the case of Kamla Ukey, whose parents were eligible for a farm loan, although she managed the farm. Or in the case of Suman Parteti, where the well under the *Kapildhara* scheme would be granted to her father-in-law, since he was the legal owner of the farm. In most of the villages, acquiring land through leasing in or purchases is near impossible given the rising cost of land. Some women, as suggested in the case studies, do manage to do this, thus increasing their ability to become land-owning farmers.

Fifth, some of the young women we interviewed, especially in Tamil Nadu, enjoy quite high levels of freedom to pursue farming on their own. Among certain landowning case groups like the KV, it might be possible for women to become full-time farmers as men are in full-time non-farm employment. In the case of Madhya Pradesh, both men and women pursue plural activities and combine farm and non-farm activities, most likely on account of the limited opportunities for employment in the non-farm sector for men and women alike. In these cases, the autonomy of the young women farmers seems relatively limited.

Sixth, besides lack of land ownership young women farmers face several other challenges. Access to training and techniques can be challenging for young women farmers. For example, a young woman farmer in Sehore, MP, who has completed a Masters' degree and identifies herself as a farmer described:

The agriculture extension officials who visit the village meet only the male farmers. It is hardly ever the case that these male farmers then discuss the matters related to farming

with women in the house who also farm along with them...their role has been reduced to just providing assistance with no decision-making power.

In the case of Madhya Pradesh, some women have taken up farming and acquired a set of skills with the support of government programs and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Societal support seems important too in the form of learning from their peers. Tamil Nadu's young women farmers seem more equipped to accessing the latest techniques via social media. In contrast, the young women farmers in Madhya Pradesh continue to rely on more traditional forms of extension and peer group support.

Seventh, the young women farmers in our study clearly demonstrate that being and becoming a farmer does not absolve them of their domestic and care work. Some of our case studies illustrate these clearly and here too unless they have some support from other (and older) family members in sharing responsibilities for household chores or farm work the dual responsibility of farm and domestic work can be overwhelming. Kamla and Shanti's life stories as farmers establish the intersection of age and gender wherein women straddle multiple identities and responsibilities across different patriarchal relationships—from daughters to daughters-in-law to parents, between natal and marital households. Attending to farm and household work and care responsibilities can also crowd out opportunities. For example, a young woman farmer in Sehore, MP, with two small children said she would have loved to diversify into dairy but said that cattle “needed timely care – feeding and providing drinking water.” With her responsibilities of taking care of her young children, acquiring and maintaining cattle was out of the question.

Eighth, young women farmers also face substantial difficulty in negotiating male spaces such as the market. In particular, they experience severe limits to their mobility because of public spaces being male dominated. Relative to older women, younger women face more obstacles travelling out of the village. An older woman farmer in Madhya Pradesh's Chhindwara said that she had never gone to the market and that the trader came home. Although she could now do so, she chooses not to. In general, “if the market is far away, then women don't go, but if it is nearby then the women also go and sell at the market” she explains. In our study we found that when women went to the market, they were accompanied by their male spouses or other male members

of the family. In general, when itinerant traders are the main buyers of produce, prices are often set by these traders. The problem of managing a farm can be acute for young women farmers who are single or widowed. Procurement of inputs, hiring of labour and selling of output represent a formidable challenge. Not all are able to accomplish these without a hired male farm manager or male relatives. A young widowed farmer in Sehore said “Who cares that a woman is alone or needs help?” suggesting that there is no state support for those like her. She relies overwhelmingly on a hired manager who shares expenses incurred on cultivation and shares the produce while taking responsibility for all purchases and sales.

We also note differences in terms of class and community support in mediating this process of negotiating male dominated spaces. While Shanti, with relatively lesser social and land endowments struggles to negotiate, Parvathi seems to be relatively more successful in such negotiation. In fact, interestingly, Shanti despite being a joint owner of land, finds it a lot more difficult to access such spaces compared to Parvathi who is confident about her ability to bargain with the middlemen for better prices. This highlights the importance of social networks in mediating and helping cope with gender related vulnerabilities. Many recent initiatives such as the self-help groups have aided young women farmers in their attempt to navigate male-dominated spaces. A young woman farmer in Sehore, MP said:

More than that (i.e. a savings group), it is a platform for women to meet and discuss their problems...this has really enabled women to present their opinions in front of men and outsiders.

Often these social networks also determine access to government programs or other external support from corporate foundations or self-help groups. A young woman farmer from a marginalized caste or tribe is often triple marginalized. In the case of Madhya Pradesh, several programmes that are tailored for tribal communities have provided lifelines to these young women farmers, as have the corporate foundations operating in tribal dominated districts. In Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, a NGO provides training in organic farming to smallholder Dalit women farmers, assisting them with market access and training them to produce organic manure.

In such cases however, their smaller landholding sizes (1-3 acres) and lower caste status prove to be barriers.

While collective mobilization do help the women farmers to overcome some of the limitations imposed on them by their gender, caste and economic status, their prospects in farming continue to be constrained by these very institutions. In conclusion, it is useful to go beyond our study to seek a policy setting that would be conducive to and supportive of young women farmers.⁹ Initiatives that focus on women's collective access/ right to land simultaneously challenge the family farm as the unit of organising production and offer the potential to weaken caste hierarchies, status and patriarchal relations that undergird the family farm (Agarwal and Agrawal 2017; Vijayabaskar et al. 2018).

In this regard, perhaps the two most transformative policy initiatives for young women have been the establishment of a Directorate of Women in Agriculture¹⁰ and the organization of women into self-help groups under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. The former has actively engaged in research and developing technologies for women in agriculture and the latter, like the NGO run self-help groups is often regarded as offering a platform for young women to organize themselves. Such groups can redress some of the disadvantages young women farmers face in accessing information and training (Raghunathan, et al., 2019, for example). Similarly programs such as the Mahila Samakhya, women's self-help groups and one-third reservation in Panchayats are useful to focus on women's needs more broadly. These initiatives focus on providing training and finance to support livelihoods. Many have actively provided platforms for extension training, production and marketing. Although not specifically framed with young women farmers in mind they are likely focusing on the vast majority of young women, albeit on married young women.

⁹ In 2018, the Government of India committed to allocating 30% of the funds to agriculture in the Union Budget to schemes supporting women in agriculture. Rai (2019) however points out that there is not much that is specifically directed to women farmers. Further, recent budget allocations in 2019 have not conformed to this commitment of 30%.

¹⁰ The Working Group on Agricultural Research and Education constituted by the Planning Commission for the formulation of the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) recommended the establishment of a National Research Centre for Women in Agriculture (NRCWA). Accordingly, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research established the NRCWA in 1996 at Bhubaneswar which was upgraded as the Directorate of Research on Women in Agriculture (DRWA) in the year 2008, with a sub-centre in Bhopal.

While collective mobilization does help the young women farmers to overcome some of the limitations imposed on them by their gender, caste and economic status, their prospects in farming continue to be constrained by these very institutions. These case studies highlight the need for visibility and recognition of young women farmers as well as for sound, inclusive policies to support them.

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