



Editorial

Men till the land but women know the seed. It is widely believed that agriculture evolved largely due to women. While men hunted, women carried out the important job of gathering seeds and selecting the best plants that produced food, animal feed and fibre. In fact, women may have been responsible for the earliest domestication of crop plants. Even in current times, it is not men, but women, who are known to be the main caretakers of farm animals and the chief custodians of soil health and agriculture around the world. Although women play such a pivotal role in crop production and animal husbandry, their contribution is often overlooked in social, economic and political spheres. Women are far less empowered than men because they face structural barriers that limit their access to land, information, finance, infrastructure, technologies, and markets.¹

Cotton farming is labour intensive in the developing world. Women do most of the work and are often severely underpaid. A study conducted by the International Trade Centre (ITC)² showed that women across the world are most commonly employed in cotton farms for picking, planting and field management. The study also highlights the fact that women are paid less than men and these gender-based wage disparities are observed in many countries. Studies show that women are discriminated against on all fronts at all levels. Women do not get their share of land ownership, access to assets or power in decision making. In a rural setting, land ownership is a source of hope, livelihood, empowerment, opportunities and dignity. Sadly, women in the farming sector lack the right to own land in more than 90 countries.³ Despite constituting half of the global population — of which more than 400 million women are farmers who produce the majority of the world's food — women own less than 20% of the land.³ The United Nations Food and agricultural Organization (FAO) estimates farm land ownership of women to be as low as 10%.⁴ Depriving women of land ownership also deprives them of empowerment as well as social and economic security.

Women constitute only 25.3% of employment in agriculture.⁵ They form about 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries (FAO 2011)⁶. About 59% of employed women in sub-Saharan Africa are engaged in informal agricultural employment (UN Women 2015)⁷. Not surprisingly, women also constitute 70% of the financially insecure population in the world.⁴ A recent report⁸ shows that the gender gap, which is currently at 78% in 'political participation', has widened recently, driven by negative trends in some large countries, counterbalancing the progress made in 98 smaller countries. The report also highlights a 42% gender gap in 'economic participation and opportunity' and estimates that it could take another 267.6 years to close the wage gap. The report shows that 'the proportion of women among skilled professionals continues to increase, as does the progress towards wage-equality. Another contributing factor to the wage gap is a general lack of women in leadership positions, with women representing just 27% of all managerial positions'. Further, only 22% of rural women in low-income countries hold bank accounts (World Bank 2015).⁹ These are serious challenges that are difficult to overcome due to deeply entrenched patriarchal values prevalent in much of the world. Women empowerment is also hindered due to discriminatory social norms and practices, traditions, customs, cultural beliefs and religious tenets that exist in many parts of the world. Many societies follow traditions that often hinder women from participating in political or economic settings. Women are also excluded from decision-making and opportunities regarding social development.

The contribution of women as workers, managers and leaders at home and on the farm is neither remunerated nor acknowledged appropriately. Much of their contribution goes unnoticed, especially in rural societies. It might be at a snail's pace, but times are changing. Women in many parts of the world are asserting their rights. The world is becoming increasingly aware of the fact that empowered women not only benefit society but also catalyse its growth. A study showed that the total agricultural output in Africa could increase by up to 20% if women's access to agricultural inputs were equal to men's (DFID 2010).⁶ The need to work toward mainstreaming of gender equity has become more pertinent in current times than ever before.

Women are supposedly revered and even worshipped in many societies. However, they continue to face the consequences of discriminatory practices that deprive them of ownership, education, equal rights, respectability, equality, equity and dignity. In fact, some societies across the world still suffer from issues like domestic violence, dowry demands and female infanticide.

Religions, cultures and societies across the world might have evolved differently but no one can disagree with the simple fact that women shape the world's future. This issue of the ICAC RECORDER is dedicated to women. It records their voices and it documents their resilience and their many successes. I would like to thank my colleagues — Ms Lorena Ruiz, Ms Parkhi Vats, Ms Caroline Taco, and Dr Sandhya Kranthi — for conducting interviews with women leaders in the cotton sector across the world. As the Editor of the ICAC RECORDER, I generally look at technical content, but this special issue has given me a very different experience — that of inspiration and hope. Dear reader, I earnestly hope that the interviews will inspire you as much as they have inspired me.

– Keshav Kranthi

1) <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/agriculture/un-plans-to-double-farmers-income-in-africa-in-three-years-59373>

2) Women in Cotton -Results of a Global survey-2011. ITC

3) <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/women-own-less-than-20-of-the-worlds-land-its-time-to-give-them-equal-property-rights/>

4) <http://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/en/>

5) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.FE.ZS>

6) <http://www.fao.org/3/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

7) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-day/2015>

8) <http://reports.weforum.org/globalgender-gap-report-2021/dataexplorer>

9) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/04/15/massive-drop-in-number-of-unbanked-says-new-report>