

The Missing Women Farmers at the 'No-Confidence March' in Delhi

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While three-fourths of all women in the country are association with agricultural work, women accounted for only about 15 of the 1,500 farmers gathered at the march.

New Delhi: The All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), comprising 200 farmers' organisations from across the country, organised a march from Mandi House to Parliament Street in New Delhi on July 20. Around 1,500 farmers from different parts of India gathered to show "no confidence" in the Narendra Modi government for betraying farmers over the minimum support price (MSP) increase and other unfulfilled election promises.

Women, however, were conspicuous by their absence.

Charanjeet Kaur from the district of Barnala in Punjab was one of the only 15-odd women present at the march. "The three of us travelled a long way to be here," she said, gesturing at her two female companions. They sat on the pavement at Barakhamba Road among crowds of male farmers, confident and determined. "We travelled in a train coach filled with 200 people. There was barely any place to stand. But we came."

Her companion Surinder Pal spends over eight hours a day working in the fields, on land owned by the male members of her family. When asked why the three of them decided to come, she said, "No matter what we do, we never get paid properly for it. The government has made too many empty promises to us."

"Farmers' issues affect us deeply. As women, we have different responsibilities. We have our children and households to take care of, as well as our work on the fields. When my husband died, he had been in deep debt and our land was taken away," Charanjeet added.

[Over three-fourths of women](#) in India today are engaged in farming occupations. This proportion is higher than that of men. In addition, women [make up 74% of the country's rural workforce](#). However, only about 12.7% of farmland is owned by women. The government does not recognise agricultural workers without a land title as farmers, which has dire consequences for women. They cannot access credit for farming, receive subsidies or access government schemes for farmers. In short, they labour with little support from the government.

The [Hindu Succession Act](#) was amended in 2005 to award daughters the equal right to their parents' property. But in practice, they are not considered equals when it comes to land inheritance. They face opposition both from officials as well as from their own families. The cultural belief that women shouldn't own farmland is often internalised by women themselves. [Landesa's research](#) shows that when women have rights over the land they work on, they gain greater bargaining power in their households and community.

Narinder Singh, who had come from Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh to attend the march, was

distressed about his daughter. "She drives the tractor on the field, for which she is being harassed," he said, while walking on Barakhamba Road with a black flag over his shoulder. "Some men, who seem like gangsters, harass her. We have filed FIRs and been to the police station many times yet the police keep asking us for more and more money. This is all because my daughter drives a tractor."

Uttar Pradesh has [one of the highest gender crime rates](#) in the country, besides having among the lowest sex ratios – 912 women to every 1,000 men. The practice of driving tractors has traditionally been reserved for men. In many areas in India, women are held back from driving tractors or handling the plough.

Charanjeet spoke of the women who were compelled to work in more difficult conditions when they became the only breadwinners in their families. "I know women whose husbands committed suicide when they faced crushing debt. These women have no opportunity to mourn. They have to ensure sustenance for their children and fight for compensation from the government. They take photos of their husbands to show the officials." Compensation is to be given to the families, she said, but it is barely ever given without a fight. Farmers' groups inevitably have to intervene to ensure at least some amount is disbursed.

Farmer suicides have left thousands of women widowed in India. They are then compelled to take on more responsibility, the increased economic burden adding to their domestic burden. They are plagued with issues of accessing childcare support when they work in the fields, trying to get compensation, lack of psychological support and providing for the family. Their husband's land is often taken away.

When Charanjeet told me that a fundamental problem among many men in the villages of Punjab is *nasha*, or intoxication, the men standing on her right interjected. "Many women do it too," they insisted.

At this, she stood up defiantly in front of the ten men and straightened her *dupatta*. "Only women with money and easy access do it. Most of us have seen the men in our family passed out and missing work. They sell their land, the utensils of the house – everything they can get their hands on – to pay for drugs. Once again the distressed women of the family have to take on additional responsibilities and provide for the children."

As vice-president of the Istri Jagriti Manch, Charanjeet has been helping women with various problems they face. "Women who are being harassed, or have been raped, or are fighting for their rights come to us. We help raise their voices and we protest," she explained. The organisation operates in rural and urban areas around Barnala, Sangrur, Nawahshahr, Jalandhar and Patiala in Punjab.

Women often face [sexual harassment in mandis](#). From the moment they enter the fields to the time the crop is to be sold, they are faced with the crushing double reality – they are farmers, and they are women.

Farmers' groups around the country are demanding the implementation of the recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission. In 2011, as a member of Rajya Sabha, M.S. Swaminathan [introduced a private members' Bill](#) in parliament: the Women Farmers' Entitlement Bill 2011. Its provisions would give women land ownership rights, access to legal credit, water rights, funds for various support services and help with inputs.

The [AIKSCC stated last October](#) that women were the backbone of Indian agriculture and with due

recognition, they could help pull the sector out of crisis. Their [official website](#) shows support and recognition of women farmers in various places. An all-women parliament was conducted by the organisation on 22 November, 2017 as a part of the Kisan Mukti Sansad on Parliament Street. At the July 14 working group meeting of the organisation last Saturday, representatives from many of its member organisations showed up. Female presence was close to zero.

Social activist Medha Patkar seemed unfazed by the dearth of female representation at the MSP Dhoka March. Emphasising the importance of women in agriculture, she said that farmers' issues are absolutely women's issues and women make up two-thirds of the workforce in the sector. When asked if the lack of women at the march points to a cultural issue, she told *The Wire*, "It is an organisational issue. This was a last-minute event organised very fast. It's not like there is a divide. We have brought women with us." She came to Delhi with around ten women to attend the march. "We have many women in our movement - fisherwomen, farmers, field labourers and so on. Their numbers will continue to increase over time. In the future, there will be more," she added optimistically.

As farmers' movements gather momentum over the next few months, the participation of women at these protests will be closely watched.

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