



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WOMAN FARMER 2026

WOMEN FARMERS IN ASIA

RIGHTS, RESOURCES AND AGENCY IN SUSTAINABLE
AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS



Executive Summary

Women farmers are central actors in Asia's agrifood systems as producers, agricultural workers, fishers, herders and pastoralists, livestock keepers, processors, entrepreneurs, cooperative members, knowledge holders and custodians of natural resources. Yet their contribution is not matched by equal rights, access to resources or decision-making power. FAO (2025) reports that nearly 58% of the female labour force in Asia and the Pacific works in agriculture, while only 10–20% of women hold tenure rights to the land they work on. In Southern Asia, 71% of women in the labour force work in agrifood systems, compared with 47% of men (FAO, 2023). Women also account for around 76% of unpaid work in Asia and the Pacific (UN Women, 2023).

This paper organizes the discussion around three interconnected dimensions: Rights, Resources and Agency. Rights concern women's ability to exercise rights to land and natural resources, including water and forests, as well as rights related to seeds, inheritance and tenure, in environments free from violence, harassment and discrimination. Resources include finance, inputs, extension and information, appropriate technologies, climate services, social protection and reliable markets. Agency begins with women's knowledge, confidence and ability to make and act on decisions, and extends to collective voice, leadership and representation.

The International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026 is an opportunity to move from recognition to sustained action. Women farmers are already leading solutions, from renewable-energy cold storage and certified seed enterprises to traditional rice conservation and food processing. Building on evidence from FAO, ADB, UN Women, ANGOC, the International Land Coalition (ILC), the World Rural Forum (WRF), and AFA cases, this paper proposes three priorities: advance women

farmers' rights and protection; ensure equitable access to productive resources, services and markets; and strengthen women's personal and collective agency, voice and leadership.

A. Women are central actors in Asia's agrifood systems

Women perform diverse and interconnected roles across Asia. In Central Asia, they contribute to crop and livestock production, pastoral livelihoods, food processing and natural resource management. In South Asia, they are active in crop and livestock production, agricultural labour, dairy cooperatives and rural enterprises. In East and Southeast Asia, women participate in production, fisheries, processing, trading, farm management and agri-enterprises. Their contributions also extend to biodiversity conservation, traditional knowledge and community development.

Recognition, however, remains uneven. Women working on family farms may be treated as contributing family workers rather than independent farmers, particularly when land, production assets or farm registrations are held in men's names. This can affect access to government programs, finance, extension and technology. Landless workers, Indigenous and pastoralist women, women in fisheries and young women may face additional and overlapping barriers.

B. Persistent barriers to rights, resources and agency

The barriers facing women farmers are interconnected: insecure rights can restrict access to finance and services; limited resources can constrain viable livelihoods and enterprises; and unequal workloads, discrimination and restrictive norms can reduce women's ability to make decisions and lead. Addressing one barrier in isolation is therefore rarely sufficient.

i. Land, natural resources, seeds and protection

Secure rights to land and natural resources are fundamental to agricultural livelihoods and long-term investment. Yet only 10–20% of women in Asia and the Pacific hold tenure rights to the land they work on (FAO, 2025). ANGOC's regional work shows how discriminatory inheritance practices, weak implementation, administrative barriers and women's exclusion from land-related decision-making can undermine legal protections. ILC's gender-transformative approach similarly emphasizes that land rights must include the ability to access, use, control, inherit and make decisions about land and resources, not formal ownership alone.

For Indigenous and pastoralist women, rights may also involve communal lands, forests, grazing areas and other collectively managed resources. Women's roles in conserving seeds, traditional knowledge and agricultural biodiversity should likewise be recognized. ANGOC's work on land tenure and climate change further

demonstrates why tenure security matters for long-term investments in soil, water and adaptation. Rights must also be exercisable in safe and enabling environments free from violence, harassment and discrimination.

ii. Finance, technology, services and markets

Women farmers continue to have less access to finance, productive inputs, technology, technical assistance and markets. ADB (2022) highlights access to inputs and finance; knowledge, networks and technical assistance; supply-chain participation; governance and leadership; and equality in the workplace as key areas for gender equality in agribusiness. Services must be affordable, accessible and responsive to women's activities and circumstances. Appropriate mechanization and digital tools can reduce physically demanding work and support value addition, while poorly designed technologies or unequal access to connectivity and training can reinforce existing gaps.

Women-led enterprises also face constraints in working capital, processing, storage, aggregation, logistics and reliable buyers. Farmers' organizations and cooperatives can address these constraints by providing services, facilitating finance, developing enterprises and connecting members to markets. Institutional and public food procurement can create structured opportunities when women and their organizations receive support for production planning, quality assurance, logistics, contract management and working capital. WRF's work on women in family farming complements this market perspective by emphasizing gender-responsive public policies, social protection, recognition of care responsibilities and mechanisms through which women family farmers can shape the policies affecting them.

iii. Unpaid work, decision-making, voice and leadership

Women's contribution to agriculture does not automatically translate into decision-making power. Women account for around 76% of unpaid work in Asia and the Pacific (UN Women, 2023), reducing time available for paid work, training, enterprise development and leadership. Agency begins with women's knowledge, skills and confidence, and their ability to make choices and act on decisions concerning their lives, farms, livelihoods, income and resources (FAO, 2023)

Agency also has a collective dimension. Women may be active members of farmers' organizations and cooperatives while remaining underrepresented in boards, management and financial decisions. WRF's International Network of Rural Women in Action emphasizes women's representation, collective organization and participation in public-policy processes. ILC likewise stresses shifting power toward grassroots women's organizations and leaders. Farmers' organizations and cooperatives can therefore be important platforms for collective action, leadership, enterprise development and representation. Young women require particular

attention to land, education, practical experience, finance, technology and leadership opportunities.

c. Women farmers are leading solutions

Women farmers are already developing practical solutions that connect resources with agency. Four AFA cases illustrate this:

Solar-powered cold storage (India)



SEWA members in Gujarat manage a solar-powered cold storage facility that reduces post-harvest losses and gives farmers greater flexibility over when to sell. The facility, established as a women-led community business, can store up to 10 tons of fresh produce. The case illustrates how women's collective organization, renewable energy and post-harvest infrastructure can strengthen market opportunities.

Women-led seed enterprise (Bangladesh)



Ghoraghat Krishak Mohila Samabaya Samity Limited, a women-led cooperative, produces and markets certified paddy seeds under its own Fasal Seeds brand. The enterprise connects women's collective organization with seed production, quality assurance and market development, while strengthening women's roles in local seed systems.

Traditional rice revival (Viet Nam)



The Duy Tan Clean Agricultural Products Cooperative, led by a woman director, combines conservation of traditional glutinous rice with improved processing, packaging and market development. The experience shows how women-led enterprises can connect biodiversity conservation, value addition and market access.

Food processing (Philippines)



BACFA Multipurpose Cooperative transforms locally produced bananas into banana flour. Women undertake processing activities from peeling and slicing to drying, milling and packaging, creating additional livelihood opportunities and demonstrating the role of cooperatives in value addition and rural enterprise development.

These experiences show that women are not simply beneficiaries. They are entrepreneurs, knowledge producers, innovators and leaders. Farmers' organizations and cooperatives can provide the collective infrastructure through which women access technologies, services, finance and markets while strengthening their voice and decision-making power.

D. Climate resilience, biodiversity and gender-transformative policy

Women contribute to climate adaptation and sustainable natural resource management through seed conservation, crop diversification, soil and water management, livestock production and traditional agricultural knowledge. Yet insecure tenure, limited finance and unequal participation in natural resource governance can constrain their capacity to respond to climate risks. ILC, FAO and CIRAD's 2026 work on land tenure and governance reinforces the links among women's land rights, customary tenure, climate action, biodiversity and inclusive sustainable development.

Women-led farmers' organizations such as SEWA and cooperatives such as Ghoraghat Krishak Mohila Samabaya Samity Limited, Duy Tan Clean Agricultural Products Cooperative and BACFA Multipurpose Cooperative can support agroecological transitions through farmer-to-farmer learning, participatory research, partnership development, bio-input production, appropriate mechanization, collective marketing and links to finance and climate services. New practices and technologies should reduce rather than increase women's workloads. There is also the need to move beyond simply adding women to existing programs. A gender-transformative approach asks whether women can exercise rights in practice, control resources and benefits, influence household and organizational decisions, and shape institutions and public policies. It must also recognize the different realities of Indigenous women, pastoralists, landless workers, fishers and young women.

E. Three priorities for action

1. RIGHTS - Advance women farmers' rights and protection

Strengthen women farmers' rights to land and natural resources, including water and forests, as well as rights related to seeds, inheritance and tenure. Ensure access to information and meaningful participation in decisions affecting land and natural resource governance. Promote safe and enabling environments free from violence, harassment and discrimination, where rural women can exercise their rights.

2. RESOURCES - Ensure equitable access to productive resources, services and markets

Expand women farmers' access to finance, inputs, extension and information, appropriate technologies, climate services and social protection. Support women-led enterprises, value addition and reliable markets, including through farmers' organizations, cooperatives and institutional food procurement. Invest in women farmers as knowledge producers and innovators of agroecological, biodiversity-based and climate-resilient solutions.

3. AGENCY - Strengthen women's personal and collective agency, voice and leadership

Build women farmers' confidence, knowledge, skills and ability to make and act on decisions. Expand opportunities to participate, influence and lead at household, community, organizational and institutional levels. Strengthen women's organizations, farmers' organizations and cooperatives as platforms for collective action, leadership and representation in shaping agriculture and food systems.

F. Conclusion

The central challenge is not simply to increase women's participation in agriculture, but to ensure that their contributions are matched by rights, resources and agency. Women farmers should be recognized as rights holders, farmers, entrepreneurs, knowledge producers, innovators and leaders. The International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026 provides an opportunity to translate that recognition into sustained institutional support, investment and public policies that enable women to shape more equitable, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems.

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