

Women Empowerment through Extension Services

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Introduction:

Women are the backbone of rural economies. Across the world, especially in developing countries, women contribute significantly to agriculture, livestock management, household nutrition, and natural resource management. Despite this, they often face limited access to land, credit, information, technology, and extension services. Traditional extension models historically focused more on male farmers, overlooking women's roles and needs.

Extension services — when inclusive and gender-sensitive — can play a transformative role in empowering women. By providing knowledge, skills, access to resources, and opportunities for participation, extension services not only improve women's livelihoods but also contribute to food security, poverty reduction, and sustainable development.

The Role of Women in Agriculture and Rural Development

- ☛ Women constitute **40–50% of the agricultural labour force** in many developing countries.

- ☛ They manage **seed selection, weeding, harvesting, post-harvest processing, livestock rearing, and household food preparation.**

- ☛ Women also play a major role in **kitchen gardening, dairying, small-scale poultry, fisheries, and value addition activities.**

- ☛ Their contribution to **nutrition and family health** is critical, as they make daily food and health-related decisions.

Yet, women face challenges such as limited access to extension services, lack of decision-making power, restricted mobility, and insufficient representation in farmer groups and cooperatives.

How Extension Services Empower Women

Extension services are a bridge between scientific knowledge and rural communities. By tailoring extension programs to include women, empowerment occurs in multiple dimensions:

1. Knowledge and Skills Development

- ☛ Training women in improved agricultural practices, livestock care,

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food processing, and value addition builds their technical competence.

- ☞ Nutrition and health education improves household well-being.
- ☞ Exposure visits, farmer field schools, and demonstrations enhance confidence.

2. Access to Resources and Technology

- ☞ Extension programs facilitate women's access to improved seeds, tools, irrigation, credit, and insurance.
- ☞ Women-friendly technologies (e.g., small milking machines, low-cost dryers, biogas units) reduce drudgery.

3. Economic Empowerment

- ☞ Training in entrepreneurship, marketing, and financial literacy enables women to start micro-enterprises.
- ☞ Formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), cooperatives, and producer companies helps women collectively bargain, save, and access loans.

4. Social Empowerment

- ☞ Women's participation in extension meetings, training, and decision-making groups builds leadership qualities.
- ☞ Involvement in community-based organizations increases their voice in family and community decisions.

5. Digital Extension Services

- ☞ Mobile apps, WhatsApp groups, helplines, and online videos provide women with real-time advice.
- ☞ ICT-based extension services help overcome mobility restrictions, allowing women to learn from home.

Successful Models of Women-Centric Extension

1. Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

- ☞ SHGs supported by extension agencies (like NABARD, NGOs, and state rural livelihood missions) provide a platform for women to save, invest, and learn together.

☞ Example: Kudumbashree in Kerala has empowered millions of rural women through collective enterprises.

2. Home Science and Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs)

- ☞ KVKs conduct women-centric training in food processing, nutrition, income-generating activities, and drudgery-reducing tools.

3. Farmer Field Schools (FFS)

- ☞ In FFS models, women farmers learn by doing, often in groups, building solidarity and confidence.

4. Livestock and Dairy Cooperatives

- ☞ Women dairy cooperatives in Gujarat (Amul model) have shown how extension and collective marketing can transform women into entrepreneurs.

5. ICT and Mobile Extension

- ☞ mKisan SMS service, digital literacy campaigns, and e-learning platforms have enabled rural women to receive timely information.

Challenges in Women Empowerment through Extension

- ☞ **Cultural and social barriers** restrict women's mobility and participation in training.
- ☞ **Male-dominated extension staff** often overlook women farmers.
- ☞ **Illiteracy and digital divide** limit access to written and digital advisories.
- ☞ **Time burden** from household chores reduces women's availability for training.
- ☞ **Lack of gender-disaggregated data** makes it harder to design women-specific programs.

Strategies for Strengthening Women Empowerment

1. Gender-Sensitive Extension Policies

- ☞ Governments should mandate women's participation in extension programs.
- ☞ Recruit and train more female extension workers.

2. Capacity Building and Training

- ☞ Organize women-exclusive training, farmer field schools, and exposure visits.

- ☞ Focus on leadership and entrepreneurial skills, not just production.

3. Formation of Women Groups and Federations

- ☞ Promote SHGs, cooperatives, and producer groups.
- ☞ Encourage women to take leadership positions.

4. Use of ICT and Digital Tools

- ☞ Develop women-friendly mobile apps, audio-video advisories in local languages.
- ☞ Provide digital literacy training to rural women.

5. Access to Finance and Market Linkages

- ☞ Create women-centric credit schemes, insurance products, and market platforms.
- ☞ Link women producers to e-markets and buyers directly.

6. Monitoring and Evaluation

- ☞ Collect gender-disaggregated data to assess impact and redesign programs.

Case Examples from India

- ☞ **Kudumbashree (Kerala):** A women-led poverty eradication program reaching over 4 million women, integrating microfinance, extension, and entrepreneurship.

⇒ Amul Dairy Cooperatives (Gujarat):

Extension support enabled rural women to become dairy entrepreneurs, contributing significantly to family income.

⇒ Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran

Pariyojana (MKSP): Under the National Rural Livelihood Mission, this program provides training and extension to women farmers.

Conclusion

Empowering women through extension services is not just a matter of gender equality — it is essential for agricultural growth, family nutrition, and rural development. Inclusive, gender-sensitive extension models have proven to increase productivity, incomes, and decision-making power of women. Future extension services must move beyond treating women as “farm helpers” and recognize them as **farm managers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders.**

By equipping rural women with knowledge, skills, resources, and confidence, extension services can unlock the full potential of half the farming population — leading to sustainable and inclusive rural development.

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