

## **FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE: WHY AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION MUST PRIORITISE WOMEN**



*In this blog, Ranjitha Puskur highlights why revamping the design of agricultural extension services—by recognising women as key clients—is critical for ensuring their relevance and effectiveness.*

### **CONTEXT**

Walk into any rural extension meeting in India and you'll often see the same scene: rows of men gathered around an officer or input dealer, while women stand at the fringes, listening quietly or absent altogether. The assumption is clear — men are the “farmers,” women are “helpers.” But this picture is deeply misleading. Women form 42% of India's agricultural workforce, yet they remain peripheral in agricultural extension and advisory services (EAS).

This invisibility is not an accident. It is the tip of the iceberg — beneath lies a structure of exclusion, outdated norms, and blind spots in policy and practice. Unless extension services are reimagined not just to reach, but benefit, empower, and transform women, feminisation of agriculture will remain a story of hidden labour and lost opportunity.



### **USING THE RBET FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS THE STATE OF EXTENSION**

Terms like *empowerment* and *transformation* are profound, but in agricultural research and development, they often get diluted into buzzwords.

They are among the most frequently used and abused words in current times. I find the Reach-Benefit-Empower-Transform (RBET) Framework useful to highlight what ails or holds back gender-responsive EAS and opportunities to correct it (Fig. 1). While we claim to empower women with every small and big activity, evidence shows we might not even be reaching or benefiting them effectively. Using ‘empowerment’ loosely inflates outcomes. Calling participation “empowerment” lets research and development actors, policymakers and donors tick boxes without addressing deeper inequities. The key question here is whether extension services have the intentionality to address deeper inequities that often restrict their interventions aimed at promoting the adoption of new knowledge and enhancing farmer incomes.

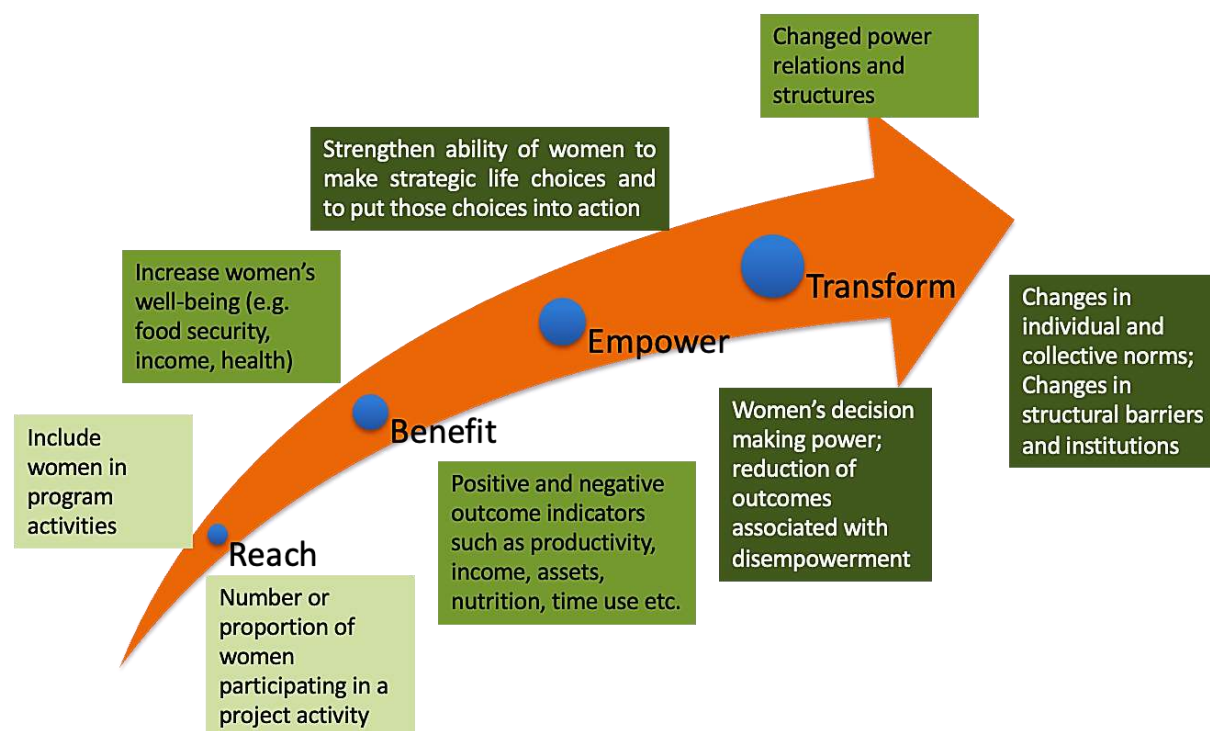


Figure 1: RBET Framework

### Why Don't Extension Services Reach Women?

The barriers are well known, yet stubbornly persistent:

- **Women don't "qualify" as farmers** in the eyes of the system. Women rarely appear in official statistics because fewer than 14% hold land titles. Land titles are overwhelmingly in men's names, and many extension programs still target the "head of household" or landowner, automatically excluding women.
- **Assumptions about households** — that information given to one member (usually male) will automatically reach the other — are simply wrong. [Studies](#) show knowledge rarely flows seamlessly across gender within households.
- **Time and mobility constraints** mean women can't always attend day-long trainings or travel to demonstration plots. Care burdens and social restrictions compound this.
- **Male-dominated extension cadres** discourage women's participation. Without women extension agents, trust and comfort are limited.

These aren't minor glitches. They are systemic flaws that keep women on the margins of knowledge systems.

## Why Don't Extension Services Benefit Women?

If extension professionals measure success only by participation counts, they miss the deeper question: who actually benefits? Even when women do participate, benefits often fall short. Why? Too often, extension delivers knowledge without dismantling structural barriers. A woman may learn a new practice but cannot adopt it because she lacks access to land, credit, or inputs. Without attention to intra-household dynamics, programs may inadvertently increase women's labour without increasing their control.

- **Technologies are designed without gender in mind.** Mechanisation often fits men's roles (ploughing, harvesting) rather than women's tasks (weeding, transplanting).
- **Literacy and education gaps** make written communication ineffective, yet visual and hands-on methods remain underused.
- **Digital divides** mean mobile-based services reach men faster than women, who often lack phone ownership or control.
- **Care burdens** mean women simply cannot invest equal time in training or adoption of new practices.

Extension remains crop- and productivity-centred, not human-centred. Programs rarely begin with a gender analysis of who does what, who controls what, and who benefits.

## Why Don't Extension Services Empower Women?

Reaching and benefiting women is not enough. The ultimate test is empowerment. Merely counting women's attendance in a training, meeting, or project is not empowerment. It says nothing about whether they gained control over resources, decisions, or outcomes.

Development projects often use empowerment to mean *confidence-building*, *participation*, or *exposure*. These are valuable, but without changes in access to land, credit, markets, and voice in decision-making, they don't alter women's position in power hierarchies. "*Empowerment-lite*" risks overclaiming impact and masking the persistence of structural inequality.

Real empowerment means shifts in power relations — within households, communities, or institutions. Did women gain a stronger voice in farm decisions? Did they control income from production? Did they influence local governance? These are more meaningful indicators. Here too, extension often fails.

- Advisory services are rarely bundled with structural reforms — like access to credit, land rights, or labour-saving tools — that are needed to unlock empowerment.
- Social norms that restrict women's voices remain unchallenged. A woman may learn a new technology, but still need her husband's approval to implement it.
- Programs rarely address intra-household power dynamics or engage men in conversations about gender equality.

Transformation is not about adding women into existing systems; it's about changing the structures, norms, and institutions that exclude them. For instance, a woman learning a new skill but still needing her husband's permission to apply it is not a transformation. Transformation would mean norms shift, so her knowledge and choices are respected in practice.

Extension cannot be gender-blind in unequal contexts. If it is, it risks reinforcing inequality rather than reducing it.



## WHAT WORKS: LESSONS FROM EVIDENCE

The good news is that solutions exist. A [systematic review of extension programs](#) shows several strategies that consistently work for women:

1. **Hands-on, visual methods** — demonstrations, videos, farmer-to-farmer exchanges — help women overcome literacy barriers and retain knowledge.
2. **Collective platforms** — Self-Help Groups, women's cooperatives, community forums — not only deliver knowledge but also build confidence and bargaining power.
3. **Targeted and gender-sensitive design** leads to higher adoption, incomes, and decision-making power. For example, training both men and women together, but creating safe spaces for women to discuss issues separately, reduces domestic conflict and increases mutual respect.
4. **Cultural sensitivity with a transformative edge.** The best programs respect local norms but also slowly shift them, showing communities that women's leadership benefits everyone.

These are not “women-only add-ons” or “special measures.” They are professional design features that make the extension more effective for everyone. Transformation is possible when extension intersects with rights, collectives, and enabling policies.



## WHY INVEST IN WOMEN?

Sceptics often ask: Why put so much effort into reaching women farmers? The evidence is overwhelming:

- **Women are more likely to adopt sustainable practices** and consider ecological impacts, making them [allies in climate adaptation](#).
- **Women invest in community outcomes** — sharing knowledge, building social networks, and reinvesting in family welfare — rather than only individual gains.
- **Closing the gender gap in agriculture** could boost global GDP by nearly \$1 trillion and reduce global food insecurity by about two percentage points, impacting 45 million people.

In short, investing in women is not charity. It is the smartest bet for productivity, resilience, and sustainability.



## FROM MARGINS TO MAINSTREAM

Agricultural extension has long operated on outdated assumptions: that the “farmer” is male, that knowledge automatically flows within households, and that productivity alone is the measure of success. These assumptions have sidelined half of the farming population.

As extension professionals, remind yourself:

- *Participation ≠ empowerment.*
- *Empowerment ≠ transformation.*
- True empowerment shifts power, agency, and control.
- True transformation shifts systems and norms, not just individuals.

As extension professionals, ask yourself:

- Do your programs treat women as legitimate farmers, or as “helpers”?
- Do your indicators measure empowerment, or just attendance?
- Do your technologies address women’s tasks, or only men’s?
- Does your research disaggregate data by gender, caste, and class, or present “farmers” as a homogenous group?

Your answers will determine whether extension remains relevant in a feminising agriculture, or whether it continues to reproduce exclusion.

If India and other countries are serious about achieving food security, climate resilience, and inclusive growth, the extension system must change its course. That means:

- Recognising women as farmers in their own right.
- Designing technologies and services that respond to their realities.
- Creating platforms that amplify women’s voices and leadership.
- Bundling knowledge with rights, resources, and institutional support.

And integrating any of the above in extension is not mission creep nor beyond the mandate. These have always been implied, but were never put into active practice.

Women already sustain agriculture with invisible labour. The real question is whether extension services will continue to ignore them — or finally help transform their labour into power, recognition, and leadership.

## THE CALL

Feminisation of agriculture is not an anomaly. It is the future. But feminisation must not mean feminisation of poverty and burden. It must mean feminisation of empowerment, leadership, and resilience.

As extension professionals, we hold the tools to make that shift. The question is whether we have the courage to use them.

Stop asking how to “include” women. Start building systems that work for women. Only then will extension truly serve ‘farmers.’

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