
Women's Land Ownership in Bihar: An Analysis of Socio-Legal Barriers and Structural Challenges

Amrit Warshini¹, Veenita Kumari², Sugandha Munshi³, Aman Verma⁴

ABSTRACT

Women's land ownership still remains limited in Bihar, despite legal reforms to enhance gender equality in property rights. This study investigates barriers to land ownership for women farmers in Bihar's Tirhut division, focusing on three districts: West Champaran, Muzaffarpur, and Sheohar. Using a mixed-methods approach, structured interviews and focus group discussions, captured quantitative and qualitative data from 120 farmers selected through a multi-stage sampling process. Findings reveal that only 7.5% of the surveyed women possess land titles, primarily obtained through inheritance. Barriers to ownership include financial constraints (63.1%), restrictive socio-cultural norms (18.0%), and limited awareness of land rights (18.9%). Correlation analysis indicates that 'access to legal services' ($r=0.497$) and 'participation in community meetings' ($r=0.239$) are significantly associated with land ownership, suggesting that legal support and community engagement are critical enablers. However, demographic factors like age, education, and income show no significant impact on ownership, underscoring the complex socio-legal landscape influencing women's land rights. These results suggest empowering women through legal aid, enhanced community involvement, and targeted financial support could mitigate barriers, fostering greater land ownership and economic stability for women farmers in Bihar.

Keywords: Women's Land Ownership, Bihar, Gender Equality, Barriers, Agricultural Land, Legal Empowerment, Socio-Cultural Norms, Economic Stability

Introduction

In India, women's land ownership still remains low, despite legal reforms aimed at gender equality. Nationally, women represent about 13.9 percent of land owners (Agarwal et al., 2021). The situation is more critical in Bihar, with only 13.31 percent of landholdings registered under women's names, while

-
1. Research Intern, National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE)
 2. Deputy Director, National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE)
 3. Senior Associate Scientist-Lead Specialist at International Rice Research Institute (IRRI)
 4. Research Intern, National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE)

Corresponding author:

Article Received Date: 05.08.2025

Article Accepted Date: 04.09.2025

men own 87.27 percent (Singh et al., 2019). Agriculture forms the backbone of Bihar's economy, employing 77.0 percent of the workforce and contributing 35.0 percent to the State's GDP. It is essential for rural livelihoods, with 88.0 percent of the population residing in rural areas. Key crops include rice, wheat, maize, and sugarcane (Singh et al., 2015). Despite showing a growth rate of 7.1 percent in recent years, agriculture in Bihar faces challenges like low productivity and poor infrastructure (Ranjan, 2020), making agricultural growth vital for poverty reduction. Women comprise 70.0 percent of the agricultural labour force and are critical to Bihar's agriculture. However, they face severe constraints, with only 13.31 percent holding land titles, which limits their access to credit, inputs, and technology.

Women's wages are also 7.04 percent less than men's, and their contributions to allied sectors, such as dairying and poultry, are often under-valued (Singh et al., 2019). Land ownership profoundly impacts women, providing financial security, empowerment, and higher social status within households and communities. Land-owning women are more likely to access credit, make agricultural investments, and benefit from reduced vulnerability to social exploitation.

Methodology

This study investigates the barriers to land ownership for women farmers in Bihar, employing a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively capture the quantitative and qualitative factors influencing access to land ownership conducted in Bihar's Tirhut division, a significant agricultural region, the research strategically selected three districts – West Champaran, Muzaffarpur, and Sheohar – based on their diverse geographical characteristics to represent the region's agricultural landscape. A multi-stage sampling method was used, beginning with purposive sampling to identify the districts. One block per district and two villages per block were selected using random sampling. Hence, there were a total of 120 respondents, proportionally distributed across the districts. Data collection incorporated structured interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews, guided by a detailed schedule with closed and open-ended questions, were conducted in the local language to ensure clarity and authentic responses. Focus group discussions were carefully designed to capture community dynamics and collective insights on women's land ownership.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify predictors of land ownership, while demographic and socio-economic variables were subjected to percentage analysis. A structured database was developed to ensure data quality, incorporating systematic data entry protocols and regular validation checks. Demographic characteristics, including district-specific sex ratios, provided a contextual foundation for understanding

the gender-based disparities in land ownership throughout the study area.

Results and Discussion

According to Table 1, the maximum number of respondents were from West Champaran, with the majority falling into the middle age category (31-46 years), suggesting a workforce that balances family responsibilities with agricultural roles. More than half of the women farmers had completed high school, while only 1.67 percent were graduates, highlighting limited access to higher education. Approximately 75.83 percent of the respondents were married and belonged to joint families, reflecting a reliance on extended family support for resources and labor. A majority engaged in farming alongside other occupations, with medium-income levels, indicating the need for diversified income sources to sustain their livelihoods.

In terms of financial inclusion, most women had access to credit, but primarily through informal sources such as family and friends. This finding underscores that women farmers are still unable to fully benefit from formal financial institutions or banks, largely due to their low levels of land ownership. Nearly half of the respondents were engaged in commercial farming, often relying on mechanized, power-operated machinery, where decision-making was commonly shared with spouses. Regarding legal knowledge, most respondents (60.83%) were only somewhat aware of land rights, while detailed legal awareness was limited. Only 7.5 percent of the respondents owned land, with financial constraints cited as the most significant barrier. Inheritance was the most common means of acquiring land, while cultural norms and economic limitations further restricted ownership opportunities.

Table 1: Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Land Ownership Characteristics of Women Farmers in Bihar's Tirhut Division

	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Districts	West Champaran	50	41.67%
	Muzaffarpur	40	33.33%
	Sheohar	30	25.00%
Age	Young (<30)	33	27.5%
	Middle (31-46)	70	58.33%
	Senior (≥47)	17	14.17%

Education	Illiterate	4	3.33%
	Primary	22	18.33%
	Middle	20	16.67%
	High School	63	52.50%
	Graduate	2	1.67%
Marital Status	Unmarried	28	23.33%
	Married	91	75.83%
Family Type	Nuclear	36	30.00%
	Joint	84	70.00%
Occupation	Farming only	24	20.00%
	Homemaker	17	14.17%
	Farming and others	69	57.50%
Annual Income	Low Income (≤59,013 INR)	16	13.33%
	Medium Income	86	71.67%
	High Income	18	15.00%
Access to Credit	Yes	112	93.33%
	No	8	6.67%
Primary Sources of Credit	Banks	10	08.33%
	Microfinance institutions	8	06.66%
	Self-help groups (SHGs)	12	10.00%
	Family/Friends	40	33.33%
	Informal lenders	30	25.00%
	NGOs/ Development Organizations/ International Orgs	12	10.00%
Types of Farming	Subsistence	25	20.83%
	Commercial	57	47.50%
	Mixed	33	27.50%
Agricultural Technology	Hand machines	45	37.50%
	Power-operated machinery	54	45.00%
	Both hand machines and power operated	21	17.50%

Decision-Making Power	Self	35	29.17%
	Jointly with spouse	65	54.17%
	Spouse	14	11.67%
	Other family members	6	5.00%
Awareness of Land Rights	Very much aware	19	15.83%
	Somewhat aware	73	60.83%
	Not aware at all	28	23.33%
Access to Legal Services	Yes	11	9.17%
	No	109	90.83%
Land Ownership	Yes	9	7.50%
	No	111	92.50%
Land Acquisition Method	Inherited	4	03.33%
	Purchased	1	0.83%
	Purchased and inherited from mother	2	1.66%
	Purchased by husband	1	0.83%
	Other	1	0.83%
Barriers to Land Ownership	Financial constraints	70	58.34%
	Cultural norms	20	16.66%

Table 2: Women's Participation and Socio-Cultural Factors in Land Ownership

Aspect	Findings
Participation in Local Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 49.17% participate sometimes, 20.83% always attend. • Most women maintain some engagement in community affairs.
Influence of Community Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NGOs like Samakhya enhance women's participation and decision-making capabilities. • Self-help groups like Jeevika provide financial support, promoting economic empowerment.

Socio-Cultural Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 86.67% agree that women should have equal rights to land ownership. 82.5% accept women’s land ownership in their communities.
Inheritance Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 60% believe family inheritance favors sons over daughters, indicating strong patriarchal norms.
Challenges in Land Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75.83% acknowledge women face more challenges than men in obtaining land ownership. Limited access to financial resources and legal knowledge are key barriers.
Perceived Benefits of Land Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 89.17% believe land ownership would improve women’s social status, highlighting its empowering potential.

The Table 2 summarises the critical insights into women’s involvement in local meetings and the socio-cultural factors affecting their land ownership rights in Bihar. The findings highlight the progress made in terms of participation and acceptance of women’s rights to land, but at the same time, the persistent challenges rooted in traditional practices and societal norms.

Barriers to Women's Land Ownership

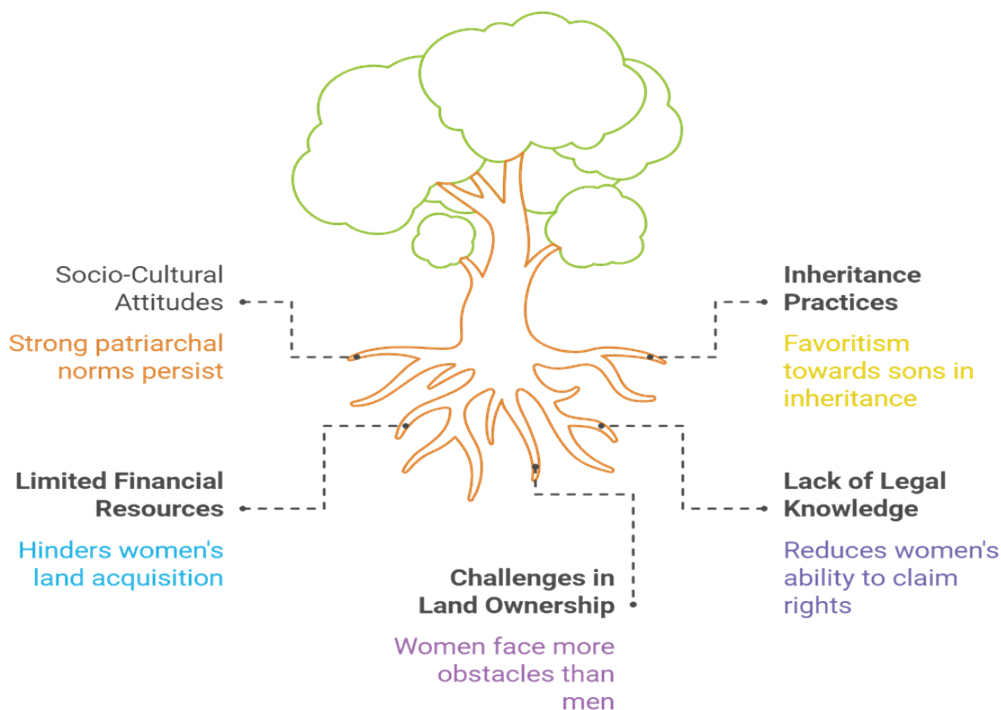


Figure 1 : Barriers to Women Land Ownership

Table 3: Correlation Analysis between Characteristics of Land Ownership and Land Ownership Status

S. No.	Variables	Coefficient of Correlation (r)
1	Age	0.118 NS
2	Education	0.138 NS
3	Marital Status	0.181*
4	Family Type	0.150 NS
5	Occupation	0.218*
6	Annual Income	0.109 NS
7	Access to Credit	0.119 NS
8	Types of Farming	0.229*
9	Practices and Technologies Used in Agricultural Activities	-0.034 NS
10	Decision-Making about Agricultural Practices	-0.003 NS
11	Participation in Local Meetings	0.239**
12	Awareness of Laws regarding Women's Land Ownership Rights	0.213*
13	Access to Legal Services related to Land Rights	0.497**
14	Socio-cultural Factors Related to Women's Land Ownership	0.039 NS

NS: Non-significant at 0.05 level, **Significant at 0.01 level.

Table 3 provides insights into the relationship between women's demographic, socioeconomic, and socio-legal characteristics and their land ownership status. The strongest positive correlations emerged for access to legal services ($r=0.497^{**}$) and participation in local meetings ($r=0.239^{**}$), both significant at the 0.01 level. This highlights the centrality of institutional and community support in strengthening women's claims to land.

Among demographic and socioeconomic factors, marital status ($r=0.181^*$) and occupation ($r=0.218^*$) were significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that women's family position and engagement in multiple income-generating activities enhance their likelihood of land ownership. By contrast, age, education, and income were not significantly associated with land ownership, suggesting that these individual-level characteristics alone may not translate into ownership

gains in the face of entrenched cultural and financial barriers. This pattern underscores that demographic influences are selective rather than uniform. While being married and having diversified occupations may provide women with stronger social and economic leverage, other characteristics such as age or education do not guarantee ownership. Instead, ownership prospects are more strongly shaped by structural factors such as inheritance practices, financial constraints, and cultural norms. This reveals that women's land ownership in Bihar remains constrained by financial, legal, and cultural barriers, despite growing awareness of land rights and increasing participation in community forums. Legal services and community participation appear to be transformative factors, but demographic factors exert uneven effects: marital status and occupation matter, while age, education, and income do not. This nuanced result challenges simplistic assumptions that demographic progress (e.g., higher education or income) automatically leads to ownership.

Conclusion

This research sheds light on the persistent barriers to women's land ownership in Bihar's Tirhut division, revealing a complex interplay of socio-legal factors that hinder progress toward gender equality in property rights. Despite legal reforms aimed at promoting women's land ownership, only 7.5 percent of the women surveyed possess land titles, predominantly acquired through inheritance. The findings indicate that financial constraints (63.1%) and restrictive socio-cultural norms (18.0%) significantly impede women's ability to acquire and control land. The analysis further highlights that access to legal services ($r=0.497$) and participation in local meetings ($r=0.239$) are critical enablers of land ownership for women, underscoring the importance of legal and community support systems. Among demographic factors, marital status and occupation showed modest but significant correlations with land ownership, while age, education, and income did not. This suggests that socio-cultural attitudes and institutional support play a more pivotal role than individual demographic attributes in determining women's access to land.

Importantly, the study reveals a notable shift in community attitudes, with 86.67 percent of the respondents acknowledging the need for equal rights to land ownership for women. This widespread acceptance signals an emerging social foundation upon which policy reforms and advocacy initiatives can build. If strategically leveraged, this progressive sentiment can accelerate legal enforcement, enhance community-driven reforms, and normalize women's ownership of land as a legitimate and widely supported practice. In conclusion, addressing the barriers to women's land ownership in Bihar requires a multi-dimensional approach that integrates legal reforms, community engagement,

and socio-economic support. By aligning policy measures with the growing acceptance of gender equality in land rights, interventions can gain stronger community legitimacy, thereby enhancing women's economic stability and social standing and contributing to the broader goals of gender equality and sustainable development in the region.

Recommendations

Focused interventions should address legal and socio-cultural barriers to enhance women's land ownership in Bihar. Increasing access to legal aid and awareness programs can empower women with knowledge of their land rights, while community engagement initiatives encourage collective action and foster support networks. Financial support tailored to women, such as low-interest loans, could be a useful strategy to address economic barriers, and targeted cultural sensitization programs could help shift restrictive gender norms. Crucially, the finding that 86.67 percent of respondents support equal rights to land ownership presents a unique opportunity for policymakers, NGOs, and local leaders to act on a favorable public mindset. This acceptance can be leveraged to strengthen policy advocacy, as reforms framed in terms of community-supported initiatives are likely to face less resistance and enjoy broader legitimacy. Community-led programs and self-help groups can build on this sentiment by showcasing women landowners as role models and creating platforms where female ownership is normalized. Similarly, public awareness campaigns should now move beyond persuading communities about the importance of women's land rights and instead focus on practical strategies for ensuring these rights are realized. With communities already receptive, NGOs and legal service providers can expand training sessions, legal literacy workshops, and property rights campaigns that will resonate more deeply and achieve faster adoption. Finally, consistent policy enforcement and continuous research to monitor the effectiveness of these strategies are essential to create a supportive environment that enables women's land ownership and ensures long-term economic security.

References

- Agarwal, B. (1994). *A field of one's own: Gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Agarwal, B., Anthwal, P., & Mahesh, M. (2021). How many and which women own land in India? Inter-gender and intra-gender gaps. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 57(11), 1807–1829.
- Allendorf, K. (2007). Do women's land rights promote empowerment and family welfare? Evidence from Nepal. *World Development*, 35(11), 1975–1988.

- Desai, S., & Barik, D. (2017). Land live: Land ownership in rural India and intra-household exchanges (Working Paper No. 2017-1). National Council of Applied Economic Research.
- Doss, C., & Meinzen-Dick, R. (2020). Land tenure security for women: A conceptual framework. *Land Use Policy*, 99, 105080.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2011). The state of food and agriculture 2010–2011: Women in agriculture – Closing the gender gap for development. FAO.
- Kelkar, G. (2013, April 8–11). The fog of entitlement: Women and land in India. Paper presented at the Annual World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, Washington, DC. Landesa.
- Meinzen-Dick, R., et al. (2017). Women’s land rights as a pathway to poverty reduction: A framework and review of available evidence. International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).
- Mishra, K., & Sam, A. G. (2016). Does women’s land ownership promote their empowerment? Empirical evidence from Nepal. *World Development*, 78, 360–371.
- Muchomba, F. M. (2017). Women’s land tenure security and household human capital: Evidence from Ethiopia’s land certification. *World Development*, 98, 310–324.
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2021). Insecure land rights for women: A threat to progress on gender equality and sustainable development. UN OHCHR.
- Singh, K., Kumari, P., & Ahmad, N. (2019). An analysis of women’s participation in agriculture in Bihar. *AgriSciRN: Agricultural Extension Services*.
- Singh, K., Singh, R., Kumar, A., Meena, M., & Shahi, B. (2015). Agricultural scenario and strategies for development: The case of Bihar. *SRPN: Globalization (Sustainability)*.
- UN Women. (2020). Realizing women’s rights to land and other productive resources (2nd ed.). UN Women.
- World Bank. (2024). Do courts grant women their inheritance shares? An analysis of case law in India. *World Development*, 182, 106688.
- World Bank. (n.d.). Ownership of land (Percentage of women who own land alone). Gender Data Portal.