

Editorial

Dairy farming is often described in terms of litres, livestock and logistics. But in rural India, it is also a story of women—of quiet economic power, daily discipline and social transformation. If we want to talk seriously about women’s empowerment in India, we cannot ignore the cowsheds, milk cans and early morning collection centres that form the backbone of the dairy sector. India is the world’s largest milk producer. Behind this statistic are millions of rural households, and within those households, it is women who do much of the work: feeding cattle, cleaning sheds, milking animals and managing small but steady streams of income. Dairy farming fits into the rhythm of rural life. It does not demand large landholdings. It can be started with a few animals. It offers daily returns instead of seasonal payouts. These features make it uniquely accessible to women. Unlike many agricultural activities, dairy farming can be managed from the homestead. This matters in rural India, where mobility is often restricted by social norms. Women who may not be allowed to travel far for wage labour can still run dairy operations. When milk is collected at the village level through cooperative societies, women can participate without stepping outside socially accepted boundaries. Over time, that participation reshapes those very boundaries. Economic empowerment begins with income in one’s own hands. Regular earnings from milk sales—however modest—give women bargaining power within the household. When a woman contributes to school fees, medical expenses or daily groceries, her voice carries more weight in family decisions. Dairy income is often used for children’s education and nutrition, creating a cycle of long-term benefits. The cooperative model has played a transformative role. Institutions inspired by the success of movements like the White Revolution have enabled women to become members of dairy societies in their own names. Direct payment into bank accounts strengthens financial inclusion. When women attend cooperative meetings, vote in elections and sometimes even lead village-level societies, empowerment moves from economic to institutional. Self-help groups have amplified this impact. By pooling savings and accessing credit, rural women can purchase improved breeds, invest in better fodder and adopt basic veterinary care. Training programmes on animal health, hygiene and milk quality build technical confidence. A woman who once saw herself only as a helper in the household begins to see herself as an entrepreneur. Dairy farming also spreads risk. Crop failure due to erratic rainfall can devastate a farming family. Milk production, by contrast, offers daily liquidity. In a country where climate change increasingly threatens agriculture, this steady income stream acts as a buffer. For women, who often manage household consumption, this stability reduces stress and vulnerability. Yet the promise of dairy-led empowerment is not automatic. Women still face barriers: lack of land titles, limited access to formal credit, unpaid labour burdens and inadequate veterinary services. In many cases, even when women do the work, assets are registered in men’s names. True empowerment requires deliberate policy support—recognition of women as farmers, targeted training, childcare support during meetings and leadership quotas in cooperatives. Technology offers new possibilities. Digital payment systems, mobile-based advisory services and cold-chain infrastructure can reduce middlemen and improve returns. But access must be inclusive. If smartphones and training remain concentrated among men, the digital shift will widen gaps instead of closing them. Dairy farming is not a silver bullet for gender inequality. It does not dismantle patriarchy overnight. But it does something powerful: it puts income, skills and social networks into the hands of rural women within an existing and culturally accepted framework. Change rooted in everyday practice is often more durable than change imposed from above. When a rural woman manages her dairy unit, negotiates with a cooperative, deposits money in her bank account and plans for her children’s future, she is not just producing milk. She is reshaping her role in the household and the village economy. If India seeks inclusive rural development, investing in women-centred dairy systems is not charity. It is sound economics—and sound social policy.

Editor-in-Chief



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