Women at the Centre: One Year of the 1-Acre Food Forest Programme

This International Women's Day invites us to face a truth that is well known in villages but still under-recognised in policy and markets. Across rural India, agriculture is sustained every day by women. They sow, weed, harvest, care for livestock, manage household nutrition, and make the daily decisions that keep farms functioning. Yet despite carrying much of the work, women are not always seen as farmers in formal systems.

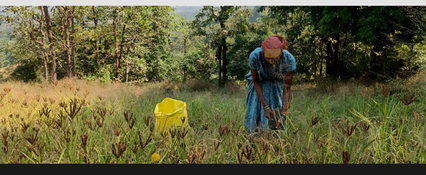
For Raah, this year's Women's Day carries particular meaning. It marks one full year since we launched the 1-Acre Food Forest programme, or 1AFF. This initiative places women farmers at the centre of their family's livelihood. It gives women the authority to decide how their one acre is cultivated and enables them to benefit directly from the food security and income it generates for their households.

Our work in the Northern Western Ghats of Maharashtra has long shown us how agriculture functions at the household level. Men often migrate to towns and cities in search of wage labor. They return briefly during the monsoon to assist with cultivation and then leave again. Women remain behind to manage the continuous work of farming, food production, and animal husbandry. For many households, the woman farmer operates largely within a subsistence system. A single rainfed rice crop arrives with the monsoon, while the public distribution system supports the family through the remaining months.

At the same time, patriarchy shapes agrarian systems in practical, measurable ways. Land titles, bank linkages, membership records, and market-facing documentation often remain in men's names. Women manage crops and food systems, but men are more likely to be recognised as farmers in official processes. This divide influences who receives information first, who qualifies for training and credit, and who participates in producer institutions. Recognition, not effort, often determines access.

So what has changed over the past year for our 1-Acre Wonder Women?

An acre in the Western Ghats rarely resembles the flat, uniform fields often assumed in agricultural planning. Land parcels sit on slopes, interrupted by rocks, pathways, and uneven soil depth. Mechanisation is difficult. Irrigation is unreliable. Heavy rainfall can wash away soil and nutrients. Yet this landscape represents the reality for thousands of tribal and smallholder households. If India's agricultural future is to be climate-ready and livelihood-secure, it must work for this kind of land too.



The 1AFF Model

The 1AFF model treats one acre as a year-round production system built through ecological layering and economic sequencing. Instead of relying on a single seasonal crop, farmers cultivate a diverse mix of crops and perennials with varying maturity cycles. Harvests are staggered and so cash flow is distributed better through the year. This matters for small households because it reduces the pressure of a single selling window and spreads risk across the year.

Long-term Fruit
- Establish fruit trees for sustainable, long-term food production.
- Build future income while strengthening the ecological base

Short-term Veggies
- Focus on fast-growing vegetables for immediate harvest and soil improvement.
- Provide immediate nutrition and early income.

Medium-term Legumes
- Plant legumes to enrich soil nitrogen for future crops.
- Help bridge financial gaps.

This approach responds directly to India's farm structure. Small and marginal holdings form the bulk of operational farms. Such plots thrive only when timing, diversification, and careful cost management come together. Dependence on a single crop or a single market window increases risk sharply. Rainfed agriculture continues to cover a large portion of cultivated land and remains uncertain year to year. Land degradation adds further pressure. These challenges point toward farming systems that conserve soil, retain moisture, improve input efficiency, and strengthen market pathways.

Policy directions are beginning to align with women-led pathways. National guidelines promoting organic and natural farming increasingly prioritise hilly, tribal, and rainfed regions, while encouraging participation by women farmers and self-help groups. These groups manage savings, mutual accountability, and collective decision-making, creating a strong base for agricultural programmes to scale.

Women Farmers and the Shift Toward Services-Supported Agriculture

The coming decade will also see agriculture become more service-led and information-rich. India is building digital public infrastructure for agriculture through initiatives such as the Digital Agriculture Mission, AgriStack, and decision-support platforms. These systems can improve advisory services, scheme delivery, and farm planning. A women-led future depends on ensuring women can access these tools through local onboarding support, language-appropriate advisories, and training designed around women's roles and time constraints.

Shared Services

Small farms benefit from nursery management, custom hiring, input planning, grading, logistics, and value addition – services that align naturally with women-led enterprise models that grow through collectives and federations.

Market Strength

As consumer demand increasingly values quality, consistency, and traceability, women's institutions can play stronger roles in aggregation, quality control, and market negotiation.

Climate-Resilient Science

Climate-resilient science achieves faster adoption when women are positioned as primary learners. Women manage many of the daily routines that sustain farms across seasons, from input use to post-harvest handling. When knowledge reaches them directly, practices are more likely to be followed consistently.

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If India's agricultural future is to be climate-ready and livelihood-secure, it must work for this kind of farmer, above all.