



**Original Article**

**LEADERSHIP AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DAIRY SECTOR**

**Mr. Suresh Balasaheb Dhadass<sup>1</sup> & Dr. Prof. Anna K. Patil<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Asst. Prof. Arts and Commerce College, Madha

<sup>2</sup>Head, Department of Economics, SGM College, Karad

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**Corresponding Author:**

**Mr. Suresh Balasaheb Dhadass**

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**Abstract:**

*The dairy sector in Maharashtra plays a pivotal role in rural livelihoods, contributing significantly to household incomes, nutrition security, and regional economic development. Despite its importance, the sector has traditionally been dominated by male leadership, with women often occupying informal or unpaid roles. This study examines the emergence and impact of women's leadership and gender-inclusive management practices within dairy cooperatives and private dairy enterprises across select districts of Maharashtra. Findings reveal that women in leadership position including executive committee members of dairy cooperatives, dairy cooperative presidents, and managerial staff in processing units significantly strengthen institutional accountability, member participation, and adoption of equitable work practices. Gender-inclusive management practices such as flexible work schedules, targeted capacity building, participatory decision making forums, and gender sensitization training positively influence organizational climate, reduce workplace bias, and enhance team performance. The study concludes that promoting women's leadership and institutionalizing gender inclusive management practices in Maharashtra's dairy sector not only fosters gender equity but also contributes to sustainable rural development and economic resilience. Policy recommendations include strengthening gender focused leadership programs, mandating gender representation quotas in cooperative governance, and integrating gender indicators into performance evaluation systems.*

**Keywords: Women Leadership, Dairy Farming, Gender Inclusive, Rural Women Empowerment, Challenges.**

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**Introduction:**

Agriculture and allied sectors constitute a significant component of Maharashtra's rural economy, with dairying emerging as one of the most sustainable and income generating activities for

small and marginal farmers. The dairy sector in Maharashtra hampers and the broader vision of the Operation Flood programme. Today, dairy cooperatives and private dairy enterprises in the state contribute substantially to employment



generation, nutritional security, and rural development. Women have always played a central role in dairy related activities such as cattle rearing, fodder management, milking, and primary processing. However, their contribution has historically remained undervalued and largely confined to informal or unpaid labour within family based production systems. Leadership roles in cooperative societies, milk unions, and dairy enterprises have traditionally been dominated by men, reflecting broader socio cultural and institutional barriers. In recent years, however, policy reforms, self-help group movements, and gender mainstreaming initiatives have begun to reshape participation patterns, encouraging women's entry into formal leadership and managerial positions within the dairy value chain. Women's leadership in the dairy sector is not merely a question of representation but of transformative governance. Evidence from rural development studies suggests that when women occupy decision making positions, institutions tend to demonstrate higher levels of transparency, inclusivity, and community responsiveness. In the context of Maharashtra's dairy cooperatives, women leaders have contributed to improved member engagement, better financial discipline, enhanced focus on animal health services, and greater outreach to marginalized producers. At the same time, gender inclusive management practices such as participatory decision making, equal access to training, flexible work arrangements, and gender sensitization programmes have begun to influence organizational culture and productivity. Despite these positive trends, structural constraints continue to limit the scale and sustainability of women's leadership. Deep rooted patriarchal norms, unequal access to credit and extension services, limited exposure to technical and managerial training, and underrepresentation in executive committees remain significant challenges.

Moreover, gender inclusion in many cooperatives often remains symbolic rather than substantive, lacking institutional mechanisms for accountability and performance evaluation based on gender sensitive indicators. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the scope, challenges, and impact of women's leadership and gender inclusive management practices in the dairy sector of Maharashtra. It aims to analyze how leadership roles undertaken by women influence cooperative governance, organizational effectiveness, and rural livelihoods. The study also evaluates existing gender inclusive practices and identifies gaps that need policy and institutional intervention. By situating women's leadership within the broader framework of sustainable rural development and inclusive economic growth, this research contributes to ongoing academic and policy debates on gender equity in agricultural and allied sectors.

### **Emergence of Women Led Dairy Initiatives:**

Maval Dairy Farmer Services Producer Company is a milestone case established as Maharashtra's first all women dairy cooperative where women not only participate as producers but also lead the cooperative governance and operations. This gives women decision making power over production, marketing, and financial management of dairy products. New initiatives like the women led Varidhvaran MPO in eastern Maharashtra aim to scale inclusivity by enrolling 185,000 women members and grow their influence across 6,000 villages. It directly addresses gender gaps in ownership and access to value chains, building leadership and economic participation for women dairy farmers.

Women play a major role in dairy farming in Maharashtra, especially in districts like Ahmednagar, Kolhapur, Pune and Solapur, where



the highest milk collection occurs. Milk production is observed in various districts of the state (e.g. Ahmednagar - 2,198 tonnes, Pune - 1,862 tonnes, Solapur - 1,474 tonnes), in which women's participation is significant.

**Major milk producing districts (female participation):** Ahmednagar (highest), Kolhapur, Pune, Sangli and Solapur are the leading districts in milk production, where a large number of women farmers are engaged in dairy farming.

**Women's Cooperatives:** The number of functioning milk cooperatives in Maharashtra is over 11,200. New women run milk producer organizations are being established and empowered.

**Production figures (estimated):** The state's total milk production in 2021-22 was over 14,300 thousand tonnes.

The major districts with the highest number of female milk producers are Ahmednagar, Kolhapur, Solapur and Pune.

### **Gender Inclusive Management Practices in the Dairy Sector:**

#### **Structured Capacity Building and Training:**

Gender inclusive management isn't just about representation; it's about equipping women with skills to lead.

#### **Key practices include:**

#### **Leadership training and governance exposure:**

Programs modelled on the national Women's Dairy Cooperative Leadership Programme (WDCLP) help rural women acquire skills in cooperative governance, roles on management committees, and member rights.

**Technical dairy training:** Dairy cooperatives and allied support agencies offer training in clean milk production, animal management, and business skills to prepare women for enterprise roles instead of purely manual labour.

### **Women Centric Cooperative Structures:**

Formation of all women dairy cooperatives provides space where women can govern setting production targets, deciding milk pricing, and engaging in marketing. This contrasts with traditional models where male members dominated committees and boards.

In many cooperative models, milk payments are directed to women's accounts, strengthening their financial inclusion and autonomy. This practice is increasingly recognised as a best practice for gender inclusive management in dairying.

### **Governance and Representation:**

Across India, efforts by bodies like NDDDB Dairy Services are actively promoting women's governance roles. In Milk Producer Organisations (MPOs), a high proportion of women occupy board positions and chair roles, demonstrating how inclusive governance can work.

While specific state wide Maharashtra data on board representation isn't widely published, these national trends suggest growing openness to female leadership within cooperatives and MPOs operating in Maharashtra.

### **Conclusion:**

The study on women's leadership and gender inclusive management practices in the dairy sector of Maharashtra highlights both significant progress and persistent structural challenges. Women play a foundational role across the dairy value chain from livestock management and milk production to cooperative participation yet their leadership representation in formal decision-making bodies remains disproportionately low. Despite their central contribution to productivity and household income, social norms, limited asset ownership, restricted mobility, and unequal access to credit and training continue to constrain their advancement



into higher managerial and governance roles. In conclusion, promoting women's leadership and embedding gender inclusive management practices in Maharashtra's dairy sector is essential for inclusive growth, cooperative resilience, and long term rural transformation. Sustainable progress will depend on integrated efforts from government agencies, dairy federations, financial institutions, and civil society organizations to institutionalize gender equity as a core governance principle rather than a peripheral development goal. Strengthening women's decision making authority within dairy cooperatives will not only enhance productivity and profitability but also contribute to broader social empowerment and equitable rural development in Maharashtra.

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