

Thousands of Indian women join farmers' protests against new laws

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Women farmers attend a protest against farm laws on International Women's Day near Haryana-Delhi border [Danish Siddiqui/Reuters]

New Delhi, March 8 (RHC)-- Thousands of women joined protests by farmers on the outskirts of New Delhi to mark International Women's Day, demanding the scrapping of new agricultural laws that open up the country's vast farm sector to private buyers.

The demonstrations on Monday were held at multiple sites on the capital's fringes where tens of thousands of farmers have camped for more than three months to protest against the laws, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government says are necessary to modernise agriculture.

Wearing bright yellow scarves representing the colour of mustard fields, the women took centre stage at one key site, chanting slogans, holding small marches, and making speeches against the laws. "This is an important day as it represents women's strength," said Veena, a 37-year-old from a farming family, who gave only one name in order to protect her identity.

"I believe if we women are united, then we can achieve our target much quicker," added Veena, who travelled from the northern state of Punjab to the sprawling Tikri protest spot.

More than 20,000 women gathered at the site near Delhi's border with the state of Haryana, police and event organisers said. "This is a day that will be managed and controlled by women, the speakers will be women, there will be a lot of feminist perspectives brought in, and discussions on what these laws mean for women farmers," said farm activist Kavitha Kuruganti. "It is one more occasion to showcase and highlight the contribution of women farmers both in agriculture in India as well as to this movement."

Holding the flags of farm unions, they listened to female farm leaders speak and chanted slogans against the laws. At least 17 took part in a day-long hunger strike. "Women are sitting here, out in the open, in protest, but Modi doesn't care. He doesn't care about mothers, sisters, and daughters. He doesn't care about women. That's clear," said Mandeep Kaur, a female farmer who travelled 1,100 km (680 miles) from Chhattisgarh state to participate in the protests.

Women have been prominent at the forefront of the protests, which have posed one of the biggest challenges to Modi since he took office in 2014. Many travelled with the thousands of male farmers who arrived at the protest sites in late November and have since organized and led protest marches, run medical camps and massive soup kitchens that feed thousands, and raised demands for gender equality.

"Today Modi is sending wishes to women across the country on International Women's Day. Who are these women he is sending wishes to? We are also like his daughters, but he clearly doesn't care about us," said Babli Singh, a farm leader.

Demonstrations were also held at Jantar Mantar, an area of New Delhi near Parliament where about 100 women held placards denouncing the new laws and calling for their withdrawal. "Today we are finding ourselves under attack at all fronts. As women, as peasants, as workers, as youth and students," said women rights activist Sucharita, who uses one name. "We are opposed to the laws that have been passed in favour of corporations."

Multiple rounds of talks between the government and farmers have failed to end the deadlock. The farmers have rejected an offer from the government to put the laws on hold for 18 months, saying they will not settle for anything less than a complete repeal. Modi's government says the reforms will bring private investment into a vast and antiquated farm sector, improve supply chains and cut colossal waste.

Agriculture accounts for nearly 15 percent of India's \$2.9-trillion economy and employs about half its workforce. Women farmers have as much at stake as men from the new farm laws, Kuruganti added. "Markets that are distant as well as exploitative make single women farmers more vulnerable, and in any case, a patriarchal society has discriminated and made them vulnerable."

International Women's Day, sponsored by the United Nations since 1975, celebrates women's achievements and aims to further their rights. Women often embody what agricultural experts call an "invisible workforce" on India's vast farmlands.

Nearly 75 percent of rural women in India who work full-time are farmers, according to the anti-poverty group Oxfam India, and the numbers are expected to rise as more men migrate to cities for jobs. Yet, less than 13 percent of women own the land they till.

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