

ENHANCING WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT IN AGRIBUSINESS ACTIVITIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate dynamics of women's engagement in agri-business in India, examining the challenges they face and the opportunities for empowerment within the agricultural landscape. The importance of women in Indian agriculture is deeply rooted in tradition, where they contribute significantly to various facets of farming. However, persistent challenges hinder their full participation, including limited access to resources such as land and credit, social and cultural constraints reinforcing gender roles, and educational gaps that impede skill development. The study delves into historical perspectives, emphasizing the pivotal role played by women in traditional and modern agricultural settings. Drawing on data and case studies, it scrutinizes the nuanced challenges faced by women in agri-business, highlighting the need for gender-inclusive policies, legal frameworks, and capacity-building programs. Despite these challenges, the essay identifies opportunities for enhancing women's engagement, emphasizing the importance of integrated skill development, educational initiatives, and technological advancements. Case studies, such as the success of Self-Help Groups in Andhra Pradesh and the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana in Bihar, underscore the transformative impact of collective action, skill development, and government support. These success stories provide replicable models for empowering women in agri-business, contributing not only to economic empowerment but also to community development and social cohesion. The study concludes by advocating for a comprehensive approach that integrates policy reforms, targeted interventions, and technological innovations to unlock the full potential of women in Indian agri-business. The journey towards gender equality in the agricultural sector is not only a moral imperative but a strategic pathway for building a sustainable and inclusive future.

Keywords:

Women in agri-business, Gender disparities, Agricultural policies, Empowerment, Skill development, Social and cultural constraints, Access to resources, Technological innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

India, often dubbed as the agrarian heartland of South Asia, owes a significant portion of its agricultural success to the active participation of women in various facets of farming. The pivotal role played by women in Indian agriculture is not only deeply rooted in historical traditions but also continues to shape the contemporary landscape.

Importance of Women in Agriculture:

Agriculture in India, historically conceived as a family-based enterprise, has witnessed the indispensable contribution of women. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women constitute nearly half of the agricultural workforce in India. Their roles transcend beyond conventional labour; women actively partake in crucial activities such as seed selection, weeding, and post-harvest tasks. In an era marked by climate change and agricultural challenges, the resilience and adaptability exhibited by women become paramount for ensuring food security. Women, often the unsung heroines, form the backbone of sustainable agricultural practices.

Historical Perspective on Women's Role in Agri-business:

Delving into the historical narrative unveils a rich and diverse tapestry of women in agri-business in India. Traditionally, women have served as the custodians of indigenous agricultural knowledge, passing down time-honoured farming techniques through generations. In pre-modern agrarian societies, women often took on the role of primary cultivators, tending to household plots and ensuring family nutrition. However, the mid-20th-century Green Revolution, while transforming agricultural practices, unintentionally marginalized women as the modernization wave tended to be male-centric.

Nevertheless, historical records unveil instances where women not only confronted systemic challenges but actively engaged in trade and agricultural entrepreneurship. Ancient texts depict the prowess of women in managing agricultural businesses, overseeing markets, and orchestrating trade transactions. These historical anecdotes underscore the dynamic contributions of women to the agricultural economy, challenging stereotypes and asserting their agency in the face of adversity.

Contemporary Significance:

In contemporary India, women's significance in agri-business remains indispensable. Data from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) underscores women's substantial contributions to crop production, animal husbandry, and dairy farming. However, despite their pivotal roles, women often find themselves in informal and undervalued positions, leading to disparities in resource access and credit. Recognizing the critical link between gender equality and agricultural productivity, empowering women in agri-business emerges not only as a moral imperative but also as a strategic move for fostering sustainable rural development.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**Gender Disparities in Agri-business:**

In the vast tapestry of Indian agriculture, a concerning issue looms large – the persistent gender disparities within the agri-business sector. Despite the significant and multifaceted contributions of women to agriculture, a stark divide exists in terms of access to resources, decision-making power, and opportunities. According to a report by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), women, who make up nearly half of the agricultural workforce, are often relegated to low-wage and labour-intensive roles. The disparity is not

merely numerical but is deeply embedded in the structural fabric of agri-business, limiting the full potential of women contributors.

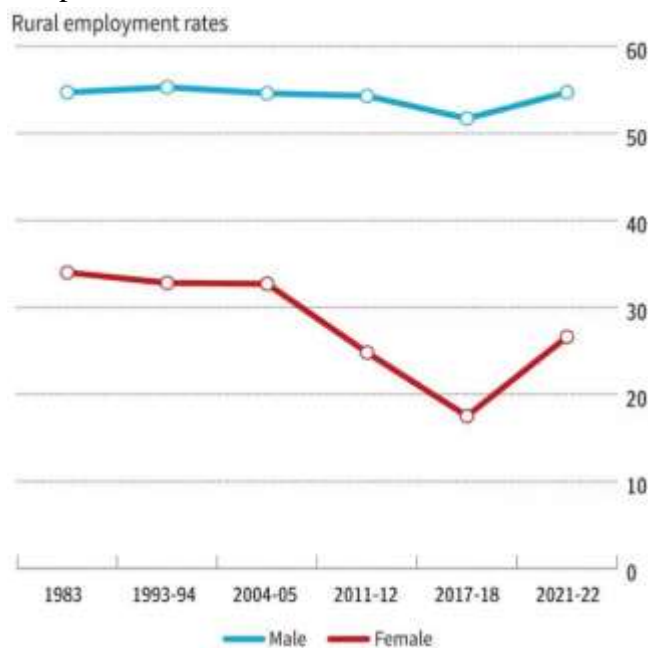


Figure 1: Rural Employment Rates in India

As evident from the above figure, the Rural Female Employment Rates have been consistently lower around 30% throughout last 40 years, which dipped even further to almost 20% in last five years. On the other hand, Rural Male Employment Rate has a steady rate over 50% all along. These data point out the widening Gender-based Employment Gap in Indian Rural context.

One of the primary challenges is the unequal access to productive resources such as land, credit, and modern agricultural technologies. Land ownership remains skewed, with women holding only a fraction of agricultural land despite their substantial contributions. The lack of access to credit further compounds the issue, hindering women from investing in their ventures or adopting advanced farming practices. These disparities perpetuate a cycle of subsistence farming, limiting the economic empowerment of women within the agri-business domain.

Underrepresentation of Women in Key Roles:

While women are the backbone of agricultural activities, their representation in key decision-making roles within agri-business remains disproportionately low. The dipping trend of women work share from around 30% in 1983 to 20% in 2022 highlights the cause of concern.

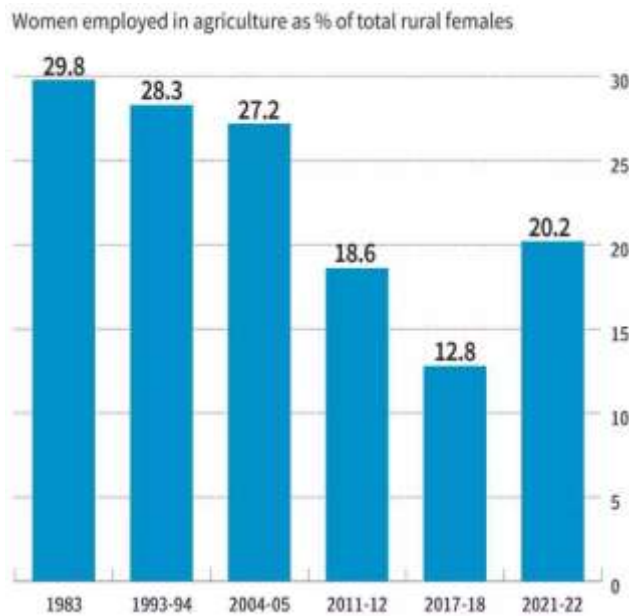


Figure 2: Rural Female Representation in Agri-business

Data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare reveals that women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, cooperative societies, and Agri-entrepreneurship ventures. This underrepresentation is a result of systemic barriers that restrict women's entry into managerial roles, limiting their ability to influence policy, access markets, and contribute to the strategic development of the sector.

Cultural norms and gender biases further exacerbate this underrepresentation, creating a glass ceiling that impedes the ascent of women in agri-business. The prevailing perception that certain roles are inherently unsuitable for women hampers their progress. The lack of inclusivity in decision-making not only stifles the potential for innovative solutions but also perpetuates a cycle of inequality within the agri-business landscape.

Addressing these gender disparities requires a multifaceted approach, acknowledging the structural impediments that hinder women's progress in agri-business. While efforts have been made to promote women in agriculture, there is a pressing need for targeted interventions that dismantle the barriers preventing their full and equitable participation.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Examine the challenges and barriers hindering women's engagement in Agri-business.
2. Investigate the Opportunities for empowering Women in the field of Agri-business.
3. Analyse successful case studies for replicable models empowering women in the Agri-business sector.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The existing body of literature on gender and agriculture presents a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted roles, challenges, and contributions of women in the agricultural sector. This review synthesizes insights from a range of studies to provide a nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics within the agricultural landscape in India.

Agarwal (2003) revisits the issue of gender and land rights, emphasizing the interconnectedness of state, family, and market in shaping women's access to and control over agricultural resources. The study sheds light on the complex interplay of socio-economic factors influencing women's land rights in both traditional and evolving agricultural settings.

Ahmed and Maitra (2010) delve into the issue of gender wage discrimination in rural and urban labour markets of Bangladesh, offering insights into the economic disparities faced by women in the agricultural workforce. The study underscores the need to address wage differentials to promote gender equity in agricultural employment.

Chayal, Dhaka, and Suwalka (2010) explore the status of women in agriculture, emphasizing their vital role in rural economies. The study underscores the need for recognizing and addressing gender disparities in access to resources and opportunities, particularly in the context of rural development.

Doss (2011) provides a comprehensive examination of the role of women in agriculture, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing their contributions. The paper argues for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges women's agency and contributions to agricultural productivity.

Fontana (2009) offers a gendered perspective on rural and agricultural employment, highlighting differentiated pathways out of poverty. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by women in the agricultural sector to foster sustainable development.

Kelkar (2011) explores the implications of gender and productive assets on women's economic security and productivity. The study underscores the need for policies that empower women by providing them with access to productive resources, thereby enhancing their economic well-being.

Okali and Mims (1998) present a focused study on gender and smallholder dairy production in Tanzania. The report highlights the gender-specific challenges faced by women engaged in dairy farming and provides recommendations for policy interventions to address these challenges.

Prasad and Singh (1992) contribute to the understanding of women in agriculture by emphasizing their status as a precious resource. The study calls for a holistic approach to education, training, and development to enhance the participation and contributions of women in the agricultural sector.

Tangka, Jabbar, and Shapiro (2000) critically review gender roles and child nutrition in ruminant livestock production systems in developing countries. The study emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive interventions to improve child nutrition outcomes in the context of livestock farming.

Udry (1996) investigates the relationship between gender, agricultural production, and household dynamics. The study explores how gender influences agricultural decision-making within households, shedding light on the intricate interplay between productive roles and gender dynamics.

Williams (2004) contributes to the literature by addressing current and emerging gender issues in the multilateral trading system. The study underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing gender disparities in the context of international trade policies.

Zaianab Salbi (2010) provides a unique perspective on the "Next Green Frontier," highlighting the experiences and challenges faced by women in agricultural development. The study underscores the importance of empowering women in sustainable agricultural practices for broader socio-economic development.

5. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN AGRI-BUSINESS

India, with its rich agricultural heritage, relies heavily on the contributions of women who play a pivotal role in various aspects of farming. Despite their significant involvement, women in agri-business face a myriad of challenges that hinder their full and equitable participation.

5.1 Limited Access to Resources:

Land Ownership and Tenure Issues: Land ownership remains a critical challenge for women in agri-business in India. According to data from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), women own only a small fraction of agricultural land. Cultural norms and discriminatory inheritance practices often deprive women of their rightful share of land, limiting their ability to engage in farming independently. This lack of land ownership not only affects their economic empowerment but also restricts their access to credit and other resources.

Credit and Financial Barriers: Access to credit is a significant hurdle faced by women in agri-business. Despite being actively involved in various agricultural activities, women often encounter difficulties in securing loans and financial support. The Gender Atlas of India highlights that a substantial percentage of women engaged in agriculture have limited access to formal credit institutions. Financial institutions' reluctance to provide loans to women, coupled with stringent collateral requirements, exacerbates the economic challenges faced by women farmers.

5.2 Social and Cultural Constraints:

Gender Roles and Stereotypes: Social and cultural norms dictate gender roles in Indian society, and these norms often confine women to traditional roles within the household. The expectation that women primarily belong to domestic spheres limits their involvement in decision-making processes related to agri-business. Stereotypes associating farming with masculinity perpetuate the idea that women are auxiliary to, rather than central to, agricultural activities. This gendered division of labour restricts women's autonomy and agency in agricultural decision-making.

Discrimination and Biases: Discrimination against women in agri-business is entrenched in societal biases. Women face prejudices in accessing markets, extension services, and

agricultural information. A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) highlights instances where women farmers experience discrimination when interacting with market actors. This bias affects their bargaining power, market opportunities, and overall participation in the agricultural value chain.

5.3 Education and Training Gaps:

Limited Educational Opportunities for Women: Education is a key determinant of women's empowerment in agri-business. However, women in rural areas often face limited educational opportunities due to factors such as distance to schools, societal norms, and economic constraints. The Gender Parity Index for literacy rates in rural areas remains a concern, with disparities between male and female literacy rates. This educational gap further restricts women's ability to adopt modern agricultural practices and technologies.

Lack of Skill Development Programs: The absence of tailored skill development programs for women in agri-business exacerbates the challenges they face. The agricultural sector is evolving, with technological advancements and changing market dynamics. Women's limited access to skill development programs hinders their capacity to adapt to these changes. A targeted approach to skill-building, encompassing both technical and entrepreneurial skills, is essential to enhance women's proficiency in agri-business activities.

6.OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCING WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT

While women in India have been integral to the agricultural sector, realizing their full potential requires addressing existing challenges and creating opportunities for empowerment. This essay explores opportunities to enhance women's engagement in agri-business in India, focusing on policy recommendations, capacity building and training programs, and the integration of technology and innovation.

6.1 Policy Recommendations:

Gender-Inclusive Agricultural Policies: A critical avenue for enhancing women's engagement in agri-business lies in the development and implementation of gender-inclusive agricultural policies. Policies that explicitly consider and address the unique challenges faced by women in agriculture can contribute significantly to their empowerment. India has made strides in this direction, with initiatives such as the National Policy for Empowerment of Women emphasizing gender mainstreaming in all sectors, including agriculture. However, continued efforts are needed to ensure the effective implementation of such policies at the ground level.

Legal Frameworks for Women's Rights in Agri-business: Legal frameworks play a crucial role in securing women's rights in agri-business. Advocating for and enforcing laws that promote women's land ownership and tenure rights is essential. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has provisions for ensuring women's participation and providing equal wages. Expanding and strengthening such legal frameworks can contribute to dismantling gender-based barriers and promoting a more equitable distribution of resources.

6.2 Capacity Building and Training Programs:

Skill Development Initiatives: Capacity building through skill development initiatives is paramount for enhancing the capabilities of women in agri-business. Programs focusing on agricultural training, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial skills can empower women to take on diverse roles within the sector. Initiatives like the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) aim to skill rural youth, including women, in various agricultural activities. Expanding and customizing such programs to meet the specific needs of women can significantly contribute to their economic independence.

Educational Opportunities for Women in Agriculture: Access to education is a key determinant of women's participation in agri-business. Encouraging and facilitating educational opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas, is crucial. Scholarships, mentorship programs, and awareness campaigns can help bridge the educational gap. The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) initiative is an example of a comprehensive approach to promote the education of girls, including those in rural areas. By creating an educated and skilled workforce, women can contribute more meaningfully to agri-business.

6.3 Technology and Innovation:

Access to Modern Agricultural Technologies: Technological advancements in agriculture can revolutionize productivity and efficiency. Ensuring women's access to modern agricultural technologies is an opportunity to enhance their engagement. Programs that provide women with access to equipment, information, and training on modern farming techniques are essential. The National Mission on Agricultural Extension and Technology (NMAET) aims to bridge the gap between farmers and technology. Extending the reach of such initiatives to include women and tailoring them to their specific needs can unlock new possibilities.

Technological Solutions for Enhancing Women's Productivity: Innovative technologies can be harnessed to address specific challenges faced by women in agri-business. Mobile applications providing real-time information on market prices, weather forecasts, and agricultural practices can empower women farmers. The use of precision farming techniques can optimize resource use and improve yield. Initiatives like the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) have incorporated technology to enhance women's productivity. Expanding such initiatives and encouraging the development of gender-sensitive technologies can open new avenues for women in agri-business.

7. CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES

In the landscape of Indian agriculture, there are inspiring case studies that underscore the transformative impact of women-led agri-businesses. This section delves into successful examples, highlighting their achievements, impact, and providing insights into replicable models for empowering women in the agricultural sector.

7.1 Successful Examples of Women-led Agri-businesses:

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Andhra Pradesh: In Andhra Pradesh, the implementation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has emerged as a powerful model for empowering women in agri-business. These groups, supported by government initiatives like the National Rural

Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), enable women to pool resources, access credit, and engage in collective farming ventures. A notable success is the Ananthapur Milk Producers Company Limited (AMUL-AP), where women in SHGs have established a dairy cooperative. This initiative has not only elevated women's economic status but has also positively impacted community development. The AMUL-AP model showcases the potential of collective action and entrepreneurship among women in agri-business.

Mahila Kisan SashaktikaranPariyojana (MKSP) in Bihar: The Mahila Kisan SashaktikaranPariyojana (MKSP) implemented in Bihar stands as an exemplary case of targeted intervention to empower women in agriculture. MKSP focuses on building the capacities of women farmers through skill development, training, and the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices. By emphasizing women's participation in decision-making processes and providing them with access to resources, MKSP has contributed to increased productivity and income. The success of MKSP reflects the significance of addressing gender-specific challenges and tailoring interventions to meet the needs of women in agri-business.

7.2 Highlighting Achievements and Impact:

Economic Empowerment and Income Generation: These case studies demonstrate that women-led agri-businesses contribute significantly to economic empowerment and income generation. For instance, the AMUL-AP cooperative in Andhra Pradesh has not only improved the financial status of women but has also created a sustainable model for dairy production. The economic independence gained by women through these initiatives enhances their decision-making power within households and communities.

Community Development and Social Impact: Beyond individual success stories, women-led agri-businesses have broader implications for community development and social impact. The collaborative nature of SHGs and cooperatives fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility. The MKSP initiative in Bihar has resulted in improved social cohesion, as women actively participate in community-building activities. These initiatives challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes, leading to positive social transformations.

7.3 Replicable Models for Empowerment:

Integrated Approach to Skill Development: One key lesson from successful case studies is the importance of an integrated approach to skill development. Initiatives like MKSP not only focus on enhancing agricultural skills but also incorporate elements of financial literacy, business management, and leadership training. Replicating such integrated models can empower women with a holistic skill set, making them better equipped to navigate the complexities of agri-business.

Government Support and Institutional Frameworks: Government support, as seen in the NRLM and MKSP initiatives, plays a pivotal role in creating an enabling environment for women-led agri-businesses. Institutional frameworks that provide access to credit, training, and market linkages are essential for replicating successful models. By scaling up these initiatives and tailoring them to regional contexts, governments can catalyse transformative changes in women's engagement in agriculture.

8. CONCLUSION

In examining the multifaceted role of women in agri-business in India, the complex interplay of challenges and opportunities emerges as a central theme. The agricultural landscape, often perceived as the backbone of the nation, relies significantly on the active participation of women. The challenges faced by women in agri-business, ranging from limited access to resources and social constraints to educational gaps, highlight systemic issues that impede their full and equitable engagement. However, amidst these challenges, a spectrum of opportunities presents itself, offering avenues for empowerment, growth, and sustainable development.

The importance of addressing gender disparities in agri-business cannot be overstated. Limited access to resources, particularly land ownership and credit, perpetuates economic vulnerabilities among women farmers. Social and cultural norms, entangled in gender roles and biases, further restrict women's agency and participation in decision-making processes. Educational gaps compound these challenges, hindering women's ability to adopt modern farming practices and technologies.

Yet, the opportunities for enhancing women's engagement are profound. Gender-inclusive agricultural policies, such as those advocated by the National Policy for Empowerment of Women, present a foundation for transformative change. Legal frameworks safeguarding women's rights in agri-business, coupled with capacity-building programs like the Mahila Kisan SashaktikaranPariyojana, offer tangible paths for empowerment. The integration of technology and innovation, exemplified by initiatives like the Ananthapur Milk Producers Company Limited and the Mahila Kisan SashaktikaranPariyojana, opens new frontiers for improving productivity and market access for women farmers.

Case studies of successful women-led agri-businesses, such as the Self-Help Groups in Andhra Pradesh and the MKSP initiative in Bihar, demonstrate not only economic empowerment but also community development and social impact. These examples underscore the transformative potential of collective action, integrated skill development, and government support.

In conclusion, the discourse on women in agri-business in India reveals a nuanced narrative. While challenges persist, the opportunities for change are tangible. The path forward involves a comprehensive approach that integrates policy reforms, targeted interventions, and a commitment to dismantling systemic barriers. By recognizing and replicating successful models, fostering an environment that supports women's agency, and embracing innovation, India can unlock the full potential of women in agri-business. This journey towards gender equality is not merely a moral imperative; it is an essential strategy for building a sustainable and inclusive future for India's agricultural sector.

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