

Challenges and Opportunities for Women in the Agri-Supply Chain

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Introduction

The agriculture sector plays a crucial role in the economies of many developing countries, and women make up a significant portion of the agricultural workforce. Globally, women represent approximately 43% of the agricultural labor force (FAO, 2011). Despite this, they face considerable challenges in accessing resources and markets, which limits their participation in the agri-supply chain. This article discusses the barriers women face in market access, the current scenario, and explores opportunities to better integrate them into the agricultural supply chain.

The Role of Women in Agriculture and the Agri-Supply Chain

Women in agriculture contribute significantly to food production, processing, and distribution. However, their participation in the more lucrative segments of the agri-supply chain, such as value addition, packaging, and market engagement, remains limited. Studies have shown that women often work in informal roles within the supply chain, performing labor-intensive tasks without proper recognition or compensation (World Bank, 2015).

In many developing countries, including India, Africa, and Southeast Asia, women's roles in agriculture are expanding due to migration of men to urban areas for better employment opportunities. However, the gender-based division of labor in agriculture still prevails, where women are often excluded from decision-making processes related to production, resource allocation, and market access (Agarwal, 2018).

Challenges Faced by Women in the Agri-Supply Chain

Despite their crucial involvement in agriculture, women face several challenges that prevent them from fully participating in the agri-supply chain. These challenges are rooted in socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, and policy inadequacies.

1. Limited Access to Resources

Access to land, finance, and agricultural inputs is a fundamental requirement for successful participation in the agri-supply chain. However, due to patriarchal societal norms, women often have restricted ownership of land. Studies suggest that only 13% of agricultural landholders globally are women (FAO, 2018). Without ownership rights, women struggle to secure loans and investments to enhance their farming activities, further limiting their ability to participate in market-oriented agriculture.

2. Lack of Market Information and Access

Women farmers and entrepreneurs often lack access to up-to-date market information, such as pricing, demand trends, and buyer networks (Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010). This information asymmetry puts them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts, who are more likely to be part of formal farmer organizations and networks that facilitate market access.

Additionally, rural women have limited access to transportation and infrastructure, which prevents them from reaching markets in urban areas. Without proper infrastructure, including storage facilities and transport systems, women are forced to sell their produce at local markets at lower prices, resulting in limited profit margins.

3. Gender Bias in Agricultural Policies

Government policies aimed at improving agricultural productivity often do not account for the specific challenges faced by women. For instance, most agricultural extension services are designed for male farmers, leading to the exclusion of women from training programs that provide knowledge on modern farming techniques, value addition, and market access (Doss, 2014). As a result, women are left behind in the adoption of new technologies that could enhance their productivity and enable their participation in the agri-supply chain.

4. Social and Cultural Norms

In many developing regions, cultural norms dictate that women's primary responsibilities are domestic, such as household management and caregiving. This limits the time they can dedicate to agricultural activities, especially in sectors like marketing and distribution, which often require travel and longer working hours. Cultural constraints also restrict women's ability to participate in community-based decision-making processes, which are crucial for market integration (Kumar & Quisumbing, 2013).

5. Financial Constraints

Women face significant barriers in accessing credit and financial services. Due to limited land ownership, they are often unable to provide the collateral required by financial institutions. Moreover, women are frequently viewed as higher-risk borrowers, leading to higher interest rates and lower credit availability. According to the International Finance Corporation (IFC), women entrepreneurs in agriculture face a credit gap of approximately \$320 billion globally (IFC, 2019). This financial exclusion prevents them from expanding their businesses, improving production, and participating in the broader supply chain.

Opportunities for Women in the Agri-Supply Chain

Despite the numerous challenges, there are significant opportunities to integrate women into the agri-supply chain. Addressing gender-specific barriers can unlock their potential as key contributors to agricultural value chains, leading to improved food security, poverty reduction, and economic growth.

1. Empowering Women through Training and Capacity Building

Providing targeted training and capacity-building programs for women can enhance their participation in the agri-supply chain. Agricultural extension services need to be gender-sensitive, offering women access to modern farming techniques, business management, and value addition skills (Ragasa et al., 2014). Organizations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India have successfully implemented training programs that help women farmers improve their productivity and access to markets.

2. Promoting Women's Collectives and Cooperatives: Women's collectives and cooperatives

provide a platform for female farmers and entrepreneurs to pool resources, share knowledge, and access markets collectively. By working together, women can reduce the transaction costs associated with marketing their products, negotiate better prices, and improve their bargaining power (Krishna et al., 2019). For example, the Kudumbashree initiative in Kerala, India, has empowered thousands of women to participate in agri-supply chains by forming small collectives that focus on organic farming and food processing.

3. Leveraging Digital Technologies

Digital technologies offer new opportunities for women in agriculture, especially in addressing the challenges of market access and information asymmetry. Mobile-based platforms and apps that provide real-time market information, weather updates, and farming advice can be a game-changer for women farmers (World Bank, 2017). For example, platforms like e-Choupal and Kisan Call Center in India have enabled women to access vital agricultural information and connect with buyers directly, bypassing traditional intermediaries.

4. Financial Inclusion and Access to Credit

To improve women's participation in the agri-supply chain, financial inclusion must be prioritized. Governments and financial institutions should design gender-sensitive financial products that cater to the needs of women in agriculture. Microfinance institutions and self-help groups (SHGs) can play a pivotal role in providing credit to women, enabling them to invest in farming equipment, storage facilities, and other value-added activities (Chaudhary, 2020). Programs like PMMY (Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana) in India have provided small loans to women entrepreneurs, including those in the agriculture sector, helping them expand their businesses and participate more actively in supply chains.

5. Strengthening Gender-Sensitive Agricultural Policies

Policy reforms that address gender disparities in agriculture are crucial for creating an enabling environment for women in the agri-supply chain. Governments should implement land reforms that provide women with ownership rights, as well as introduce policies that ensure equal access to agricultural inputs, training, and market infrastructure (Agarwal, 2018). Additionally, policies

should encourage the participation of women in farmer organizations and cooperatives, giving them a stronger voice in decision-making processes related to the supply chain.

Current Scenario and Case Studies

Several case studies demonstrate the positive impact of integrating women into the agri-supply chain:

Case Study 1: SEWA's Agro-Business Initiative (India)

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has been a pioneer in empowering women farmers through collective farming and market integration. SEWA helps women pool their resources, produce high-quality organic products, and access larger markets. Through their agro-business initiatives, SEWA women farmers have been able to negotiate better prices, participate in value addition, and sell directly to consumers, bypassing middlemen (Bhowmik, 2016).

Case Study 2: The Role of Digital Platforms in Kenya

In Kenya, women farmers have started using digital platforms like M-Farm to access market prices, connect with buyers, and sell their produce directly. This has not only improved their income but also reduced the gender gap in market participation (World Bank, 2021). The success of such platforms underscores the potential of technology in overcoming the barriers women face in accessing the agri-supply chain.

Conclusion

Women's integration into the agri-supply chain is essential for the overall development of the agricultural sector and rural economies. While women face significant challenges in accessing markets, financial services, and resources, there are numerous opportunities to empower them through training, technology, and policy reforms. Collective action, digital platforms, and gender-sensitive financial products can play a key role in enhancing women's participation in the agri-supply chain. Governments, NGOs, and the private sector must work together to break down the barriers women face and create an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient agricultural supply chain.

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