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Sowing success: Women entrepreneurs transforming agriculture and horticulture in India

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Abstract

"Women Entrepreneur" is a person who accepts challenging role to meet her personal needs and become economically independent. Women entrepreneurship in agriculture and horticulture is emerging as a vital force in transforming India's rural economy. This study explores case studies of women-led initiatives in diverse agri-horti domains such as organic farming, mushroom cultivation, floriculture and agro-processing. India has witnessed a significant transformation in the entrepreneurial landscape, with women increasingly stepping into leadership roles across diverse sectors. Women entrepreneurs are becoming powerful in today's dynamic global environment, fostering innovation, economic growth and social advancement. Their businesses operate in various sectors from sustainable agriculture to tech startups and their influence goes beyond the boardroom to benefit communities and motivate younger generations. Nevertheless, despite their outstanding accomplishments, female entrepreneurs frequently face difficulties resulting from societal biases and historical gender inequalities. The factors that affect women's participation roles are different across the world, changing with the dynamic nature of the environments in which they live. The efforts are on it to uplift the social and economic status of women. These cases illustrate how women, despite structural and social challenges like land inaccessibility, limited market linkages and gender-based constraints are innovating and creating sustainable livelihood models. Through participatory methods and support from SHGs, NGOs and government schemes, many women have transitioned from laborers to successful entrepreneurs. The paper also analyzes the challenges they face, including access to finance, training gaps and socio-cultural limitations, while highlighting the emerging opportunities like digital platforms, eco-tourism and agri-startup ecosystems. These findings underscore the need for gender-inclusive policies and institutional frameworks to further empower women in agri-entrepreneurship. The study concludes that women entrepreneurs, when enabled with knowledge, resources, and market access, can play a transformative role in agricultural development and rural empowerment.

Keywords: Women entrepreneur, challenges, opportunities and agriculture

Introduction

Women have long played an integral yet often underrecognized role in India's agricultural sector. As cultivators, laborers and household managers, their contributions to food security and rural livelihoods are immense. However, in recent years, women have begun to emerge not just as contributors but as entrepreneurs leading enterprises, innovating value chains and redefining the economic landscape of rural India. In agriculture and horticulture, this shift is particularly significant, as these sectors offer accessible and culturally relevant entry points for women's economic empowerment.

The rise of women agripreneurs in India is not only a reflection of changing social dynamics but also an indicator of how inclusive entrepreneurship can foster sustainable development, reduce poverty and enhance community well-being. From small-scale organic farms and mushroom

cultivation units to floriculture businesses and agro-processing ventures, women are turning traditional practices into scalable business models.

Despite these encouraging trends, women in agriculture and horticulture continue to face numerous challenges. Limited access to land, credit, training, and markets combined with deep-rooted gender norms and policy blind spots hinder their full participation. At the same time, opportunities such as digital platforms, self-help groups (SHGs), Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and government schemes are opening new doors for women to thrive as agri-entrepreneurs.

According to a report by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), in India, about 46.0% of the agricultural workforce is female, but only 13.0% of rural women are engaged in entrepreneurship. While there is no specific data available on the percentage of women entrepreneurs related to

agriculture in India, it is estimated that a significant number of women entrepreneurs in rural areas are involved in agriculture-related businesses such as farming, food processing, and handicrafts. The Indian government has also launched various schemes and programs to encourage and support women's entrepreneurship in agriculture. Women leaders in farming are becoming increasingly common as more women take on leadership roles in agriculture. Women have always played a crucial role in farming, but have often been overlooked or underestimated. However, with the growing recognition of the importance of women's contributions to agriculture, more and more women are taking on leadership roles in the industry. These women are leading the way in sustainable farming practices, advocating for gender equity and empowering other women farmers. With their leadership, women in farming are making significant contributions to the global economy. Agriculture sector employs 80.0 per cent of all economically active women; they comprise 33.0 per cent of the agricultural labour force and 48.0 per cent of self-employed farmers. In India, 85.0 per cent of rural women are engaged in agriculture, yet only about 13.0 per cent own land.

This review article seeks to explore the journeys of women entrepreneurs in agriculture and horticulture across India through a set of impactful case studies. It further analyzes the systemic challenges they face and highlights the emerging opportunities that can accelerate their participation in the agri-horti economy. By synthesizing research, field experiences, and success stories, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender-inclusive rural development and to inform policy and practice in promoting women's entrepreneurship in agriculture.

Brief Research Done in India

The study is based on secondary data collected from different journals, research articles, newspapers, and reports on women entrepreneurship in the field of agriculture and horticulture. Various studies on this subject on internet also have been referred in this paper.

Jha and Pandey (2022) ^[4] in their study on grassroots horticultural entrepreneurship by woman Binadevi, nicknamed as Mushroom Mahila succeeded as an entrepreneur in mushroom farming with the main objective as to train rural women in mushroom cultivation as an easy-entry horticulture based enterprise. The findings showed that she popularized mushroom production in five blocks and 105 neighbouring villages in the Munger district, impacting 1500 women by supporting them through mushroom farming. The productivity was also increased and led to increased post-training, tripled income for many families and improved social mobility.

Devi and Reddy (2021) ^[3] in their study on horticulture-based women entrepreneurship which is a case study of jackfruit entrepreneurs in Karnataka found that working women were increased by 40 to 50 per cent and local processing reduced post harvest losses through. The main objective of the study was value addition to local horticultural crops (jackfruit) and generate employment and collected data using economic analysis.

Kulkarni (2020) ^[5] in his study on inclusive agri-business models explained about how entrepreneurial training helped

women direct transition from subsistence to commercial horticulture and millet farming, through the company Happy Roots established by Reema Sathe in Maharashtra. The methodology used was survey based study along with business model analysis and interviews with the tribal women farmers and supply chain mapping. Happy Roots is mainly focussed on making healthy and natural snack food that is free from preservatives, refined flours and additives. Their products included whole grain cookies, crackers and fresh dips that were made using farm-fresh produce and grains sourced directly from farmers and were handmade by trained rural women's groups.

Narayanamoorthy and Suresh (2020) ^[6] in their case study on Sahaja Aharam Producer Company which is a federation of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) across the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana explained about the promotion of horticultural crop value chains by organic farming and natural farming methods. These methods helped in building their entrepreneurial skills and linking their institutions connect farmers directly to Consumers (F2C) and to markets (B2B) via Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs).

Chavan and Kumar (2019) ^[2] in their case study on women empowerment on agripreneurship, a case study in drought-prone Maharashtra explained how entrepreneurship can empower women in rural India, particularly by addressing their lack of access to finance and business support by Chetna Vijay Sinha, founder of Mann Deshi Foundation. The foundation's approach which included providing access to finance, skill-building and market access had led to significant improvements in the economic and social well-being of women and their households.

Nayak and Hedge (2019) ^[7] in their study on feminist agri-practices and biodiversity conservation found that they built eco-literacy and created women networks. Vanastree is a women-led collective focused on seed saving, sustainable agriculture and community empowerment in the Malnad region of Karnataka, India. The collective emphasized on the preservation of traditional knowledge, biodiversity and played the crucial role of women in ecological and social well-being. Through seed exchange, training programs and collaborative projects, Vanastree worked to enhance food security, promote economic opportunities and foster a deeper connection with the natural environment. The methodology used was participatory action research, biodiversity indexing and garden talks.

Patel and Ramesh (2019) ^[8] explained about a case study on urban composting and women's green enterprises with the objective of creating sustainable composting solutions promoting women-led green entrepreneurship using action research and product analysis. The findings concluded that women played key roles in eco-friendly waste management and urban composting supported rooftop horticulture.

Ahmed and Shaik (2018) ^[1] in their study on women entrepreneurship focused on women's involvement in floriculture in the Kashmir Valley. The main objective of the study was to promote floriculture among women in conflict-affected areas using protected cultivation using the methods field visits, structured interviews and income tracking. It highlighted the potential of floriculture as a means of economic empowerment for women, particularly in a region where traditional gender roles may limit their

participation in other sectors. The study likely explored how women were contributing to flower cultivation, processing and marketing and the challenges and opportunities they faced in this emerging industry. The findings included the increase in women earnings, creation of off-season income and strengthening of social status.

Rao (2018) ^[9] in his study on agroecological practices and women empowerment which is a case study of Green Foundation emphasized the importance of promotion of seed sovereignty and sustainable horticulture among women using participatory research and ethnographic methodology. The methods included case narratives, community mapping, and seed-sharing data and concluded that indigenous horticultural practices empowered women, preserved biodiversity and improved household nutrition.

Shiva and Gala (2017) ^[10] in their study on seed freedom and women farmers in India which is a case study on Navdanya, started by Dr. Vandana Shiva found out that women gained knowledge and self-reliance through seed saving and intercropping of vegetables and fruits and the methodology used were Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique and field interviews. The study included biodiversity conservation, organic farming, fair trade, the rights of farmers and the process of seed saving.

The literature on women entrepreneurship in agriculture and horticulture in India since 2017 highlights a growing trend of rural and semi-urban women taking leadership roles in agribusiness, sustainable farming, and value addition. The studies reviewed focus on individual and collective efforts by women to address challenges such as market access, low income, lack of training, and environmental degradation, while also promoting empowerment and sustainable livelihoods.

Challenges and Opportunities of Women Entrepreneurship in Agriculture and Horticulture in India

Women constitute a significant share of India's agricultural workforce, yet their contributions often remain invisible in formal statistics and policy frameworks. In recent years, the role of women has expanded beyond traditional farming to include entrepreneurship in agriculture and horticulture, ranging from organic production and seed saving to agro-processing and direct marketing. Despite their growing presence, women entrepreneurs in these sectors continue to face a host of structural, financial and social challenges that limit their potential. Some of the challenges and opportunities are discussed hereunder.

1. Limited Access to Land and Assets

Despite forming a major part of the agricultural workforce, most women lack land ownership rights, which restricts their access to credit, government schemes, and formal recognition as farmers.

2. Financial Constraints

Inadequate access to institutional finance, collateral requirements and low financial literacy hinder women's ability to invest in agribusinesses, infrastructure, and technology.

3. Lack of Technical Skills and Training

Women entrepreneurs often have limited access to training

in modern agricultural practices, post-harvest management, and value addition due to sociocultural barriers and low outreach of extension services.

4. Market Linkage and Mobility Issues

Constraints in traveling, dealing with male-dominated market networks, and lack of digital skills hinder women's ability to market their produce directly or explore e-commerce options.

5. Social Norms and Gender Bias

Cultural perceptions that devalue women's economic contributions, as well as time poverty due to domestic responsibilities, reduce the time and freedom women can dedicate to entrepreneurial pursuits.

6. Invisibility in Policies and Data

Many government programs are designed without gender-sensitive frameworks, and the lack of sex-disaggregated data leads to poor policy targeting.

Opportunities

1. Agri-Tech and Digital Platforms

Mobile-based apps, online marketing platforms, and digital extension services can bridge knowledge and market gaps, helping women access inputs, weather forecasts, and fair pricing.

2. Value Addition and Agro-Processing

Women excel in processing, packaging, and culinary innovation, especially in horticultural crops like jackfruit, mushrooms, spices, floriculture, and medicinal plants, which offer scalable opportunities.

3. Government Support and SHG Networks

Schemes like **Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)**, **National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)**, and **Startup India** have created entry points for women in agri-entrepreneurship.

4. Organic and Sustainable Farming Niches

Women are natural custodians of biodiversity and often lead organic farming movements, making them central to agroecology, seed saving, and niche produce marketing.

5. Formation of FPOs and Cooperatives

Women-led Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) enhance bargaining power, reduce middlemen exploitation, and enable collective marketing and branding.

6. Rising Demand for Local, Healthy, and Artisanal Products

Changing consumer preferences offer scope for women entrepreneurs to enter urban markets with chemical-free, locally sourced, and traditionally processed agri- horti products.

Conclusion

Women entrepreneurs in agriculture and horticulture are playing an increasingly significant role in reshaping India's rural economy. The case studies reviewed in this paper highlighted the dynamic contributions of women across the

value chain from production and processing to marketing and enterprise leadership. These women-led initiatives demonstrated that when equipped with access to resources, knowledge and institutional support women can build sustainable agribusiness models that not only improve household incomes but also foster community development and ecological resilience. Despite notable progress, women entrepreneurs continue to face substantial barriers such as lack of land rights, limited access to credit, inadequate technical training and persistent gender biases. These systemic challenges must be addressed through gender-responsive policies, increased outreach of financial and extension services and inclusive value chain development. The emerging opportunities from agri-tech platforms and SHG networks to niche markets in organic and artisanal products present a transformative potential for women in the agri-horti sector. Strengthening these avenues through targeted interventions, mentorship, digital literacy and infrastructure can catalyze a new wave of rural women entrepreneurship.

In conclusion, empowering women in agriculture and horticulture is not only a matter of equity but also a critical strategy for sustainable rural development. A collaborative ecosystem involving government, NGOs, research institutions and community-based organizations is essential to amplify the impact of women entrepreneurs and ensure their full participation in India's agricultural growth story.

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