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Socio-economic profile and constraints faced by rural women in agro-based enterprises

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Abstract

Rural women constitute a vital productive force in Indian agriculture, yet their economic potential remains constrained by structural and personal limitations. This paper examines two dimensions of women's participation in agro-based enterprises promoted through a rural extension and training centre: the socio-economic profile of participating women and the constraints they face in undertaking such enterprises. A descriptive research design was adopted, and data were collected from 120 randomly selected respondents across four villages through a pre-structured interview schedule. Results indicate that a majority of respondents (57.50%) belonged to the middle age group, held medium-sized landholdings (50.83%), and reported medium annual income (45.00%). Analysis of constraints revealed that lack of security (77.50%), difficulty in securing funding (70.00%), gender discrimination (66.67%), and lack of training (64.17%) were the most pressing barriers. The findings underscore the need for targeted credit access, security provisions, and skill-based training to strengthen women's entrepreneurial participation in the agro-enterprise sector.

Keywords: Rural women, agro-based enterprises, socio-economic profile, constraints, empowerment

1. Introduction

Women constitute a major productive workforce in Indian agriculture, with nearly 84 per cent of economically active women engaged in agricultural and allied activities. In India, women comprise 33 per cent of the agricultural labour force and 48 per cent of self-employed farmers, yet only about 13 per cent own land¹. Despite their substantial contribution, the work of rural women continues to be underestimated and undervalued, largely due to customary male dominance, limited access to technology, and constrained opportunities for training.

Empowerment of rural women, both socially and economically, remains central to inclusive agricultural development². Entrepreneurship development offers an important pathway for this empowerment, enabling diversification beyond traditional low-paid, drudgery-prone tasks into value-added activities such as food processing, poultry farming, sericulture, and agro-based cottage industries³. Structured entrepreneurship development strategies, combined with access to credit and training support, have been shown to strengthen women's participation in such ventures⁴. Rural extension and training centres have accordingly been active in promoting such enterprises among farm women in their respective regions, particularly around value addition of locally abundant produce.

While the potential for agro-based enterprises is considerable, women's participation is shaped both by their socio-economic characteristics and by the constraints they encounter in practice⁵. Understanding these two dimensions

together is essential for designing effective interventions. Accordingly, this paper addresses two specific objectives: (i) to ascertain the socio-economic profile of rural women engaged in agro-based enterprises, and (ii) to identify the constraints faced by these women in performing enterprise-related activities and to document their suggestions for addressing these constraints.

2. Materials and Methods

A descriptive research design was employed for the study, conducted in a rural district with a high concentration of women engaged in agro-based enterprises. A block/mandal was purposively selected on this basis, and four villages were purposively chosen based on their proximity to a local rural extension and training centre. From each selected village, 30 respondents were chosen using random sampling, yielding a total sample size of 120 rural women.

Data were collected through personal interviews using a pre-tested, structured interview schedule developed specifically for this study. Socio-economic characteristics were measured using standardized scoring and categorization procedures. Constraints were assessed through a checklist of enterprise-related problems, with respondents permitted multiple responses; frequencies and percentages were computed and problems were ranked accordingly. Data were analysed using arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and percentage analysis. All respondents participated voluntarily and gave informed consent prior to the interview. The purpose of the study was explained to each respondent, and confidentiality of individual responses was assured. The study procedure was

reviewed and approved by the institutional research ethics committee.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

The socio-economic characteristics of the 120 respondents are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-economic profile of respondents (n=120)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Young (up to 35 yrs)	26	21.67
	Middle (36–55 yrs)	69	57.50
	Old (above 55 yrs)	25	20.83
Education	Illiterate	16	13.34
	Primary	24	20.00
	Junior High School	22	18.33
	High School	26	21.66
	Intermediate	20	16.67
Annual Income	Graduate	12	10.00
	Low (< Rs. 50,000)	35	29.17
	Medium (Rs. 50,001–1,00,000)	54	45.00
	High (> Rs. 1,00,000)	31	25.83
Land Holding	Up to 2 acres	39	32.50
	2.0 to 5 acres	61	50.83
	More than 5 acres	20	16.67
Family Size	Small (1–3)	54	45.00
	Medium (4–6)	45	37.50
	Large (>7)	21	17.50
Farming Experience	Low (< 5 yrs)	34	28.33
	Medium (6–10 yrs)	60	50.00
	High (>10 yrs)	26	21.67

More than half of the respondents (57.50%) belonged to the middle age group (36–55 years), followed by young (21.67%) and old (20.83%) categories, indicating that participation in agro-based enterprises is concentrated among women in their most economically active years. In terms of education, the sample was fairly heterogeneous: while 13.34 per cent were illiterate, the majority had at least primary-level schooling, with 21.66 per cent having completed high school. Nearly half the respondents (45.00%) reported medium annual income (Rs. 50,001–1,00,000), suggesting that agro-enterprise participants are drawn predominantly from moderate-income households rather than the poorest or wealthiest strata, broadly consistent with earlier profiles of farm women's socio-economic status in Indian agriculture¹. With respect to land holding, half of the respondents (50.83%) held medium-sized landholdings of 2 to 5 acres, placing most participants in the small farmer category. A similar pattern was observed for farming experience, where half the respondents (50.00%) had medium experience of 6 to 10 years. These findings are consistent with earlier reports that farm women's engagement in agriculture and allied enterprises is closely tied to landholding size, income adequacy, and accumulated farming experience¹, suggesting that women with moderate resource endowments and established farming backgrounds are more likely to diversify into agro-based enterprise activities without excessive risk.

3.2 Constraints Faced by Respondents

Respondents were asked to identify the constraints they encountered in undertaking agro-based enterprise activities. As multiple responses were permitted, the results are presented as ranked percentages in Table 2.

Table 2: Constraints faced by respondents in agro-based enterprises (n=120, multiple responses)

Rank	Constraint	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I	Lack of security	93	77.50
II	Securing funding	84	70.00
III	Gender discrimination	80	66.67
IV	Lack of training	77	64.17
V	Lack of family support	63	52.50
VI	Lack of self-confidence	57	47.50
VII	Marketing problem	53	44.16
VIII	Low risk-taking ability	51	42.50
IX	Health-related problems	42	35.00
X	Low education	38	31.67
XI	Inadequate loan facilities	26	21.67
XII	Poor knowledge of financial management	21	17.50
XIII	Dual duty (home and enterprise)	14	11.67

Lack of security emerged as the foremost constraint, reported by 77.50 per cent of respondents, followed closely by difficulty in securing funding (70.00%) and gender discrimination (66.67%). Lack of training (64.17%) and lack of family support (52.50%) were also widely cited. These findings corroborate earlier studies reporting that socio-economic and institutional constraints, particularly limited access to credit and support systems, substantially hinder women's adoption of income-generating enterprises⁶, pointing to the need for interventions addressing personal safety, access to formal credit, and gender-sensitive institutional support alongside skill development.

Comparatively fewer respondents cited low risk-taking ability (42.50%), health-related problems (35.00%), and low education (31.67%) as limiting factors, while dual duty in managing both home and enterprise ranked lowest (11.67%). Marketing-related difficulties (44.16%) were also notable, consistent with reports that both marketing and non-marketing bottlenecks constrain the growth of agro-based enterprises⁷. This is further supported by evidence that structural barriers in the rural informal sector⁸ and enterprise-specific operational problems⁹ tend to outweigh individual capability constraints in shaping women's ability to sustain such enterprises.

When asked for suggestions, respondents most frequently recommended better time management (96.67%), strategies for managing home and business responsibilities together (89.17%), and greater use of ICT-enabled devices (78.33%), followed by calls for stronger society support (62.50%) and wider access to micro-credit facilities (59.17%). These priorities align with findings that extension-led capacity building and institutional support are central to empowering rural women in enterprise participation¹⁰, reinforcing financial access, social/family support, and training and technology as key intervention areas.

4. Conclusion

The study reveals that women participating in agro-based enterprises promoted through the rural extension centre are predominantly middle-aged, moderately educated, and drawn from households with medium income and landholding, reflecting a profile of relatively resource-secure but not affluent rural women. Despite reasonable resource endowments, their enterprise activities are constrained principally by concerns over personal security, limited access to funding, gender discrimination, and inadequate training. Addressing these barriers through targeted credit schemes, community security measures, gender-sensitive institutional reforms, and structured vocational training, in line with recommended strategies for women's empowerment in agriculture¹¹, could substantially enhance the sustainability and scale of women-led agro-enterprises. These findings have direct relevance for extension functionaries, banking institutions, and policymakers seeking to design more effective, locale-specific support mechanisms for women's entrepreneurship in agriculture.

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