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Problems faced by women entrepreneurs through value addition of agricultural produce

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship remains a formidable challenge for women in India however, when pursued successfully, it can instill the confidence and raise awareness of their rights. Compared to developed nations, the growth of women entrepreneurship in India is significantly lower. Traditionally, entrepreneurship has been a male-dominated arena, but times have changed-women today are emerging as resilient and inspiring entrepreneurs. A nation cannot achieve true progress while ignoring the potential of its female workforce. With economic liberalization and globalization, the number of women entrepreneurs is on the rise worldwide. In India, the latent entrepreneurial abilities of women are gradually surfacing, thanks to shifts in the socio-political landscape. Despite their competence in managing businesses, women in India still face numerous obstacles-social, cultural, and economic-that hinder their entrepreneurial journey. One of the major setbacks is the lack of robust entrepreneurial activity among women, even in the wake of women empowerment initiatives. This paper explores the key barriers that demotivate the women to start their own ventures and examines the challenges they encounter as they strive to establish themselves in the competitive business world.

Keywords: Women, entrepreneurs, SHG, Jorhat

Introduction

Agriculture plays a pivotal role in the economic development of many countries, particularly in developing economies where it serves as a primary source of livelihood for millions of people, including women. Women, especially in rural areas, are often the backbone of agricultural production, involved in farming, harvesting, and processing agricultural products. However, despite their significant contribution, women entrepreneurs face numerous barriers when it comes to engaging in the value addition of agricultural produce.

Value addition in agriculture refers to the processes that increase the value of raw agricultural products through methods such as processing, packaging, branding, and marketing. While this process can substantially improve the economic returns from agricultural products, women face specific challenges that hinder their active participation in these value chains. These challenges are multifaceted and range from limited access to resources to socio-cultural barriers, as well as institutional and infrastructural constraints. Women in developing countries have significantly lower access to land ownership compared to men, which limits their ability to engage in productive agricultural activities and invest in value-added processes

(FAO, 2011) ^[6]. Women's involvement in agriculture also differs across communities, influenced by factors such as geographical location, cropping patterns, ethnic background, and the family's economic and educational status. Beyond crop production, women actively contribute to a range of allied agricultural activities, including dairying, animal husbandry, poultry farming, goat rearing, rabbit farming, beekeeping, floriculture, horticulture, fruit preservation, post-harvest processing, and the production of value-added food products. Entrepreneurial skills are instrumental in building confidence and self-awareness, particularly through income-generating activities. Rural women can undertake various such activities from their homes by organizing themselves into Self Help Groups (SHGs) (Anonymous, 2001) ^[2]. SHGs are small, voluntary associations of women, usually from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. These groups have effectively empowered women by placing economic agency in their hands, thereby reducing their reliance on men and enhancing their self-confidence.

Women in agriculture often face challenges in acquiring the appropriate technologies that can enhance productivity and efficiency in value addition. Technologies for processing, packaging, and marketing agricultural products are typically more accessible to large commercial enterprises or male

entrepreneurs. According to a study by Cheston and Kuhn (2002)^[3], women in rural areas often lack various resources needed to adopt modern agricultural technologies that could improve the value addition process. The absence of such resources limits their capacity to scale up operations or improve the quality of processed goods, thus reducing their potential earnings.

In many societies, agricultural production is seen as the domain of men, while women are expected to take on domestic roles or contribute to agriculture in a less visible manner (Doss, 2018)^[4]. Various norms often limit women's involvement in public or commercial activities, resulting in lower levels of participation in entrepreneurial ventures (Agarwal, 1994)^[1]. According to the FAO (2014)^[5], women in agriculture often lack access to the same business networks, suppliers, and distributors as their male counterparts, as well as women are also excluded from commercial platforms and agricultural trade fairs, which limits their ability to establish connections with buyers or other value chain actors.

In addition, the absence of gender-sensitive policies in agricultural development programs means that women often do not benefit from government support initiatives aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity and value addition (Kabeer, 2017)^[8]. A woman entrepreneur is someone who initiates and independently manages a business, skillfully navigating risks and embracing challenges to fulfill personal goals and achieve financial independence (Sreeveena, 2020)^[15]. The role of women has evolved significantly due to advancements in education, urbanization, industrialization, and a growing awareness of democratic values. However, despite this progress, female representation in entrepreneurship remains low. According to the Index of Women Entrepreneurs, only 7 out of every 100 entrepreneurs in India are women. The World Economic Forum's 2021 report highlights a substantial gender gap of 72% in India's labor market. (Rathna, 2016)^[14].

While men and women often dedicate a comparable amount of time to agricultural work in many communities and farming contexts, women typically bear the primary responsibility for domestic tasks. Rural women in India are deeply engaged in agriculture, though their roles and the extent of their participation vary depending on the specific agro-production systems (Nagaraja, (2013)^[10]. Women are generally more active in allied agricultural sectors than in grain production, and households with limited financial resources often depend more on women's participation in income-generating endeavors. To raise the income and living standards of these farming families, it is essential to provide women with occupation-oriented training. Vocational skills such as the preservation of seasonal fruits

and vegetables not only create livelihood opportunities but also help nurture entrepreneurial qualities among rural women. Therefore when involved in value-added activities such as food processing, packaging, or preservation, women often operate on a small scale due to resource limitations and insufficient institutional support (Njiraini *et al.*, 2020)^[12]. Addressing these constraints is essential not only for gender equity but also for enhancing food security, reducing post-harvest losses, and fostering inclusive rural development. Similarly, in Assam the women entrepreneurs face various challenges which often act as a barrier towards their responsibilities and career. Therefore this research aims to study the problems faced by the respondents in value addition of agriculture produce in Assam which often limit their access towards growth and development.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Jorhat district of Assam. The North-West block of Jorhat district was selected for the study with a total of 2 villages namely Nij-Baligaon and Majiya gaon with 3 SHG's each from the two villages was selected namely Ankurjyoti, Rongjyoti and Surujmukhi SHGs from Nij- Baligaon and Janakalyan, Joymoti and Kanaklata SHGs from Majiya gaon with a total of 120 respondents were selected for the study. The collected data were meticulously tabulated and subjected to analysis using appropriate statistical techniques like PCI, frequency and percentage.

Challenges faced by the women involved in value addition was determined with the help of Problem Confrontation Index (PCI) was used which was computed by a 3- point rating Likert type scale. The farm women entrepreneurs were asked to mention the major problems faced and were also asked to mention the degree or intensity of seriousness of each problem against which scores of 3, 2 and 1 were assigned for highly important, moderately important and less important challenges respectively.

The PCI was computed by using the following formula: $PCI = (P_h \times 3) + (P_m \times 2) + (P_l \times 1) + (P_n \times 0)$

Where, PCI = Problem Confrontation Index, P_h = No. of respondents expressed problem as "most important", P_m = No. of respondents expressed problem as "moderately important", P_l = No. of respondents expressed problem as "less important".

Results

A perusal of data in table 1 below represents a comprehensive overview of the the problems faced by the respondents in value addition of agricultural produce which is calculated with the help of PCI and ranked according to their importance.

Table 1: Problems faced by the women entrepreneurs in value addition of agricultural produce

Sl. No.	Problems	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all	PCI	Rank
1	Lack of time due to family burden	87 (72.50)	18 (15.00)	15 (12.50)	312	I
2	Lack of training on mechanised technologies	80 (66.66)	28 (23.33)	12 (10.00)	308	II
3	Lack of availability of raw materials	66 (55.00)	49 (40.83)	5 (4.16)	301	III
4	Inability to compete with larger enterprise due to lack of resources.	75 (62.50)	24 (20.00)	21 (17.50)	294	IV
5	Lack of financial literacy and knowledge of government schemes.	62 (51.66)	49 (40.83)	9 (7.50)	293	V
6	Insufficient funds for business expansion and operations.	68 (56.66)	35 (29.16)	17 (14.16)	291	VI
7	Poor access to markets for selling products.	57 (47.50)	34 (28.33)	29 (24.16)	268	VII
8	Lack of demand in the local markets	57 (47.50)	26 (21.66)	37 (30.83)	260	VIII

9	Poor transportation and communication networks in rural areas.	44 (36.66)	52 (43.33)	24 (20.00)	260	IX
10	Poor implementation of policies and programs.	33 (27.50)	57 (47.50)	30 (25.00)	243	X
11	Lack of knowledge about the market price and demand.	30 (25.00)	59 (49.16)	31 (25.83)	239	XI
12	Lack of skill development programs tailored to specific trades	40 (33.33)	31 (25.83)	49 (40.83)	231	XII

The data presented in the above table reveals that lack of time due to family burden is the most important problem faced by the respondents to a great extent with PCI 312 and rank I, which indicates that they often juggle with both business and domestic household duties such as childcare, cooking, cleaning etc. Lack of training on mechanised technologies is the second important problem faced by the respondents with PCI 308 and rank II which indicates that without proper training, women entrepreneurs may not be able to fully utilize mechanized technologies to improve productivity, reduce labor intensity, or enhance the quality of their products or services, followed by lack of availability of raw materials which is the 3rd important problem faced by the respondents with PCI 301 and rank III which is in line with the findings given by (Cheston and Kuhn, 2002, Kuzilwa, 2005) ^[3, 9]. Inability to compete with larger enterprise due to lack of resources and lack of financial literacy and knowledge of government schemes. are the fourth and fifth problems faced by the respondents with PCI of 294 and 293 respectively followed by insufficient funds for business expansion and operations which is the next important problem faced by the respondent with PCI 291 and rank VI thereby this indicates reflects a systemic disadvantage where women entrepreneurs are caught in a cycle of limited access to resources, opportunities, and knowledge-making it harder for them to grow, compete, and thrive in a competitive market environment. Poor access to markets for selling products is the VIIth important problem faced by the respondents with PCI 268 and rank VII followed by lack of demand in the local market and poor transportation and communication networks in rural areas is the next problem faced by the respondents with PCI 260 and rank VIII and IX respectively which conform to the findings given by Pushpa and Arun (2023) ^[13]. Poor implementation of policies and programs is another problem faced by the respondent with PCI 243 and rank X followed by Lack of knowledge about the market price and demand and Lack of skill development programs tailored to specific trades with PCI 329 and 231 and rank XI and XII respectively which VIII which is in line with the findings given by (Nayyar *et al.*, 2007) ^[11] highlights the critical need for market-driven, context-specific, and gender-sensitive support systems that can equip women entrepreneurs with the right skills, information, and tools to thrive in their respective trades and markets.

Conclusion

The problems faced by women entrepreneurs in the value addition of agricultural produce are multifaceted and deeply rooted in socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. These challenges-including limited access to resources, socio-cultural barriers, market access difficulties, legal constraints, and infrastructure deficiencies-result in women being marginalized in the agricultural value chain, despite their crucial role in the sector. To overcome these barriers, there is a need for targeted policies and interventions that promote gender equality, enhance access to resources and

technology, and create supportive legal and institutional frameworks. By addressing these challenges, governments and organizations can help women unlock their full potential as entrepreneurs in the agricultural value addition sector, leading to greater economic empowerment and sustainable agricultural development.

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