

“Socio-Economic Impact of Women-Led Agribusinesses on Rural Livelihoods in Marathwada”

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Abstract

Women-led agribusinesses have emerged as a vital driver of rural development in India, particularly in regions like Marathwada, which face chronic challenges of drought, low agricultural productivity, and limited employment opportunities. This study examines the socio-economic impact of women-led agribusinesses on rural livelihoods in Marathwada, focusing on income enhancement, empowerment, skill development, and community well-being. A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining primary data from 150 women entrepreneurs across key districts with secondary data from government reports and previous studies. The analysis highlights that women-led agribusinesses significantly contribute to household income, create local employment opportunities, and enhance decision-making power within families. In addition, these enterprises improve social recognition and confidence among women, fostering greater participation in community development activities. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as limited access to finance, markets, and technology continue to restrict growth potential. The study underscores the need for targeted policies, including microfinance support, skill development programs, and market-linkage facilitation, to strengthen women's agribusiness initiatives. Overall, empowering women in agribusiness not only enhances their socio-economic status but also contributes to sustainable rural development, making them key agents of transformation in Marathwada's agrarian landscape.

Keywords: Women-led agribusiness, rural livelihoods, socio-economic impact, women empowerment, Marathwada, rural entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Agriculture continues to be the backbone of rural India, providing employment and livelihood to a large section of the population. In regions like Marathwada, where agriculture faces challenges such as erratic rainfall, low productivity, and limited employment opportunities, women play a crucial yet often under-recognized role in sustaining rural economies. Over the past decade, women-led agribusinesses have emerged as an important avenue for enhancing household income, creating employment, and promoting economic self-reliance. These enterprises include activities such as dairy farming, poultry, food processing, millet cultivation, and horticulture, which not only generate income but also foster skill development and decision-making power among rural women.

Despite their potential, women entrepreneurs in rural areas often face barriers such as limited access to finance, technology, markets, and training. Understanding the socio-economic impact of these agribusinesses is essential for designing policies and support systems that can strengthen women's participation in rural development. This study aims to assess the economic, social, and community-level outcomes of women-led agribusinesses in Marathwada, highlighting their contributions to rural livelihoods, empowerment, and sustainable development.

Literature Review

Women's participation in agribusiness and rural entrepreneurship has been widely acknowledged as a key driver of socio-economic development. Several studies emphasize that women-led enterprises not only supplement household income but also empower women socially and economically. According to Kumar & Singh (2020), women entrepreneurs in rural India face both structural and cultural challenges, yet their engagement in agriculture-based micro-enterprises significantly improves family welfare and local employment opportunities.

Research by Chand & Mishra (2018) highlights that women's involvement in dairy, poultry, and food processing enterprises contributes to household income diversification and enhances food security in rural areas. Similarly, Patel et al. (2019) observed that skill development and access to microfinance are critical factors influencing the success of women-led agribusinesses. These studies suggest that women's empowerment through agribusiness not only strengthens economic status but also fosters decision-making capacity and social recognition.

In the context of Maharashtra, especially the Marathwada region, research indicates that recurrent droughts, water scarcity, and limited market access constrain the growth of rural enterprises (Government of Maharashtra, 2022). However, initiatives under schemes like PM FME (Pradhan Mantri Formalisation of Micro Food Enterprises) and NABARD support programs have shown potential in supporting women entrepreneurs to overcome these challenges.

Despite the growing body of literature, there is a gap in empirical studies focusing specifically on the socio-economic impacts of women-led agribusinesses in drought-prone regions like Marathwada. Most research addresses either income generation or empowerment separately, but few studies analyze the combined economic, social, and community-level

outcomes of these enterprises. This gap highlights the need for a focused study to understand how women-led agribusinesses influence rural livelihoods, household well-being, and local development.

Research Methodology

Study Area

The study is focused on the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, which comprises eight districts: Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, Parbhani, Hingoli, Nanded, Osmanabad, and Latur. This region is largely agriculture-dependent and characterized by semi-arid conditions, frequent droughts, and water scarcity, which affect rural livelihoods. The choice of Marathwada is significant because women in this region are increasingly engaging in agribusiness activities to enhance household income, create employment, and improve socio-economic status.

Sampling

a) Population:

The study targets women entrepreneurs actively engaged in agribusiness, including activities such as dairy farming, poultry, food processing, horticulture, and small-scale agro-enterprises.

b) Sample Size:

A total of 150 respondents were selected from different villages across Marathwada to ensure representation of various agribusiness types and socio-economic backgrounds.

c) Sampling Method:

- **Stratified Sampling:** The population was divided into strata based on districts and type of agribusiness, ensuring that each category is proportionally represented.
- **Purposive Sampling:** Women entrepreneurs who had at least two years of experience in agribusiness and were actively managing enterprises were selected to gather relevant insights.

Data Collection

a) Primary Data:

- **Structured Questionnaires:** Designed to capture demographic details, income levels, employment generation, business challenges, and decision-making power.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted with selected respondents to obtain qualitative insights on empowerment, community participation, and socio-cultural challenges.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Conducted in select villages to understand community-level impacts of women-led agribusinesses.

b) Secondary Data:

- Government reports on rural development, agriculture, and women empowerment programs.
- Data from NGOs and local cooperatives supporting women entrepreneurs.
- Previous research studies on women entrepreneurship and rural livelihoods in India and Maharashtra.

Data Analysis and Presentation

1. Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Number of Respondents (N=150)	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	20–30	40	26.7
	31–40	55	36.7
	41–50	35	23.3
	51 & above	20	13.3
Education	Illiterate	30	20.0
	Primary	50	33.3
	Secondary	45	30.0
	Higher Secondary & above	25	16.7
Household Size	≤4 members	50	33.3
	5–7 members	80	53.3
	≥8 members	20	13.3
Landholding	Marginal (<1 ha)	60	40.0
	Small (1–2 ha)	50	33.3
	Medium (>2 ha)	40	26.7
Monthly Household Income	< ₹10,000	45	30.0
	₹10,001–20,000	65	43.3
	> ₹20,000	40	26.7

Source: Primary Data

The majority of women entrepreneurs fall in the age group of 31–40 years, indicating a productive working age. Most respondents have primary or secondary education, showing basic literacy that supports entrepreneurial activities. Households are generally medium-sized, with 5–7 members. Landholdings are mostly marginal or small, reflecting the semi-arid agricultural conditions of Marathwada. Around 43% earn ₹10,001–20,000 monthly, suggesting moderate economic stability through agribusiness activities.

2. Agribusiness Performance

Type of Agribusiness	Number of Entrepreneurs	Percentage (%)	Average Monthly Revenue (₹)	Employment Generated
Dairy Farming	50	33.3	12,000	2
Poultry	35	23.3	10,500	1
Food Processing	30	20.0	15,000	3
Horticulture / Fruits	20	13.3	9,000	1
Others (Millets, Spices)	15	10.0	8,500	1

Source: Primary Data

Dairy farming emerges as the most popular agribusiness, employing additional family members and generating stable income. Food processing enterprises have higher average revenue per entrepreneur, reflecting value addition. Smaller enterprises like horticulture and spice cultivation have lower revenue but provide critical household nutrition and market linkage opportunities.

3. Impact Assessment

a) Economic Impact

Indicator	Improvement Noted	Percentage (%)
Increase in household income	Yes	70
Asset accumulation	Yes	55
Savings growth	Yes	60

Source: Primary Data

Women-led agribusinesses contribute significantly to **income improvement (70%)**, asset ownership (55%), and enhanced household savings (60%), indicating better economic resilience.

b) Social Impact

Indicator	Positive Change	Percentage (%)
Participation in household decisions	Yes	65
Skill development (entrepreneurial)	Yes	75
Social recognition / empowerment	Yes	60

Source: Primary Data

Women's participation in decision-making and entrepreneurial skill development is notable, with 75% reporting skill enhancement. Social recognition has improved, strengthening empowerment within households and communities.

c) Community Impact

Indicator	Impact Observed	Percentage (%)
Employment generated locally	Yes	50
Contribution to food security	Yes	60
Community awareness / leadership	Yes	40

Source: Primary Data

Half of the agribusinesses generate local employment, while 60% contribute to food security by producing milk, vegetables, or processed food products. Women entrepreneurs also play leadership roles in community-level initiatives, although this is lower (40%), indicating room for social engagement.

Comparison with Existing Literature

1. **Productivity & Agricultural Performance:** In Kenya, research shows that women's empowerment in agriculture (measured via the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index, A-WEAI) is *positively associated* with maize productivity. In Pakistan, greater participation of women in rice production improved technical efficiency significantly (e.g., higher labour/land ratio).
2. **Nutrition & Dietary Diversity** A study across 3,600 rural Indian households found that when women are more empowered in agricultural decisions (especially input decisions) and are members of self-help groups, their dietary diversity improves. However, some systematic reviews note a trade-off: while women's increased involvement in agriculture can raise household income, it may also increase their workload, potentially hurting rest or childcare.
3. **Food Security / Household Consumption :** In Southern Ethiopia (Gamo Zone), women's empowerment in agriculture positively impacts household food security, as measured via food consumption scores and dietary diversity.
4. **Empowerment & Social Dimensions:** In Sri Lanka (Imbulpe division), a household-level analysis found that women's empowerment was significantly influenced by agricultural training, education, and access to credit; and that empowerment correlated with greater food production. According to IFAD, economic empowerment of rural women leads to positive changes in social norms – more decision-making, leadership, participation. ICRISAT reports that through self-help groups (SHGs) and collectives, women are moving from labor roles to leadership/management roles in agriculture.
5. **Climate-Resilient Agriculture:** In India, capacity-building programs that train women in climate-resilient agricultural practices (precision farming, integrated pest management) have increased income, productivity, and social status.

Summary of Comparison:

- The literature widely supports the notion that when women are more empowered in agribusiness via decision-making, access to inputs/training/markets there are positive spillovers on productivity, nutrition, and household welfare.
- However, some caveats emerge: increased burdens, structural barriers, and social norms can limit the full benefits unless addressed.

Policy Implications & Recommendations

1. Support Programs: Skill Development & Access to Microfinance

- **Skill Development:**
 - Training programs help women acquire technical skills in agriculture, processing, marketing, bookkeeping, and entrepreneurship.
 - Examples include workshops on organic farming, dairy management, food preservation, and digital marketing.
 - Skilled women can adopt modern practices, increase productivity, and improve product quality, leading to higher income.
 - Capacity-building also enhances confidence and decision-making power, fostering empowerment.
- **Access to Microfinance:**
 - Microfinance provides small loans, credit, and savings facilities, enabling women to invest in agribusiness, buy inputs, or expand operations.
 - Access to credit reduces dependency on informal moneylenders and allows timely investment in productive activities.
 - Programs like SHGs (Self-Help Groups) have successfully combined credit access with training, promoting both financial independence and entrepreneurial growth.

Impact: These programs together enhance women's economic participation, reduce financial vulnerability, and create a sustainable livelihood.

2. Market Linkage Facilitation for Women Entrepreneurs

- **Need for Market Linkages:**
 - Women often face challenges in selling their produce due to lack of access to markets, pricing information, transport, and buyer networks.
- **Facilitation Measures:**
 - Government and NGOs can help by linking women to wholesale markets, cooperatives, retail chains, and e-markets.
 - Providing storage, processing, and packaging infrastructure increases product value.
 - Digital platforms can enable direct-to-consumer sales, improving profit margins and business sustainability.

Impact: Strong market linkages ensure better income, reduce post-harvest losses, and integrate women entrepreneurs into local and regional value chains.

3. Encourage Government Schemes

- **MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act):**
 - Provides guaranteed employment for rural households, including women, ensuring income stability during lean agricultural periods.
 - Women's participation in MGNREGA also empowers them through wage earnings and recognition as contributors to household and community economy.
- **NABARD Initiatives:**
 - NABARD promotes rural development via credit support, infrastructure, and capacity-building.

- Schemes target women farmers and agripreneurs, enabling access to loans, technology, and training.
- **PM FME Scheme (Pradhan Mantri Formalization of Micro Food Processing Enterprises):**
- Encourages women-led micro-enterprises in food processing, providing financial support, training, and marketing assistance.
- Helps small-scale women entrepreneurs formalize their businesses, improve product quality, and access wider markets.

Impact: Participation in such schemes strengthens women's economic resilience, entrepreneurship, and social recognition in the community.

4. Community Awareness Programs to Strengthen Participation

- **Objective:** Address social and cultural barriers that limit women's active participation in agribusiness.
- **Strategies:**
 - Awareness campaigns to sensitize families and communities about the economic and social benefits of women's participation.
 - Promoting gender equality and encouraging shared household decision-making.
 - Educating communities on women's rights to land, credit, and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- **Impact:** Creates an enabling environment where women can fully participate, reduces resistance from traditional norms, and supports long-term empowerment and rural development.

Overall Implication: These policy measures and programs work together to create an ecosystem that empowers women economically and socially, strengthens rural livelihoods, promotes inclusive development, and fosters sustainable local growth.

Conclusion

The study of women-led agribusinesses in Marathwada reveals significant socio-economic and empowerment outcomes. Women's participation in agriculture and related enterprises has contributed to increased household income, improved financial stability, and greater asset accumulation. Engagement in value-added production and adoption of modern agricultural practices has enhanced productivity and diversified income sources, strengthening resilience against agricultural and climate-related risks.

Beyond economic gains, women-led agribusinesses have positively influenced social empowerment. Women now exercise greater decision-making power within households, take leadership roles in self-help groups and cooperatives, and gain social recognition and confidence through entrepreneurial activities. Training, skill development, and access to credit have further enhanced women's agency, fostering both individual and community-level empowerment.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain. Women often face limited access to formal credit, markets, infrastructure, and technology, while persistent social norms and gender-based constraints restrict full participation. Policy gaps and insufficient support mechanisms can limit the scalability and sustainability of women-led initiatives.

Looking forward, women-led agribusinesses have immense potential to strengthen Marathwada's rural economy. With targeted policy support, improved market linkages, skill development programs, and community awareness initiatives, these enterprises can enhance rural livelihoods, promote inclusive development, and contribute to sustainable local growth. Supporting women entrepreneurs is therefore not only a means of economic empowerment but a strategic pathway to holistic rural development in the region.

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