

Thematic brief

Enabling/Facilitating women farmers to access better markets

This thematic brief is developed under the Action Learning Research project '*Role of Gender in Agriculture, Climate Change and Food Security*' by Friends of Women's World Banking (FWWB) India. As the author **Bharti**, role has been to review and analyse existing literature and FWWB's work on promoting women farmers' access to markets and the value chain and design an approach for supporting greater market access.

Context

Persistent discrimination and gender inequalities continue to constrain women's access to the market and thereby their incomes and benefits from their earnings. These interlinked and mutually reinforcing inequities operate on all levels, ranging from the individual and household levels to markets and value chains. In specific contexts, restrictions on women's freedom and mobility exclude them from participating in markets. In others, women's participation is limited to roles characterised by heavy workloads and low wages. Very often, women's access to and benefits from markets are determined by their diverse identities and demographics, such as age, marital status, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, and geographic location (Berik, Yana van der Meulen, & Stephanie, 2009).

There is considerable scepticism from both producers and business owners, which also creates barriers to market access and collaboration. Business owners often express doubts about the reliability of production volumes and the quality produced by women. In contrast, producers, especially women farmers, feel disillusioned due to perceived breaches of trust in past transactions. This mutual distrust between producers and market players, coupled with gender inequalities and intersecting forms of discrimination, restricts women's full and gainful participation in markets and hinders economic development (Cuberes & Marc, 2012).

Women represent more than 70% of the agricultural workforce in many parts of the world, yet they continue to face challenges as economic agents in agribusiness value chains compared with men. (UN-WOMEN, 2021). In India, the agriculture sector employs 80% of all economically active women: 33% in the labour force and 48% as self-employed. (ICAR, 2020) Despite women's dominance in the labour force, they lack leadership in many areas of agribusiness (market-facing roles), as the majority remain in low-value-added crops, are concentrated in basic production and low-productivity activities, and struggle to leverage lucrative aspects of the value chain (UN-WOMEN, 2021). Moreover, their contributions have often gone unrecognised and undervalued, and they have faced numerous barriers to market access.

The literature has demonstrated that expanding women's access to markets can yield numerous financial benefits. There has been sufficient evidence showing the benefits of increasing efforts to expand women's access to markets and value chains, as well as investing in economic sectors—such as agriculture—where women are disproportionately represented in labour-intensive, low-wage, and informal employment. (Kan & Stephan, 2021)

Methodology

This analytical brief is developed by examining secondary literature on promoting women farmers' access to markets and the value chain. FWWB's longstanding work in capacity building for small and marginal farmers (especially women farmers) in the agricultural value chain, particularly in accessing better markets, has been referenced and analysed in this note. Thus, through secondary research and analysis of research reports, policy papers, and FWWB's project documents, this analytical brief aims to outline a framework or approach for women farmers to access better markets. The framework will seek to understand the key enablers and constraints to women farmers' market access.

Framework for analysis

The experiences of the JOINT PROGRAMME: Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE)¹ (FAO, IFAD, UN Women, and WFP, 2022). Strategies can be seen as an adaptable framework for enabling markets and value chains to work for women farmers, as summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Framework/ Approach for supporting women farmers' access to better markets



Figure 1 outlines five central approaches to promoting women's participation in markets and value chains through measures that empower women economically. These approaches have contributed to the economic empowerment of rural women in seven participating countries during JP RWEE's first phase. (FAO, IFAD, UN Women, and WFP, 2022). The same framework can be used to analyse examples from India and globally.

Insights from India and global examples:

Gender analysis tools (Gate Analysis, 2005) are one of the tools to analyse social relations between men and women, uncovering the inequalities in social, economic, and political power that underlie gender-differentiated access, opportunities, constraints, and outcomes in the market. Additionally, value chain analysis has been conducted to design situation-specific marketing strategies that take into account the unique socio-cultural and agro-ecological variations of different regions (Olawoye et al., 2016). It uncovered the other organisational and coercive relationships and cleavages among the various actors clustered in the different nodes of the value-chain.

Policymakers and other stakeholders have also designed and implemented a broad range of interventions to promote women's access to and participation in markets and value chains.

These broadly include measures and policies that aim to

- Empower disadvantaged producers and workers, including by increasing their production and efficiency,

¹ JOINT PROGRAMME: Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE) - It is a UN Joint Programme on Rural Women's Economic Empowerment. It is a global initiative that aims to secure livelihoods and rights for rural women. The programme is jointly implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the World Food Programme (WFP) in seven countries: Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda. <https://jprwee.org/>

- Develop markets and value chains by collaborating with private sector actors and public organisations to increase gender sensitive procurement, and
- Advocate for gender-responsive economic policy.

The measures mentioned above reflect a complementary and necessary approach towards addressing the complex and dynamic challenges faced by women farmers. The effective expansion of women's access to markets and value chains requires strategies that engage diverse public and private stakeholders. (UN Secretary-General's Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016). Given the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion that women experience, a range of strategies have been used in developing, implementing, and evaluating projects aimed at improving market access for women farmers. Some of those include. Developing and strengthening producer groups, organisations and cooperatives for increasing women's collective negotiating power, and access to productive assets (land, agricultural inputs, and time-saving technologies). In Niger, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, producer organisations adopted regulations and practices that improved financial management and gender-equitable governance. In Guatemala, the formalisation of women's groups and the continuation of producer activities sustained increased income generation.

- Establishing links between women, markets and value chains through the promotion of gender-responsive procurement—the acquisition of goods produced by women-owned and gender responsive entities—for the promotion of local and sustainable market opportunities. In addition, existing links between women and markets to be strengthened by providing women with the tools and knowledge to become more efficient producers at scale. In Kyrgyzstan, women entrepreneurs' access to markets was expanded through the online marketplace “Buy from Women.” While in Ethiopia, regional and national-level market exposure was established by linking women's cooperatives and urban women's enterprises with trade fairs.
- Improving market participation through the promotion of savings, credit, and financial services led to expansion of women's access to and control over resources, and an increase in their financial capacity to invest in their enterprises for increased production, adoption of new technology, and targeting of new markets. In Guatemala, strengthening savings and loan groups improved financial and accounting skills among participating members. While in Nepal, the provision of reliable and sustainable support for access to credit and financial services proved critical in creating economic resilience through market integration. Similarly, in India National Rural Livelihood Mission (NLRM)
- Promoting income diversification, skills development and job creation through sustained capacity-building to equip women with the skills to incorporate new tools and technologies into production and enterprise management.
- Increasing women's influence on market-related policy-making through capacity building opportunities to policymakers at all levels to promote the expansion and adoption of gender-sensitive policies in plans and legislation. Under the JPRWEE project, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Food of Guatemala developed the country's first-ever Institutional Policy for Gender Equality and its Strategy (2014–2023). Subsequently, in Ethiopia, capacity-building opportunities were provided to experts (local and regional governments, as well as women's associations) on gender mainstreaming, gender-responsive budgeting, and leadership.

- FWWB, through its work with small and marginal farmers, especially women farmers, promotes direct participation in the agri-based economy, augments their capacities, and increases their climate resilience. It collaborates with agri-tech experts and market linkage specialists to build the capacities of farmers through training, workshops, and exposure visits, and enabling catalytic finance for climate-adaptive measures. So far, FWWB has supported 200 farmer collectives and more than 1.5 lakh farmers across India.
- FWWB in one of its Capacity Building projects funded by Supraja Foundation facilitated market linkage for farmer collectives by organising buyer awareness programs, exposure visits to explore market opportunities (for Moringa and other agri produce), branding & packaging initiative (for groundnut oil) and participation in trade fairs/exhibitions (such as Vibrant Gujarat Summit, 2024) to connect sellers with potential buyers and networks for market linkages and business opportunities. As part of the project, two advanced digital platforms (BookMyCrop and Arya Shakti Application)² were introduced to support data digitalisation, satellite-based farm monitoring, and traceability of sustainable practices adopted by farmers.
- FWWB under the Ford Funded project on ‘Gender, Climate Change, and Agriculture’ engaged with technical market support agencies such as Raheja (solar dried produce), and Info-kul Grameen services (milk value chain) for exploring niche lucrative markets, establishing market linkages, and providing technical handholding on value addition on the entire supply chain. These market agencies provided training videos and guidance on packaging and storage solutions to ensure that farmers are equipped to maintain the quality and shelf life of the products.

The above two examples demonstrate FWWB’s efforts to establish links between women, markets, and value chains by promoting local and sustainable market opportunities. In each of these examples, existing linkages between farmers (particularly women farmers) and markets are to be strengthened by providing producers with the tools and knowledge to become more efficient. Furthermore, access to markets was expanded through the online platform ‘BookMyCrop’, which enables satellite monitoring of crops and the traceability of agricultural practices. By tracking these practices, the platform creates transparency and allows the produce to be linked directly with potential buyers, thereby enhancing market access and buyer confidence in sustainably grown crops.

Learning from the examples:

Market access for women farmers involves linking diverse strategies and stakeholders at all levels. In most cases, it also requires dismantling gender inequalities within households, communities, and institutions. Women’s access to markets can be strengthened by implementing context-specific gender responsive programming; promotion of savings, access to credit and financial services; and expansion of women’s control over resources

²BookMyCrop to enable satellite monitoring of crops and help trace the agricultural practices followed by farmers. Arya Shakti Application to facilitate end-to-end farm monitoring. The platform offers crop recommendations tailored to specific farm conditions and generates a farm credit score, which can help farmers access formal credit and improve their financial inclusion.

(productive assets such as land which was a condition to become part of board), as underlined below:

- **Creating sustainable access to markets for women farmers** through networking with local institutions with a sustainable demand for their produce, increased market reach of local produce and decent work opportunities. This will require ongoing partnerships with players (private and market groups) to ensure sustained access to institutional demand for women-produced goods. This also entails promotion of women farmers' products on local platforms, including radio programming and digital forums, to increase sales.
- **Promoting inclusion to expand women farmers' access to markets** by engaging with both men and women in the deconstruction of local gender norms that contribute to women's economic marginalisation. Beyond engaging with men, inclusive and transformative practices should also be integrated to establish more gender-equal relationships. Further, programme targeting should ensure that most disempowered women from participating communities have the skills and opportunities to engage with markets collectively.
- **Amplifying women farmers' collective voice and gender equality in policymaking related to markets and value chains** through the design and implementation of gender-sensitive policies. Additional measures are to ensure that women's access to leadership and elected positions continues to grow, which may include creating organisational procedures and legal quotas to promote and protect women's participation in leadership roles. Local development planning and access to productive assets are other mechanisms for ensuring the sustainability of gains in women's economic empowerment.

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