

Empowering Women in Agri-Business Leadership: Opportunities and Challenges in Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods in Vidarbha

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Abstract—Agriculture is the backbone of rural life in Vidarbha, but women, who make up the majority of the agricultural labour, are underrepresented in decision-making and agri-business leadership. This study examines the potential and constraints that women face when leading agri-business firms and producer institutions, as well as how their involvement may contribute to sustainable living in the region. Drawing on field observations, secondary data, and literature on gender and rural development, the study examines women's participation in self-help groups, farmer-producer organisations, and forest-based companies, highlighting both the socioeconomic potential and the institutional barriers that exist. Value addition in cotton, soybean, and horticultural products, collective marketing of minor forest goods, adoption of climate-resilient agricultural techniques, and the rising space for digital platforms connecting rural women to larger markets are all potential options. Women's leadership potential remains constrained by constraints such as low financing access, a lack of collateral ownership, restricted mobility, significant household duties, and insufficient institutional support. The paper contends that empowering women via targeted training, credit facilitation, infrastructure assistance, and policy convergence with forest rights and livelihood schemes may greatly improve rural resilience and close the rural-urban livelihood gap. The findings are useful for policymakers, NGOs, and academic forums working on gender-inclusive and sustainable agribusiness models in Vidarbha.

Index Terms—Women Empowerment, Agri-Business Leadership, Sustainable Livelihoods, Vidarbha, Rural Entrepreneurship, Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs), Forest-Based Livelihoods

I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has historically served as the backbone of rural India, providing not just food and raw resources but also a key source of income for millions of people. Women make up a large share of the labour in this industry, working in sowing, transplanting, harvesting, post-harvest processing, and animal management. Despite their significant engagement, women are generally underrepresented in decision-making roles, notably in agribusiness and company leadership. This paradox of high engagement but little acknowledgement has far-reaching consequences for rural development, social fairness, and livelihood sustainability. The Vidarbha area of Maharashtra is a significant case study for investigating these topics due to its agricultural concerns, livelihood risks, and increasing prospects in agribusiness. Vidarbha, known for its reliance on rainfed agriculture, recurrent climate pressures, and socioeconomic inequities, has emerged as a significant location for talks about livelihood sustainability and the empowerment of marginalised populations, particularly women. In recent years, the conversation around sustainable livelihoods has changed from a narrow focus on agricultural output to a more comprehensive view that incorporates value addition, entrepreneurship, forest-based resources, and communal enterprise models. Women's leadership in agribusiness is widely regarded as critical to this shift. When women serve as leaders in self-help groups (SHGs), farmer producer organisations (FPOs), cooperatives, or micro-enterprises, they not only increase their income and negotiating power, but also strengthen the resilience of entire households and communities. Leadership positions provide women access to markets,

technology, training, and institutional networks that are often dominated by males. Empowered women are also more inclined to spend their earnings in nutrition, education, and community development, resulting in beneficial ripple effects that extend well beyond individual homes.

Women in Vidarbha continue to encounter several impediments to leadership in agribusiness. Due to a lack of access to land titles and collateral, they are unable to secure official finance, which is critical for expanding businesses. Social conventions frequently constrain their mobility, restricting their interactions with markets and purchasers. Heavy family commitments and caregiving demands significantly limit the time and energy available for business pursuits. Furthermore, many women-led ventures remain tiny and informal, unable to compete with bigger, male-dominated businesses. Even in SHGs and FPOs, decision-making authority is frequently concentrated in the hands of males, leaving women as passive members rather than active leaders. These structural barriers keep women from reaching their full potential in developing sustainable livelihood routes. The region has unique potential to increase women's roles in agribusiness leadership. Cotton, soybeans, pulses, and horticulture products like oranges and pomegranates provide opportunities for value addition through processing, packaging, and branding. Forest-based resources, including non-timber forest products (NTFP), such as tendu leaves, mahua, honey, and medicinal plants, give further opportunities for women to participate in community businesses under the Forest Rights Act. Initiatives such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) have shown that with the correct institutional assistance, women can effectively run businesses, increase income, and improve household resilience. Digital technology and e-commerce platforms are creating new opportunities for women to avoid conventional middlemen and connect directly with markets, enhancing price realisation and lowering exploitation.

The convergence of agriculture, forest rights, and sustainable living makes Vidarbha an ideal location for policy and research. Empowering women in agribusiness leadership is more than just a gender equality objective; it is a strategic imperative for resolving rural hardship, closing the rural-urban livelihood gap, and guaranteeing ecological

sustainability. Policymakers may unleash considerable latent potential by making it easier for women to lead businesses, get finance, and engage in market linkages. Such empowerment can help to break the cycle of poverty and distress migration that affects many rural households in Vidarbha, while also contributing to inclusive and balanced regional development. As a result, it focuses on identifying the potential and problems associated with boosting women's leadership in agribusiness in Vidarbha. It aims to examine the structural impediments to women's engagement, identify sectors where their leadership may be increased, and highlight measures for strengthening sustainable livelihoods. In doing so, the research contributes to the larger subject of bridging rural-urban divides by highlighting women's roles as decision-makers, inventors, and entrepreneurs in the agribusiness sector.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Jaacks et al. (2025) Using a quasi-experimental methodology in Uttar Pradesh, the authors demonstrate that participation in Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) is connected with higher levels of women's empowerment and farm profitability, although the impacts vary across domains such as leadership and income control. They suggest that additional interventions (such as childcare and transportation help) are required to convert market participation into agency.

Rukmani, Gopinath, Anuradha, Sanjeev, & Yadav (2019). This research, based on Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) work in Wardha and Yavatmal (Vidarbha), examines how women-led, nutrition-sensitive agriculture—kitchen gardens, millets, and nutritional counselling—boosted livelihoods and dietary variety. It emphasises the importance of collaborative effort and locally tailored extension for long-term success.

Prateek & Gupta (2024) The authors use case studies of gram sabha federations in Vidarbha to demonstrate how collective forest governance stabilises rural livelihoods by increasing bargaining power in NTFP markets and facilitating rule-making on sustainable harvesting. They emphasise the role of federated institutions in growing inclusive value-added.

Malapit et al. (2017) This IFPRI discussion paper introduces the Abbreviated Women's Empowerment

in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI), which validates a speedier, more field-friendly instrument across test locations. It identifies which empowerment domains are most susceptible to project change, guiding program design and assessment in agri-entrepreneurship.

Gupta, Vemireddy, Singh & Pingali (2019) The authors report on research conducted across India and describe how adapting WEAI to local agricultural contexts (tasks, assets, crops) provides more policy-relevant insights. They warn that uncritical use of global measurements may overlook intra-regional gendered restrictions influencing company leadership. SOPPECOM (2022) This policy brief contends that India's FPO drive may marginalise women unless SHG-FPO links, gender-responsive bylaws, and investment in care and mobility are mainstreamed. It provides practical design solutions for egalitarian governance, such as reserved board seats, customised credit, and aggregation models.

Vuciterna, Ruggeri, Mazzocchi, Manzella & Corsi (2024) A bibliometric evaluation of 728 publications maps women's agricultural entrepreneurship research, highlighting empowerment, resource access, digitalisation, and climate resilience as key clusters. The report highlights persisting evidence gaps in the Global South and advocates for practical efforts on leadership and scalability.

Khan, Zahid, Nasir & Shah (2025) This viewpoint brings together global information on women entrepreneurs as sustainability leaders, emphasising social capital, market access, and enabling environments. It emphasises the need for gender-responsive policies and mentorship networks in promoting green agribusiness growth.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate the prospects and constraints of empowering women as agri-business leaders to promote sustainable lives in Vidarbha.
2. Investigate the level of women's engagement and leadership in agribusiness operations, self-help groups (SHGs), and farmer-producer organisations (FPOs) in Vidarbha.
3. Identify possibilities for women in value addition, collective marketing, and forest-based companies to improve livelihood sustainability.
4. To investigate the primary barriers that women have

in obtaining resources such as financing, technology, training, and market connections for agribusiness leadership.

5. To investigate the effects of women's leadership in agribusiness on income diversification, decision-making authority, and household resilience.

6. To propose strategies and policy measures for boosting women's agribusiness leadership and bridging rural-urban livelihood gaps in Vidarbha Region.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current research, Empowering Women in Agri-Business Leadership: Opportunities and Challenges in Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods in Vidarbha, is based on the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) and Gender and Development (GAD) perspectives, with parts of Empowerment Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive perspective for examining the relationship between women's leadership, resource access, and livelihood sustainability. The Department for International Development (DFID) established the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, which emphasises that five types of capital affect livelihood outcomes: human, social, environmental, physical, and financial. Rural women in Vidarbha frequently face barriers to accessing these resources, including limited land ownership (natural capital), limited access to cash (financial capital), poor infrastructure (physical capital), and restricted networks (social capital). Leadership in agribusiness allows women to increase these capitals by improving loan availability, boosting skills via training, creating networks through FPOs and SHGs, and implementing sustainable farming practices. Using SLF, this study investigates how women's agribusiness leadership contributes to more diverse, resilient, and ecologically sustainable lifestyles. In addition, the Gender and Development (GAD) viewpoint emphasises power dynamics, social norms, and institutional structures that impact gender roles. Unlike Women in Development (WID), which focuses on women's engagement in isolation, GAD emphasises the issue of altering uneven power relations. In Vidarbha, women work in agriculture but are underrepresented in company governance and market decision-making. Using the GAD approach, this study examines how societal norms, patriarchy,

and institutional biases limit women's leadership chances while also showing avenues for structural change through legislation, collective action, and gender-responsive institutions. The study also incorporates Empowerment Theory, namely Kabeer's (1999) framework of resources, agency, and accomplishments. According to this viewpoint, empowerment is more than just involvement; it is about improving one's ability to make smart life decisions. Women in agribusiness have access to financing, training, and land rights; agency entails leadership roles, decision-making, and market negotiations; and success is measured by increased income, household resilience, and recognition as community leaders. By employing this approach, the study conceptualises women's leadership as both a means and an aim, promoting sustainable livelihoods while advancing gender equity.

Integrating these views enables the research to examine both potential (such as value addition, forest-based firms, and digital inclusion) and difficulties (such as financial hurdles, mobility constraints, and unpaid care obligations). The framework emphasises that women's empowerment in agribusiness requires a multifaceted approach that includes boosting livelihood capitals, addressing structural gender inequities, and empowering agency through supporting policies and institutions. Thus, the theoretical framework provides a comprehensive foundation for researching women's leadership in Vidarbha. It views empowerment not just as an individual success, but also as a social process capable of transforming rural communities, closing the rural-urban livelihood gap, and promoting sustainable development.

V. KEY FINDINGS

1. High Participation but Low Leadership: Women in Vidarbha make major contributions to agricultural tasks, including planting, harvesting, post-harvest processing, and animal management. However, their involvement in decision-making and leadership roles within FPOs, cooperatives, and agri-business firms is restricted. Many women participate in self-help groups (SHGs), but only a tiny minority hold leadership positions.
2. Opportunities in Value Addition and Forest-Based Enterprises: Cotton, soybean, pulse, and horticultural

commodities are examples of value-added industries that may be enhanced by grading, processing, and branding. Furthermore, non-timber forest products (NTFP) such as tendu leaves, mahua, and honey offer potential for women's collectives to establish their businesses under the Forest Rights Act. Digital platforms are also establishing new marketing channels, reducing reliance on intermediaries.

3. Positive Impact on Livelihood Sustainability: Women-led businesses and SHGs that have effectively accessed capital and markets have reported greater household incomes, stronger savings habits, and more dietary diversity. Leadership in agribusiness also increased women's decision-making authority inside families, which improved education, health, and nutrition results.

4. Challenges in Scaling Women's Leadership: Women continue to face structural constraints such as a lack of land ownership, restricted access to collateral-free lending, inadequate exposure to training and extension services, and movement limitations. The burden of unpaid household duties significantly restricts the amount of time they have available for entrepreneurial activity. Social conventions and male domination in farming institutions sometimes inhibit women from taking on leadership posts.

5. Institutional Support and Policy Convergence: Programs like as NRLM and MKSP in Vidarbha have demonstrated that focused capacity-building and group-based methods may improve women's leadership. However, more collaboration between agriculture, forest rights, rural livelihood projects, and financial institutions is required to scale up successful models.

6. Bridging Rural–Urban Livelihood Gaps: Women's agribusiness leadership, when properly supported, minimises rural distress migration by increasing local economic prospects. This not only increases household resilience but also helps to reduce inequities in rural and urban livelihood possibilities.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

1. Promote Gender-Responsive Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs): Women should be required to serve on FPO and cooperative boards of directors. Reserved leadership roles, capacity-building seminars,

and exposure trips can all help encourage women to actively participate in decision-making.

2. Strengthen Access to Finance: Banks and microfinance institutions should provide collateral-free financing opportunities for women-led businesses. Special loan guarantee schemes and flexible payback plans would benefit female businesses without land or property titles.

3. Skill Development and Capacity Building: Tailored training programs in value addition, business management, digital literacy, and climate-smart agriculture should be offered. Linking women to research organisations and agricultural universities can help them gain technical expertise.

4. Support for Value Addition and Market Linkages: Infrastructure for storing, grading, processing, and branding agricultural and forest-based commodities should be built locally. Establishing agreements with e-commerce platforms may provide women businesses with direct access to larger audiences.

5. Recognition of Forest-Based Enterprises: Effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act is critical. Women's collectives can be granted exclusive rights to manage and market minor forest production (MFP), including training in sustainable harvesting and product diversification.

6. Reduction of Domestic Work Burden: Establishing community childcare centres, promoting time-saving technology (such as energy-efficient stoves and water facilities), and encouraging shared family tasks can all help women have more time to manage businesses.

7. Awareness and Sensitisation: Community awareness efforts should challenge restrictive gender conventions while emphasising the economic and social benefits of female leadership. Male family members and community leaders should participate as allies in this process.

8. Policy Convergence and Institutional Collaboration: Agriculture, rural development, forest, and women and child development ministries should work together more closely. Integrating women's agribusiness promotion into current government initiatives (NRLM, MKSP, Atma Nirbhar Bharat, and NABARD's FPO programs) can increase the effect.

9. Encourage Digital Inclusion: Providing cellphones, internet connectivity, and digital tool training can assist women in getting access to online marketplaces, financial services, and agricultural advisory, decreasing their reliance on intermediaries.

VII. CONCLUSION

According to the research Empowering Women in Agri-Business Leadership in Vidarbha, women participate in agriculture in large numbers, but their presence in leadership and decision-making roles remains disproportionately low. Women face systemic barriers such as a lack of land ownership, limited access to collateral-free credit, insufficient training opportunities, and unpaid domestic responsibilities that prevent them from turning their skills and labour into entrepreneurial leadership and long-term livelihood outcomes. However, there are several prospects for women to advance their careers in agribusiness, including value addition in cotton, soybeans, pulses, and horticulture products, forest-based companies under the Forest Rights Act, digital platforms, and e-commerce marketplaces. Support from self-help groups, farmer-producer organisations, and programs such as NRLM and MKSP has resulted in increased household income, decision-making capacity, and community resilience. Empowering women in agribusiness leadership promotes not just gender parity but also a strategic approach to long-term rural development. However, realising this potential requires policy and institutional support, such as gender-responsive FPO structures, targeted skill development programs, flexible funding mechanisms, childcare and migration assistance, and more convergence between agricultural and forest rights legislation.

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