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Gender in Agricultural Value Chains: Challenges, Dynamics, and Pathways Toward Inclusive Development

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Gender dynamics critically shape agricultural value chains, affecting production efficiency, inclusiveness, and sustainability. Despite women's significant contributions across all stages of agriculture, structural inequalities continue to marginalize them within value-chain processes. This paper provides a comprehensive, evidence-based exploration of gender and agricultural value chains, identifying barriers to women's participation, analyzing institutional and social constraints, and proposing strategies for equitable and gender-responsive value-chain transformation. Drawing on global research and policy evidence, it argues that achieving gender equality is not merely a moral imperative but a key driver of agricultural productivity, resilience, and social equity. The study concludes that gender-transformative approaches, informed by context-specific analysis and supported by inclusive policy frameworks, are essential for creating equitable and sustainable agricultural value chains.

Introduction

Agricultural value chains (AVCs) encompass the full range of activities involved in producing, processing, distributing, and marketing agricultural products. Over the past two decades, the value-chain framework has emerged as an essential analytical and operational tool for understanding how value is created, captured, and distributed among stakeholders (Coles & Mitchell, 2011). However, within these systems, gender relations significantly influence who participates, who benefits, and who controls resources and decision-making power.

Globally, women constitute around 37% of the agricultural labor force, rising to nearly 48% in low-income countries (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], n.d.). Despite this, their contributions remain underrecognized and undervalued. Women are often concentrated in informal, low-value, or labor-intensive segments—such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and small-scale trading—while men dominate capital-intensive and profit-generating sectors, including mechanized farming, export agribusiness, and marketing.

The gender gap in access to resources, markets, and decision-making power reinforces a cycle of inequality that undermines both women's empowerment and agricultural productivity. Thus, integrating gender into agricultural value-chain development is not merely a social or ethical concern but a key factor in achieving sustainable, efficient, and equitable agricultural transformation. This paper synthesizes global research and policy analyses to explore gendered dimensions of agricultural value chains, barriers that constrain women's participation, and strategies that foster inclusive and transformative agricultural systems.

Gender Dynamics in Agricultural Value Chains

- **Gendered Division of Labour:** Agricultural value chains are profoundly shaped by gendered divisions of labor, where responsibilities are distributed according to social

norms and cultural expectations. In most contexts, men perform activities involving mechanization, marketing, and control over resources, while women are concentrated in time-consuming, manual, and low-profit roles (Coles & Mitchell, 2011). Women's involvement is highest in production and processing stages such as weeding, sorting, and packaging, yet their control over income and decision-making remains limited. This structural imbalance perpetuates a situation where women contribute substantially to agricultural productivity but receive a disproportionately small share of its benefits. The gendered segmentation of agricultural activities is reinforced by social perceptions that position men as primary breadwinners and women as "helpers" or secondary earners. These cultural norms limit women's access to extension services, credit, and land rights, further restricting participation in higher-value chain nodes (Rubin, Boonabaana, & Manfre, 2019).

- **Access and Control Over Resources:** Access to and control over productive resources—such as land, finance, technology, and information—represent critical areas of gender disparity. In many regions, women's landholdings are smaller and less secure than men's, while inheritance laws frequently restrict ownership rights (International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2021). Limited access to credit and agricultural inputs reduces women's productivity and prevents investment in high-value crops or technologies. Even when women generate income, household power relations often limit their control over earnings. Studies in East Africa reveal that even when women earn from cash crops, men typically manage proceeds, reflecting persistent gendered hierarchies that constrain women's agency (Rubin et al., 2019). This lack of autonomy hinders both empowerment and reinvestment in education and community well-being. Intersectionality—where gender interacts with age, class, and education—further compounds these inequalities (Pyburn et al., 2023).

Structural and Institutional Barriers

- **Cultural Norms and Social Expectations:** Cultural and social norms define women's mobility, visibility, and autonomy in agriculture. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, women's direct participation in markets is discouraged, compelling reliance on male intermediaries (Njuki et al., 2021). This not only reduces income but also excludes them from key market information and negotiation processes. Additionally, women shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic labor. Balancing household responsibilities with agricultural work limits their participation in production, training, and marketing. Targeted interventions such as childcare access and labor-saving technologies are essential to mitigate time poverty and enhance women's engagement in value chains.

Institutional Exclusion

Institutional barriers exacerbate gender inequalities. Women remain underrepresented in cooperatives, producer organizations, and governance bodies. Even when included, their participation is often nominal, with minimal influence in decision-making processes (IFC, 2021). Gender-neutral agricultural policies often worsen inequalities by overlooking women's specific challenges, inadvertently reinforcing systemic disparities (FAO, n.d.).

Market and Information Constraints

Women face unequal access to information, technology, and markets. Limited mobility, weak infrastructure, and restricted networks hinder their ability to engage with buyers. While digital technologies such as mobile banking and e-commerce show potential, gender gaps in literacy and affordability constrain benefits (Grow Asia, 2022). Climate change further intensifies these vulnerabilities, as women—often responsible for household food security—face higher risks from environmental shocks (Herforth et al., 2022).

Toward Gender-Inclusive Agricultural Value Chains

• Gender-Sensitive Value Chain Analysis

Promoting gender inclusion begins with gender-sensitive value-chain analysis (GSVCA), which maps gender roles, access, and decision-making across nodes (Manfre et al., 2016). This approach helps policymakers design targeted interventions addressing gendered barriers rather than treating them as secondary considerations

• Capacity Building and Skills Development

Empowerment through knowledge and capacity building is central to inclusion. Technical and entrepreneurial training enables women to transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture. Leadership, negotiation, and financial literacy training strengthen market participation (Grow Asia, 2022). Evidence from Kenya and Uganda shows women receiving integrated agricultural-business training report higher productivity and control over income (Herforth et al., 2022).

• Access to Inputs, Finance, and Technology

Expanding access to credit and technology is vital. Microfinance programs, savings groups, and digital financial tools help overcome collateral constraints (IFC, 2021). Designing tools aligned with women's needs—such as portable irrigation systems or solar-powered processors—improves productivity and reduces workloads (FAO, n.d.)

• Collective Action and Leadership

Collective organization empowers women through shared resources, peer support, and stronger bargaining power. Women's cooperatives and producer associations improve access to markets and decision spaces, fostering agency and resilience (Rubin et al., 2019).

• Gender-Transformative Approaches

Genuine inclusion demands systemic transformation rather than symbolic participation. Gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) challenge social norms and institutional rules sustaining inequality (Kini, 2022). Involving men and women jointly helps shift mindsets and structures, ensuring lasting empowerment (Pyburn et al., 2023).

• Policy and Institutional Implications

Governments should integrate gender analysis into planning, budgeting, and evaluation. Sex-disaggregated data collection, land tenure reform, and inclusive financial systems are essential (FAO, n.d.). The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) offers tools to measure changes in agency and participation (Herforth et al., 2022). Private sector engagement through gender-smart business models, inclusive sourcing, and supplier diversity can enhance fairness and profitability (IFC, 2021).

• Emerging Trends and Future Directions

Digitalization, climate-smart agriculture, and intersectional analysis are reshaping gender inclusion. Mobile platforms expand access to finance and information but require policies to bridge digital divides (Grow Asia, 2022). Climate-smart agriculture integrates women's indigenous knowledge for sustainable adaptation (CIMMYT, 2022). Intersectionality underscores the need to address gender alongside class, ethnicity, and age (Pyburn et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Gender equality in agricultural value chains is a cornerstone of inclusive and sustainable development. Women's contributions remain indispensable, yet systemic barriers persist in access, control, and participation. Transformative, gender-responsive strategies across all levels of policy and practice can dismantle these inequalities. Empowering women in agriculture is both an ethical imperative and an economic necessity that enhances productivity, food security, and community resilience.

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