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Sustaining livelihoods: The role of women-led micro enterprises in India's organic food supply chain

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Abstract

The organic food sector in India has witnessed an unprecedented expansion in the area. Health, growing environmental responsibility, and food produced without excessive chemical means have all been tightly linked with this expansion. Relying Less on Foreign Suppliers For Electric Mobility. Different types of organic business involve cultivation, processing, local employment, product development and online marketing. Women entrepreneurs, and their contribution towards the organic food system in India, the issues that inhibit their growth and the wider social and economic changes brought by them. It uses secondary material from market studies, academic literature and government and industry documents. The analysis reveals that women-led ventures are shortening linkages from farms to buyers. Besides, they also bolster rural livelihoods, sustainability, and consumer awareness. Simultaneously, slow progress has been caused by limited capital, expensive certification, and intense competition in the market.

Keywords: *women entrepreneurs, organic food, farm-to-market linkages, women-led enterprises, rural employment, sustainable agriculture, chemical-free products.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the mass employment that agriculture aids is both economic and social progress, it continues to be true for India. Increasingly, consumers are seeking food grown using cleaner methods. In the last few years, concerns about pesticide use, fertilizer residues, food adulteration and personal health have increased. This shift has aided the organic food industry growth. Women entrepreneurs have entered this area through farming, processing, packaging, local distribution, and direct sales to consumers. Farm to Market term refers to increasing producer and buyer distance. With fewer intermediaries, it is easier to explain how the goods were grown, keep up the quality and pay a fairer return to the producer. This methodology is utilized by many women-led organic ventures due to its focus on transparency, local marketing and sustainable supply arrangements. These initiatives can also provide paid work for rural women through self-help groups and other community enterprises. According to the literature reviewed in this paper, a woman entrepreneur is understood as a woman or a group of women who develops a business idea and arranges necessary resources to accept commercial risk and manage enterprise. An official definition mentioned most often in previous studies defines an enterprise as women-owned when at least 51 per cent of its capital is owned by women, and this generates similar share of employment for women. Women entrepreneurs contribute to production, employment, and local economic activity beyond ownership. As family responsibilities often happen along with their work, the building of a business, which is quite an erratic process, may be affected by an economic and social pressure.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Yadav and Unni (2016), women's entrepreneurship is not just important to create job opportunities and innovation, but also essential for robust socio-economic development. The work identifies challenges that persistently recur weak access to finance, social constraints, poor training and lack of market exposure. Despite this, they observe that policy support and improved educational opportunities can increase women's participation in entrepreneurial activity. Dahiya, Panghal, Sindhu, and Siwach (2021) analyse the problems faced by women entrepreneurs in organic food business using TISM approach. The research shows that unawareness, lack

of institutional support, limited finance, and poor market access are important constraints. It also states that the same sector offers substantial opportunities for women as there is a rising demand for food which is healthy, eco-friendly and free from chemicals. Women-led firms can strengthen the organic food ecosystem through innovation and community engagement in this scenario. A research study on social entrepreneurship among women working in organic food activities was done by Ramya and Santhi (2019). Their qualitative analysis encompasses technology, entrepreneurship education, taxation, and changing consumer preferences. The study states that these conditions influence the survival and growth of women-led businesses. In fact, an increasing number of such entrepreneurs pursue income generation together with social goals, including healthier consumption and more sustainable livelihoods. Khare (2019) notes that in Indian society, women are entering the field of entrepreneurship as part of becoming an entrepreneur. These days, more women are becoming entrepreneurs and, in some cases, employers rather than remaining just employees or unpaid domestic workers. This movement transforms women's roles in local economies but does not eliminate their continued struggles. Khare emphasizes social expectations, business-related obstacles, government policy as well as the real-life challenges faced by women in creating and running a business. Recent reports and local examples show that women-owned organic businesses are slowly coming into view. Women are seen selling organic vegetable, millet based food and other locally made products at Lucknow and Uttar Pradesh. Some of these industries also employ rural women for work. While the cases are not of same scale, they suggest that women-led organisations dealing in organic products are gaining economic and social significance at local as well as wider market levels.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To trace the expansion of women's entrepreneurship in India's organic food industry.
2. To assess the contribution of women entrepreneurs to sustainable agriculture and rural development.
3. To examine the main difficulties faced by women operating organic food enterprises.
4. To review government programmes that support women entrepreneurs in the organic sector.

5. To describe recent growth patterns in India's organic food market.
6. To propose practical measures for increasing women's participation in this industry.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper follows a desk-based secondary research design. Material was gathered from the following categories of sources:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles
2. Government reports and policy documents
3. Market research reports, and related publications
4. Newspaper reports and articles
5. Industry publications
6. Online databases and published case material

The collected material was read comparatively and arranged around the paper's main themes: market growth, women's roles in the value chain, barriers to enterprise development, policy support, and socio-economic outcomes. The approach is descriptive as well as analytical, although it is limited by the quality and detail of the available secondary sources.

5. GROWTH OF INDIA'S ORGANIC FOOD INDUSTRY

India is a major producer of organic crops and its domestic market for organic products is also widening. The reviewed sources connect this growth with several factors:

1. There will be heightened public awareness on health food safety.
2. Increases in disposable cash of many consumers.
3. Greater preference for food made with less chemical inputs.
4. Government initiatives that promote organic farming.
5. Increased accessibility of e-business and virtual trade.

Urban markets exhibit a clear demand for goods obtained through sustainable and traceable production processes, as well as for environmentally friendly goods. It doesn't mean that growth is uniform across regions, but it has opened up new avenues for producers, processors, and small brands. According to industry estimates utilized in the paper, the Indian

organic food sector will be pegged at close to USD 1.9 billion by 2024. In addition, it forecasts an annual compound growth of more than 20 percent between 2025 and 2033. Likewise, the Statista estimates mentioned in the reviewed material expects the market to grow, mainly owing to increasing consumer preference for organic products. India reportedly has one of the world's largest groups of organic producers; nearly 30 per cent of the world total, it is advised. With this large producer base, there is potential, but production scale and market access vary a lot.

6. KEY FACTS AND DATA

Sr No	Indicator	Data
1	India organic food market size (2024)	1.9 billion USD
2	Expected CAGR (2025-2033)	20.13%
3	Women owned MSME in India	~ 22%
4	"Lakhpati Didis" in U.P.	17 lakh + women
5	Women contribution in artisan economy	50% +

Sources: IMARC Group, Economic Survey 2024-25

7. ROLE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THE ORGANIC FOOD SECTOR

Women-owned enterprises operate at various points along the organic food value chain from production to the point of sale.

1. Organic Farming and Production

Women farmers engage in various low input and chemical-free farming activities. Odd Varieties of Produce.

- Millets Cultivation
- Dehydrated legumes
- Spices and medicinal herbs.
- Natural medicines.
- Breeding of bee and honey making.
- Make it dairy and other processed foods.

Many women-run farms utilize composting, crop rotation as well as organic pest control methods. Soil health is likely to improve in the long run with these methods as we will be using less chemicals. Women entrepreneurs have started producing organic food from millet: UP news agency report. Through these institutions, not only were goods sold but also generated employment for rural women and promoted sustainable farming..

2. Food Processing and Value Addition

Women's participation is also visible in small-scale processing activities such as:

- Pickles and preserved foods
- Organic snacks
- Cold-pressed oils
- Organic flour and bakery items
- Herbal teas
- Natural honey products
- Traditional regional foods

Processing, packing and branding enhances the value of farm produce. They can also minimize intermediary reliance by allowing one business to sell a finished product as opposed to an unrefined crop. The studies surveyed in the paper stated that Women led organic initiatives either solve economic or social problem. They can be consulted not only on income, but also on healthier consumption and livelihood based on more sustainable production.

3. Direct-to-Consumer Marketing

Through social media, online marketplaces and messaging platforms, some women entrepreneurs can reach urban buyers without being fully dependent on traditional wholesalers.

Common direct-marketing methods include:

- Promotion through social media
- Local business and community networks
- E-commerce platforms
- Farmers' markets
- Subscription and home-delivery arrangements

Small women-led brands that are unable to get shelf space through formal retailing can find visibility in farmer's markets. As per a report by one of the Lucknow markets, as per the paper women made over 80 per cent of the participating entrepreneurs and were selling organic or sustainability-oriented products.

4. Employment Generation and Empowerment of Rural Women

Women-led organic enterprises often employ other rural women in cultivation, food processing, packing, and sales. Their work is commonly organised through:

- Self-help groups (SHGs)
- Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs)

- Cooperatives and community enterprises

These arrangements can produce local employment and can provide women involved with a more regular revenue. At times, they also increase women's participation in domestic and commercial decisions. Programs like Lakhpati Didi aim at promoting women's involvement in agriculture, processing, and rural enterprise. The study found that more than 17 lakh women of Uttar Pradesh have been covered under the economic-empowerment related material of the paper.

8. CASE EXAMPLES OF WOMEN-LED ORGANIC ENTERPRISES

1. Millet-Based Start-ups in Uttar Pradesh

Women entrepreneurs in Uttar Pradesh have developed millet-based food ventures that supply markets in Delhi-NCR and, in some cases, agencies such as NAFED. The activities reported in these examples include:

- Chemical-free farming
- Farmer training
- Rural women employment
- Sustainable supply chains

2. Self- Help Group Based Marketing Models

Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad is often presented as an early and well-known example of a women-run collective enterprise. In 1959, the activity began in Mumbai where seven Gujarati women contributed a total of Rs. 80 to the cooperative. This example is useful as it illustrates how a tiny collective activity can be scaled up through joint ownership and organised marketing. Akka Sanjeevini Angadi is a unique model in Karnataka. Its women-led retail outlets act as a selling point for locally produced goods and could improve market access for SHGs and small producers.

3. Organic Honey Enterprises

A range of women-led businesses also operate within natural honey and similar products. These companies link pollination, low-chemical farming, and value-added food processing. According to the assessed text, one instance grew from two beehive boxes to more than 500 hives and reached monthly production of about 300 kg of raw honey.

9. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Despite the opportunities described above, women entrepreneurs in organic food businesses continue to face several connected barriers.

1. Limited Access to Finance

Challenges related to finance common include.

- Not enough collateral for formal loans.
- Loan applications are being rejected or delayed.
- A credit record that is little or nothing
- Women-owned businesses face a larger financing gap than many male-owned ones.

2. Certification and Compliance Costs

Certification may involve several formal requirements, including:

- Documentation
- Inspection
- Compliance procedures

For a small business, it can be difficult to bear the cost of documentation, inspection and compliance. The literature, therefore, views certification and regulatory compliance as significant obstacles, especially for the very small women-led units with minimal staff and capital.

3. Market Competition and Consumer Trust

Women-managed organic brands may experience.

- Competitive pricing and visibility of traditional brands.
- False or misleading organic labels being sold in the market.
- Consumers are doubtful about the authenticity of the product.
- The necessity for building trust through accessible information and verifiable supply routes.

4. Limited Awareness, Training, and Digital Access

Many entrepreneurs in the countryside lack digital devices, reliable internet service, e-commerce systems, or any form of training. This may impair record-keeping, online marketing, pricing and communicating to buyers. A lack of knowledge about certification and market requirements can be another setback.

5. Social and Patriarchal Constraints

The business has the option to provide financial assistance. Women in several communities are still not given the freedom to travel, interact with buyers, own property, and spend money. Business is often viewed as a male activity, depriving the women starting it of family or community support. Similarly, most women have to do most of the domestic and care work. It could be a double burden that holds back growth in business as carrying these responsibilities along with production, marketing and finance work.

10. GOVERNMENT SUPPORT AND POLICY INITIATIVES

The Government of India has introduced programmes that relate either to women's enterprise development, organic farming, or both.

The main initiatives discussed in the reviewed material are:

1. Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY)

Supports cluster-based organic cultivation and group certification.

2. National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)

Promotes women's self-help groups and rural livelihood enterprises.

3. Lakhpati Didi Scheme

Encourages income-generating activities led by women.

4. Startup India and MSME Support

Offers financial, mentoring, and technical support to eligible start-ups and MSMEs.

5. National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP)

Provides a national framework for organic production standards and certification. Together with other schemes, it can support women's participation in processing, agri-business, and organic farming.

6. MUDRA Yojana

Provides credit support for eligible micro and small enterprises.

7. Digital India

Improves digital access and can widen opportunities for online marketing.

11. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

The contribution of women entrepreneurs in this sector can be considered across economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

Economic effects

- Additional household income
- Employment within rural communities
- Circulation of income in local markets
- Expansion of micro, small, and medium enterprises

Social effects

- Greater economic agency for women
- A stronger role in household and enterprise decisions
- Potential improvements in spending on education and health

Environmental effects

- Lower use of some synthetic chemicals
- Better attention to soil health
- Protection of local biodiversity
- Use of more sustainable farming practices

Taken together, the reviewed evidence suggests that women-led organic enterprises may combine commercial activity with social and environmental aims. The strength of these outcomes, however, depends on the scale of the enterprise and the support available to it.

12. FINDINGS

The review arrives at the following key findings:

1. Women entrepreneurs contribute in cultivation, processing, marketing and employment generation in the organic food system in India.
2. Digital channels provide new pathways to consumers but have unequal access.
3. The financial cost and barriers to certification remain a limitation for many small women-led businesses.
4. Rural women have become more involved thanks to government and livelihood programs, but implementation and reach differ across locations.

5. Proliferation of organic food enterprises can generate economic benefits while promoting environmental and community objectives.

13. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Modify certification processes to make them easier and less expensive for small businesses owned by women.
2. Make finance affordable to everyone to sustain growth of enterprises
3. Expand functional entrepreneurial education in rural area.
4. Offer direct assistance for digital literacy, online selling, and electronic payments system.
5. Establish capacity for developing stronger market links through cooperatives, SHGs, and FPOs.
6. Promote partnerships between government agencies, private firms and producer groups.
7. Assist appropriate women-led brands to access overseas and bigger domestic markets.
8. Enhance women's collective enterprises that are self-managed.
9. Invest in local processing, storage, packaging, quality testing and other facilities.

14. CONCLUSION

Women entrepreneurs play an important role in organic food industry in India. Their businesses link production to processing and market outlets, generating jobs and income in rural areas. The evidence cited in this paper suggests that their contribution is wider than simply owning a business: it may include employing local people, adopting more sustainable production practices and enhancing women's economic agency. Gains do not happen automatically. Numerous small enterprises are still hindered in their ability to survive and grow due to restricted access to credit, certification costs, poor infrastructure and market access.

The future of women-led organic enterprise will depend on practical support rather than mere policy pronouncements. It is crucial to have low-cost financing, trustworthy certification, training, digital access and reliable market links. As demand for healthy and ethically produced foods rise, women entrepreneurs can have a greater role in the organic

economy, but only if their institutional and social barriers are tackled too.

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