

A Study on Women Economic Empowerment through Dairy Farming: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

This study explores the economic empowerment of women through dairy farming, focusing on the issues and challenges they face. Dairy farming has emerged as a significant avenue for economic development in rural areas, offering women opportunities to enhance their financial independence and improve their livelihoods. This research aims to analyse the multifaceted impacts of dairy farming on women's economic status, including income generation, skill development, and social standing. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with women involved in dairy farming across various regions. Key findings reveal that while dairy farming provides substantial economic benefits and empowerment opportunities, women encounter several barriers such as limited access to resources, inadequate training, and socio-cultural constraints. The study also highlights the role of supportive policies and community programs in addressing these challenges and enhancing the effectiveness of dairy farming as a tool for women's economic empowerment. Recommendations are provided for policymakers, development practitioners, and stakeholders to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the dairy sector.

Introduction

India remains a male-dominated society, where the issue of women's empowerment continues to be a significant challenge. The very notion of women's empowerment underscores how society has often marginalized women, who make up nearly half of the population. Women themselves must step up to claim their rightful place in all aspects of life and combat exploitation across various fields. This case study highlights a woman who has risen to meet these challenges through dairy farming, demonstrating her resilience and determination in overcoming obstacles in her life.

Dairy farming is a significant agricultural activity in India, providing crucial income for small farmers and agricultural labourers. It enables these individuals to achieve financial stability and independence. Dairy cooperative networks are prevalent across the country, managing the procurement, processing, and marketing of milk and its products. In states like Gujarat, Karnataka, Bihar, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, these cooperatives have thrived due to their well-organized three-tier structure, which ranges

from village-level to state-level organizations, along with efficient procurement and timely payment to milk producers. To expand the reach of dairy cooperatives and their benefits, there is a need to raise awareness among dairy farmers. Women have played a pivotal role in the dairy cooperative movement, initially supported by the Operation Flood Programme and later by the Integrated Dairy Development Programme implemented by the Government. The baseline survey of the National Dairy Plan (NDP-I) indicated that women contributed approximately 64 percent of the total time spent in the dairy sector. For further development of women, Support to Training and Employment Programme (STEP) for women was started during the year 1986 by Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India

The STEP program is designed to empower women nationwide. As part of this initiative, Women Dairy Cooperative Societies (WDCs) have been established to enhance the socio-economic conditions and political influence of women milk producers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds in rural areas. These WDCs are expected to provide economic benefits to women dairy farmers and, by managing and owning dairy animals, help them gain valuable experience and build their capacity. Given these findings, the current study aims to evaluate the impact of women dairy cooperatives on women's empowerment in the Eastern Dry Zone of Karnataka.

Dairy farming is not just an economic activity but a means of social and economic upliftment. Among the key beneficiaries of this sector are women, who play a crucial role in dairy farming. However, despite their integral contribution, women face numerous challenges that impact their ability to fully capitalize on the economic opportunities provided by dairy farming. Economic empowerment through dairy farming offers women the potential to enhance their financial stability, gain greater control over resources, and contribute significantly to their families and communities. Yet, the journey towards empowerment is fraught with issues and obstacles that need to be addressed comprehensively. These include limited access to resources, inadequate training and knowledge, cultural and social barriers, financial constraints, health and safety risks, and insufficient legal and policy support.

Role of Dairy Farming in Women Empowerment

Milk and dairy foods play a crucial role in enhancing the nutrition of girls and women throughout various stages of their lives. From adolescence through pregnancy, breastfeeding, and into motherhood, women must be empowered to make informed nutritional choices. Dairy products are particularly valuable as they supply essential nutrients for maintaining bone health, including calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, and zinc. Additionally, vitamin D, which is often fortified in dairy products, and protein contribute to overall well-being. The protein in milk and dairy products also helps counteract age-related muscle loss, making dairy an important component of a balanced diet for women at any age.

Milk production significantly supports the livelihoods of millions of women and their families, creating substantial socio-economic value for rural communities. Women dairy farmers worldwide are gaining financial autonomy through ownership of revenue, livestock, and land, which positively impacts their ability to invest in their children's education and improve housing conditions. Additionally, women in the dairy sector are increasingly assuming leadership and governance roles. Dairy farming not only diversifies and enhances family incomes, particularly in developing countries, but also fosters a better understanding of food choices and availability through educational initiatives like school milk programs. By empowering women to make informed decisions about nutrition, dairy farming delivers dual benefits: it enhances the lives of women and, in turn, provides significant advantages for their children's development.

To boost rural women's involvement in dairy farming, it is essential to provide support through

both public and private initiatives. Programs that supply female dairy farmers with practical tools, such as milking machines, can reduce manual labour and prevent injuries, offering significant benefits. Additionally, workshops that focus on leadership and management skills for farmer groups or small enterprises can empower women. Training programs aimed at transferring production and marketing skills are also valuable, as they enable women to process milk into dairy products, extend shelf life, and engage in collective selling. For many rural women in developing economies, small-scale dairy farming is a crucial source of livelihood. These women will benefit from adopting low-impact farming practices and facilities that reduce carbon emissions and water pollution. Additionally, resource-limited female farmers could gain from obtaining ecological certification for their products. Such certification can enhance the market value of their products, leading to better prices and increased income.

Female dairy farmers are transforming their lives and communities by participating in collective efforts to produce and market dairy products. Their involvement in dairy farming not only benefits their personal lives but also enhances their communities. This makes dairy farming an accessible livelihood option for socioeconomically disadvantaged women. The increased participation of women in dairy farming also enhances their chances of engaging in public decision-making, thereby improving their social and economic status. Income from dairy farming directly supports household livelihoods and elevates the quality of life for these women. Furthermore, greater involvement in dairy farming allows women to contribute ideas, make decisions to improve their families' and communities' well-being, and assume leadership roles. As female dairy farmers continue to use dairying as a source of income and a means of connecting with markets and rural society, their participation will further promote gender equality within their communities. It provides women with limited income opportunities and public presence the chance to earn a living and voice their perspectives, thereby fostering greater gender balance in rural areas.

Challenges Faced by Women in Dairy Farming

Women in dairy farming often face several challenges that impact their ability to succeed and thrive in the industry. Some of the key challenges include:

Access to Livestock

Livestock are a primary asset in dairy farming. Women often struggle to acquire high-quality dairy cows or other animals due to financial constraints or limited access to livestock markets. Without quality animals, their production and income potential may be compromised. Additionally, women may face difficulties in accessing veterinary services or breeding programs, which are essential for maintaining and improving livestock health and productivity.

Limited Access to Training Programs

Women often face barriers in accessing training programs that are critical for modern dairy farming. Training in areas such as animal husbandry, milking techniques, feed management, and disease control is essential for improving productivity and efficiency. However, cultural norms, logistical challenges, or institutional biases may restrict women's participation in these programs, leaving them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts.

Limited Decision-Making Power

Social expectations often place women in subordinate roles within the family and community. As a result, their ability to make significant decisions regarding dairy farming operations, such as investments, resource management, and business strategies, may be constrained. This lack of decision-making power can hinder their ability to effectively manage and expand their dairy operations.

Legal and Policy Barriers: In many regions, legal frameworks do not fully recognize or support women's rights to own or inherit land. Land ownership is crucial for dairy farming as it provides the foundation for operations such as grazing, feed cultivation, and establishing infrastructure. When women's rights to land are limited or not legally recognized, their ability to secure loans, invest in their operations, and expand their dairy farms is significantly hindered.

Lack of Financial Literacy

Women may have lower levels of financial literacy compared to their male counterparts, often due to limited access to education and training in financial management. This gap in financial knowledge can affect their ability to prepare loan applications, manage farm finances, and make informed business decisions.

Exposure to Zoonotic Diseases

Women working with livestock are at risk of exposure to zoonotic diseases, which are diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans. This includes diseases like brucellosis, tuberculosis, and leptospirosis. The risk is heightened if proper hygiene and protective measures are not in place, and if women lack access to adequate veterinary care and training on disease prevention.

Waste Management Challenges

Managing animal waste is a significant aspect of dairy farming. Women may be exposed to hazardous conditions related to waste handling, such as increased risk of respiratory problems from inhaling dust and gases, and potential infections from contact with waste. Poor waste management practices can exacerbate these risks and affect both human health and environmental conditions.

Outcomes

Overcoming the challenges faced by women in dairy farming requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the various barriers they encounter. Some strategies to effectively tackle these challenges, Enhancing Access to Resources Advocate for and implement legal reforms to ensure women's equal rights to land ownership and property. Develop gender-sensitive financial products that cater to women's needs, such as low-interest loans and microfinance options. Provide training on financial management and facilitate access to credit without requiring traditional forms of collateral. Establish programs that provide women with access to essential resources like livestock, feed, and equipment. Partnerships with NGOs and government agencies can help facilitate these resources. Provide technical support through extension services and agricultural advisors who are trained to address women's specific needs. This includes on-site support and guidance to help women implement best practices. Create platforms for knowledge exchange where women can share experiences and learn from each other. This can be facilitated through women's farmer groups, cooperatives, and online forums.

Conduct community awareness campaigns to challenge gender biases and promote the value of women's contributions to dairy farming. Highlight successful women farmers as role models. Engage local leaders and influencers to support gender equality in dairy farming. Foster community dialogues to address cultural norms that restrict women's participation. Ensure access to resources that help reduce physical strain and health risks. Improve access to healthcare services by setting up mobile clinics or partnerships with local health providers. By implementing these strategies, the challenges faced by women in dairy farming can be effectively addressed, leading to greater opportunities, improved productivity, and enhanced empowerment for women in the sector.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that dairy farming has considerable promise for boosting women's economic status and independence. It can increase their income, offer skill-building opportunities,

and enhance their social standing in the community. Nevertheless, to fully realize these benefits, several challenges need to be addressed. These include restricted access to financial resources, insufficient training and technical support, and enduring social and cultural barriers that hinder women's complete involvement and decision-making capabilities. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. First, there is a need for targeted interventions that provide women with better access to financial services, including microloans and insurance, to help them invest in and sustain their dairy enterprises. Second, comprehensive training programs and technical support are essential to enhance their knowledge and skills, improve productivity, and ensure the health and welfare of dairy livestock. Third, efforts must be made to challenge and change societal norms that restrict women's roles and contributions in dairy farming, promoting gender equality and empowering women to take on leadership roles within the sector. By addressing these issues, stakeholders can help to unlock the full potential of dairy farming as a tool for women's economic empowerment, ultimately contributing to broader economic development and social progress in rural areas.

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