

Women-Based Enterprises in Africa's Agricultural Value Chains

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ABSTRACT

Women have been at the heart of African agriculture, planting, harvesting, processing, and selling food. Yet, despite their central role, they face persistent challenges: limited access to land, financing, training, and technology. This article shines a light on how women-led enterprises are not only overcoming these obstacles but also driving real transformation across agricultural value chains. From running farms and cooperatives to leading agro-processing ventures and managing distribution networks, women are turning agriculture into a pathway for economic empowerment and community upliftment.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is opening new doors. AI-powered tools are helping women optimize farming practices, make informed decisions, and tap into broader markets. However, gaps in digital access and skills still hold many back. The paper outlines practical, inclusive strategies to support women entrepreneurs through fairer land policies, accessible finance, skill-building, and better infrastructure. Ultimately, it advocates for a future where women in agriculture are fully equipped to lead, innovate, and thrive, benefiting not just themselves but entire communities and economies.

Keywords: Women, Agriculture Value Chain (VAC), Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

In Africa, agriculture is not just an economic activity; it is a way of life and the mainstay for millions. At the core of this sector are women, who, despite contributing immensely to farming and agribusiness, often remain on the sidelines when it comes to decision-making and access to resources. This paper reimagines the story of women in African agriculture, not merely through policy language (McKinsey & Company, 2022), but through the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs who are transforming communities and economies through their work in the agricultural value chain.

Women as Pillars of Agriculture Across sub-Saharan Africa, women make up the majority of the agricultural workforce, responsible for up to 80% of food production. They plant, nurture, harvest, process, and sell—often juggling these responsibilities with caregiving and household management (UN Women, 2022). Yet, these women face systemic obstacles: limited land ownership rights, difficulty in accessing loans, inadequate training, and exclusion from

critical market information. Despite this, many persist and excel, driven by necessity, resilience, and a vision for a better life for their families and communities.

Emerging Women Enterprises

Agents of Change. Women-led enterprises are reshaping Africa's agricultural landscape. From running smallholder farms to leading innovative agribusinesses (IFPRI, 2023-2024), these entrepreneurs are doing more than just surviving, they're innovating. In Ghana, for example, women are creating cooperatives to collectively process and market cassava, adding value and increasing incomes. In Kenya, women are managing distribution networks that get fresh produce from rural farms to urban tables. These businesses are not only economically empowering women but also creating jobs, reducing food insecurity, and fostering inclusive community development.

The transformation of Africa's agriculture hinges on the full and equitable inclusion of women in agribusiness value chains. Women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) contribute significantly across agricultural stages from planting and

harvesting to processing and trading, yet they remain marginalized due to entrenched structural and gender-specific barriers (FAO, 2021).

There is large potential of Africa's agribusiness sector to reach US\$1 trillion by 2030 can only be realized if women are empowered to participate equitably alongside men. However, multiple systemic barriers prevent this. These include limited access to land, financing, market linkages, and business support services, alongside sociocultural norms that limit women's autonomy, confidence, and time.

The assertion that women are the backbone of African agriculture is well-supported. They make up the majority of the agricultural workforce but are overrepresented in low-value chain segments due to limited access to land and productive inputs. AI integration and Technology are a Game-Changer. The digital age offers exciting new possibilities. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is helping women farmers optimize their work. Drones monitor crop health. Mobile apps predict weather and market prices (African Development Bank, 2023). Voice-activated tools offer advice in local languages. These innovations help bridge the gap between traditional farming and modern efficiency. However, digital adoption still faces hurdles: many women lack smartphones, internet access, or the skills to use new tools effectively. Closing this digital divide is critical to ensuring every woman has the chance to benefit.

WOMEN ENTERPRISES IN RURAL AFRICA (AGRA, 2021)

- **Shea Butter Cooperatives in West Africa (e.g., Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali):** In many parts of West Africa, women have formed cooperatives to harvest, process, and export shea butter. These cooperatives, such as those supported by initiatives like Savannah Fruits Company and Ghana Shea Network, empower women economically while preserving indigenous knowledge and biodiversity.
- **Fish Smoking and Aquaculture Enterprises in Nigeria:** In riverine communities like those in the Niger Delta, women are engaged in fish smoking using improved kilns, which are more energy-efficient and reduce health hazards. Others run small-scale fish farms, cultivating catfish and tilapia for sale in local markets.
- **Vegetable Cluster Farming in Rwanda:** Rwandan women in districts like Bugesera have organized themselves into vegetable farming clusters to grow tomatoes, onions, and leafy greens (CGIAR, 2023). Through partnerships with NGOs, they access training,

quality seeds, and group marketing strategies, boosting profits and reducing post-harvest losses.

- **Banana and Plantain Processing in Cameroon and Uganda:** Women-led micro-enterprises are turning bananas into flour, crisps, and even baby food, using solar dryers and manual grinders. These businesses not only create jobs but also reduce waste and enhance food security.
- **Mushroom Farming in Kenya:** In areas like Kisii County, groups of women have ventured into mushroom cultivation, a high-value enterprise that requires little land and can be done indoors. NGOs and agricultural extension services support them with training, spawn supply, and market connections.
- **Dairy Cooperatives in Tanzania and Kenya:** Rural women in Arusha and Nyeri are managing dairy cooperatives, collecting milk from smallholder farms, and processing it into yogurt, ghee, and cheese. These enterprises often include a cold-chain system and direct links to schools and urban retailers.
- **Mobile Farm Services in Senegal:** Some enterprising women in rural Senegal have launched mobile agricultural service businesses offering weeding, plowing, and harvesting services using small machines. This helps boost productivity for other women farmers who can't afford their equipment.
- **Cactus and Aloe Vera Farming in Morocco:** In arid regions, women have adapted to the climate by cultivating drought-resistant plants like cactus and aloe vera, which they process into oils, soaps, and skincare products, often targeting tourist and export markets.

CHALLENGES

The Roadblocks Ahead Despite progress (World Bank, 2020). Deep-rooted challenges persist:

- **Access to Finance:** Many women are excluded from formal financial systems due to a lack of collateral or credit history.
- **Land Ownership:** Cultural norms often prevent women from owning or inheriting land.
- **Education and Skills Gap:** Limited access to education means fewer opportunities to learn about modern farming or business practices.
- **Infrastructure Deficits:** Poor roads, inadequate storage, and unreliable communication systems hinder productivity and growth.
- **Market Exclusion:** Women often lack access to lucrative markets due to mobility and information barriers.

SOLUTIONS ROOTED IN REALITY

Empowering women in agriculture requires more than policies; it demands empathy and action (World Economic Forum, 2024). Practical solutions include:

- Gender-sensitive financial services, such as microloans and flexible repayment plans.
- Legal reforms to guarantee land rights and inheritance for women.
- Tailored training programs that fit women's schedules and literacy levels.
- Strengthening women-led cooperatives to enhance market access and bargaining power.
- Developing infrastructure in rural areas to facilitate transport, storage, and digital connectivity.
- Designing intuitive digital platforms and AI tools that cater specifically to women's needs and languages.

A CALL TO ACTION

Women are already leading Africa's agricultural transformation. With the right support, access to land, fair financing, modern tools, and inclusive markets, they can accelerate change (Adebayo & Worth, 2024). Investing in women-led agricultural enterprises is not only a moral imperative but a strategic move toward sustainable development. Governments, businesses, civil society, and development partners must unite to break down barriers and unlock the full potential of Africa's women in agriculture.

CONCLUSION

The future of African agriculture is Women-led. When women are given equal opportunities and support, they bring innovation, efficiency, and compassion to every part of the agricultural value chain. Empowering these entrepreneurs uplifts entire communities, strengthens economies, and ensures a more just and food-secure future for the continent.

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