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SUPPLY CHAIN, STRONGER WOMEN: UNLOCKING ECONOMIC POTENTIAL THROUGH GENDER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the role of gender inclusion in supply chain development in India. It points out the role of empowering women in supply chains in promoting both gender equity and economic development. Policy measures notwithstanding, female representation in most Indian supply chains, particularly in leadership, remains very low. Based on 50 peer-reviewed papers using the TCCM framework, the review identifies the drivers, impediments, and the supporting models of gender-inclusive practices. The implication is that supply chains that are gender-inclusive are more resilient, innovative, and socially impactful. The agriculture, MSME, and manufacturing sectors give us examples of challenges and best practices. The paper concludes with research directions and recommendations to bring about a more inclusive Indian supply chain future.

KEYWORDS: *Women Empowerment; India; Economic Growth; TCCM Framework; Sustainable Supply Chains; Gender Equity; Inclusive Growth; Gender-Inclusive Supply Chains.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Women are a big part of the economy in India, but their participation in supply chains is restricted and informal in many cases. In spite of several initiatives and government programs aimed at promoting women's empowerment (Lwamba et al., 2022; Malhotra et al., 2024), social norms (Prieto-Carrón, 2008), access to finances (Eltantawy et al., 2009), and underrepresentation in management positions (Dias et al., 2020) still pose challenges to progress.

A gender-inclusive supply chain offers equal opportunities for men and women at every level—from production and procurement to logistics and leadership. Including women in these systems brings benefits such as better productivity, innovation, and long-term sustainability (Njuki et al., 2022; Akbari et al., 2024). However, current practices in India reflect gaps between policy intentions and actual outcomes (Maertens & Swinnen, 2012). 50 highly cited studies to understand how gender inclusivity can be effectively integrated into Indian supply chains. It uses the TCCM framework (Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methodology) to organize insights and identify gaps. Real-world examples from sectors like agriculture, MSMEs, and crafts are included to illustrate both progress and continuing challenges.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 explores theoretical foundations; Section 3 provides an overview of current practices; Section 4 discusses the benefits and challenges of inclusion; Section 5 focuses on institutional and policy support; Section 6 presents Indian and global case studies; Section 7 applies the TCCM model; and Sections 8 to 10 offer a summary, research gaps, and concluding recommendation

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

These frameworks assist in illuminating why inclusion is important and how it contributes to supply chain performance.

Empowerment Theory aims to accord greater control over their life and resources to the marginalized groups, including women (Njuki et al., 2022). In supply chains, it means decision-making positions and equal involvement.

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The Gender and Development (GAD) Framework also transcends the conventional roles and advocates for change to dismantle the barriers based on gender (Lwamba et al., 2022).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) provides that companies achieve a competitive advantage by possessing distinctive resources such as a multicultural workforce (Akbari et al., 2024).

Institutional Theory accounts for the ways in which organizations' formal and informal regulations mold their behavior. Formal regulations, as well as social norms, in India control how women interact in supply chains (Malhotra et al., 2024).

Value Chain Theory promotes examining each phase in the production process to determine how women can be integrated better, from sourcing to sale (Peña et al., 2022).

3. OVERVIEW OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN SUPPLY CHAIN

The supply chain environment in India has experienced a consistent rise in practices of inclusion by gender in several sectors. Nonetheless, inclusion levels vary greatly by industry.

Women play a big role in agricultural work in India, but they do not usually share the rights to the land, training, or credit. Interventions such as the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) seek to bridge such inequalities by offering capacity development and institutionally supported services (Njuki et al., 2022).

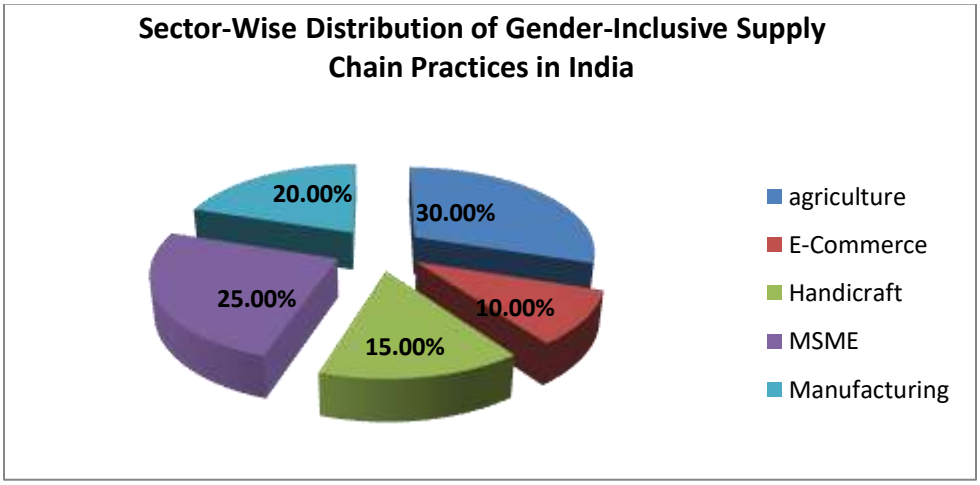
Micro, small, and medium enterprises are crucial avenues for the economic engagement of women. Mechanisms such as SHGs, microcredits, and electronic marketplaces enable women to access value chain positions, particularly in processing and logistics (Malhotra et al., 2024).

Handicraft and Artisan Industries: Textile and handloom, among other traditional industries, hire many women. Government and private efforts such as Amazon Karigar and Samarth by Flipkart enable women artisans by enhancing market access and supply chain connectivity (Peña et al., 2022).

Formal Sector Manufacturing: Within urban manufacturing sectors such as electronics and food processing, inclusion is limited but increasing. Firms that adopt diversity policies and work environments that are female-sensitive demonstrate higher levels of gender representation and performance (Akbari et al., 2024).

These practices demonstrate sector-specific opportunities and challenges to ensuring gender-inclusive supply chains. They show the role of enterprise, policy, and technology in ensuring inclusive participation.

Figure 1: Sector-Wise Distribution of Gender-Inclusive Supply Chain Practices in India



This chart illustrates the proportional impact of gender-inclusive practices across various sectors. Agriculture and MSMEs lead the way, while service-based and digital supply chains present new opportunities for inclusive expansion.

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4. BENEFITS OF GENDER INCLUSION IN SUPPLY CHAINS

Involving women in supply chains leads to tangible business and social benefits. Studies show that diverse teams drive innovation, better decision-making, and long-term growth (Akbari et al., 2024). Women's participation helps reduce poverty and improve household well-being through increased earnings and improved access to education and healthcare (Njuki et al., 2022).

Improved Resilience and Productivity: Inclusive supply chains are often more resilient to disruptions and deliver better operational results. Women bring local knowledge, multitasking abilities, and strong community networks that support continuity and flexibility, especially in informal sectors (Malhotra et al., 2024).

Enhanced Brand Image and Market Access: Organizations that empower women attract socially conscious consumers and investors. Gender-inclusive practices support ethical sourcing, boost transparency, and improve customer loyalty (Dias et al., 2020).

Challenges to Inclusion: Despite the benefits, women face persistent barriers such as cultural expectations, safety concerns, limited digital access, and exclusion from financial systems. In many cases, women's work remains unrecognized or unpaid, especially in informal and agricultural sectors (Prieto-Carrón, 2008; Eltantawy et al., 2009).

Institutional and Structural Barriers: Implementation gaps exist between inclusive policies and their real-world outcomes. Factors such as lack of gender-disaggregated data, weak monitoring, and insufficient support systems further complicate progress (Peña et al., 2022; Lwamba et al., 2022).

Addressing these issues requires a combination of policy support, corporate action, and grassroots mobilization to build sustainable and equitable supply chains. Sector-specific opportunities and challenges in achieving gender-inclusive supply chains. They also reveal the role of policy, enterprise models, and technology in shaping inclusive participation.

5. POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The Indian government and various institutions have implemented policies aimed at improving gender equality in supply chains. Programs such as the Stand-Up India Scheme and Mahila E-Haat provide women entrepreneurs with financial assistance and digital market access. These initiatives aim to support participation in both traditional and modern supply chains (Lwamba et al., 2022).

Additionally, corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies under the Companies Act 2013 require businesses to contribute to social development, including women's empowerment initiatives. Multinational corporations like Tata and Hindustan Unilever have developed gender-inclusive procurement policies and supplier diversity programs to support women-owned businesses (Akbari et al., 2024).

Global frameworks like the UN Women's Empowerment Principles and the ILO's Gender Equality Framework also influence gender practices in India's supply chains. NGOs and SHGs, such as SEWA and Kudumbashree, play a vital role by offering training, capacity building, and collective bargaining support (Njuki et al., 2022)

While policies exist, gaps in implementation and monitoring remain. Strengthening partnerships between public institutions, private companies, and community organizations is necessary to scale inclusive models and ensure that policies translate into action.

6. GLOBAL AND INDIAN CASE STUDIES

Examining case studies helps illustrate how gender-inclusive supply chains work in practice and highlights strategies that can be replicated.

Amul Dairy Cooperative (India): In Gujarat, Amul has integrated millions of rural women into its dairy supply chain. Women handle milk production, collection, and even cooperative-level governance. This inclusive model has not only empowered women but also improved quality and consistency across the chain (Njuki et al., 2022).

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Kudumbashree (Kerala, India): Kudumbashree is a state-supported SHG initiative that promotes women's entrepreneurship. Women-run micro-enterprises in food processing, garment-making, and agri-based activities participate in regional and national supply chains (Lwamba et al., 2022).

Amazon Karigar & Flipkart Samarth: These digital platforms enable women artisans and SHGs to access national markets. They support digital onboarding, product visibility, and logistical assistance (Peña et al., 2022).

SEWA RUDI Multi-Trading Company: Managed by women's cooperatives, SEWA RUDI handles procurement and retail of farm goods in Gujarat. It showcases how women can own and operate entire segments of the agri supply chain.

Wal-Mart's Global Women's Economic Empowerment Program: Internationally, Wal-Mart has supported over 1 million women in its supply chain through training and supplier development. Its best practices include procurement targets and training programs.

These examples highlight scalable models that demonstrate the business case for gender inclusivity. Whether local or global, the key lies in linking empowerment with supply chain efficiency, transparency, and sustainability.

7. TCCM-BASED LITERATURE REVIEW

The TCCM framework categorizes the reviewed studies as follows:

Component	Key Insights	Supporting Sources
Theory	Based on Empowerment Theory, GAD, RBV, Institutional and Value Chain Theories.	Njuki et al., 2022; Lwamba et al., 2022; Peña et al., 2022
Context	Studies focused on India, with comparisons to South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Sectors include agriculture, MSMEs, crafts, and manufacturing.	Malhotra et al., 2024; Maertens & Swinnen, 2012
Characteristics	Gender inclusion variables include participation, leadership, wages, training, digital tools, and finance access.	Akbari et al., 2024; Eltantawy et al., 2009
Methodology	Dominated by case studies, reviews, and qualitative analysis. Limited large datasets or standard metrics used.	Njuki et al., 2022; Akbari et al., 2024

This structured review reveals a solid theoretical and contextual base but calls for more data-driven, standardized studies across sectors in India.

7. DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH GAPS

While the reviewed literature confirms the positive impact of gender inclusion in supply chains, it also highlights several gaps. First, many studies rely on qualitative insights, with limited availability of large-scale quantitative data. This restricts the ability to generalize findings across regions and sectors (Fahimnia et al., 2015).

Second, much of the literature lacks a strong intersectional focus. Most studies consider gender in isolation, without accounting for the compounded impact of class, caste, geography, or age (Prieto-Carrón, 2008; Soundararajan & Brammer, 2018).

Third, implementation gaps between policy and practice are widely noted. Despite strong legislative frameworks and corporate commitments, actual participation rates and leadership roles for women remain low in many supply chains (Peña et al., 2022; Malhotra et al., 2024).

Fourth, few studies track long-term impacts of gender-inclusive programs. Most examine short-term interventions or pilot projects. There's a need for longitudinal research that follows women's progress across career stages and supply chain tiers (Akbari et al., 2024).

Finally, there is limited research into how digital technologies such as mobile platforms, blockchain, or AI are enabling or hindering women's inclusion in modern supply chains (Lwamba et al., 2022).

Identifying and addressing these research gaps is crucial to advancing gender equity and unlocking the full economic potential of inclusive supply chains in India.

8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

To build on existing work and address the identified gaps, future research should consider the following:
Develop Quantitative Metrics: Standardized tools for measuring gender inclusion across supply chains can help improve evaluation and benchmarking (Fahimnia et al., 2015).

Incorporate Intersectionality: Studies should consider how gender interacts with factors like caste, class, location, and age to influence supply chain participation (Prieto-Carrón, 2008).

Assess Digital Transformation: Explore how technologies such as mobile platforms, blockchain, and digital payments are enabling or limiting women's roles in supply chains (Lwamba et al., 2022).

Longitudinal and Impact Studies: Track the long-term effects of gender-inclusive programs across industries and geographies (Akbari et al., 2024).

Sectoral Comparisons: Compare inclusion practices in traditional sectors (agriculture, crafts) versus emerging areas (e-commerce, logistics) to identify replicable strategies (Njuki et al., 2022).

Research addressing these areas can guide policy, improve program design, and support more effective integration of women into supply chains at scale.

9. CONCLUSION

This review paper highlights the importance of promoting gender-inclusive practices across Indian supply chains. It shows that empowering women is not just a matter of social equity but also a strategic move to enhance economic performance, resilience, and innovation. By applying the TCCM framework, we identified key theoretical and contextual factors influencing inclusion and documented real-world examples that reflect both successes and ongoing challenges.

Despite positive trends, many structural and systemic barriers continue to hinder progress. Cultural norms, policy implementation gaps, and lack of gender-sensitive data collection still limit women's participation and leadership. However, through effective policy design, public–private collaboration, and investment in digital and financial inclusion, these obstacles can be addressed.

Moving forward, scholars and practitioners must focus on developing inclusive metrics, conducting intersectional research, and tracking long-term impacts of programs. A sustainable and equitable supply chain ecosystem in India will depend on our collective efforts to turn inclusion from policy into everyday practice.

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