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Backgrounder

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**Backgrounder on women’s roles in marketing farm produce**

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**Introduction**

Women are key players in Ghanaian agriculture, accounting for 49% of the agricultural labour force, 70% of subsistence production, and 65% of food distributors and marketers.

In agriculture, women are mainly unpaid household labourers, with the majority working on their husbands’ farms. While women play key roles in every aspect of the agricultural value chain, they face limitations, and lack equal access to productive resources (for example, land, tractors, extension services, and loans) for agricultural production. Although some women own and operate larger or medium-scale agricultural businesses, the vast majority are involved in markets in the informal economy.

According to the American Marketing Association, “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” Thus, marketing farm produce is the art or act of creating, communicating, delivering, and offering good quality farm produce to consumers. Marketing provides value both by satisfying a buyer’s need and by increasing profit for the seller. The four widely recognized pillars of marketing are product, place, people, and promotion.

***What does marketing of farm produce include?***

Marketing includes activities that provide signals which are non-verbal, verbal, visual, audio, and other creative ways of delivering value to customers or buyers. These activities are directed toward buyers and potential buyers in the marketplace, and also include pricing, packaging, how goods are displayed, and personal or store/shop branding.

***What kind of products do women market?***

Agricultural products or agribusinesses have a wide range of specialties. Like other industries, individuals tend to create a niche for themselves. The agricultural industry is a key supplier to other industries, including textiles and clothing, furniture and decoration, building and construction, and beverages and consumables. The following sectors currently offer the most lucrative opportunities for agribusiness in Ghana:

* Fruits (e.g., banana, orange, pineapples)
* Vegetables (e.g., pepper, carrots, onion, cabbage, tomatoes)
* Legumes (e.g., beans, groundnuts)
* Oil (e.g., palm oil, coconut oil, groundnut oil)
* Animal protein (e.g., chicken, fish, meat, eggs)
* Cereals (e.g., maize, rice)
* Starchy staples (e.g., yam, cassava, sweet potatoes, plantain)

Individual agribusiness may combine more than one of these categories or focus on only one. Here are some examples of women’s agribusinesses in Ghana:

* Bernice has been selling fruits and vegetables for six months and chose this niche because it is profitable. She says that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand for these products.
* Alice, 34 years old, has been selling roasted maize and plantain for three years. She chose plantain because it is something she personally loves, and the sales cycle is quick because demand is high.
* Rosalinda, 23 years old, says she began selling livestock because it did not involve a large investment and because it is less affected by climate than other agribusiness strategies.
* Victoria is a 48-year-old woman who has been selling a combination of vegetables, fish, meat, cereals, legumes, root crops, and tubers for more than 12 years. She found that the more categories of agricultural products you have, the more likely people are to buy from you. She says that, because people want to limit their time in the market because of the scorching sun and busy environment, they prefer to buy many things from one place instead of moving from one place to another. By selling more product categories, Victoria says marketers can help their customers shop more efficiently.

***Key facts on marketing farm produce***

* Farm products that are directly consumed, such as food products, are necessary or essential goods.
* Because food is an essential commodity, demand for farm products is inelastic. \* People buy food regularly and often, and price is not a major deterrent.
* Not all farm produce is available throughout the year. It is important to understand the seasonality of the products you sell.
* More women than men sell farm produce at the market. But women believe that men and women have an equal opportunity to market farm produce.
* There is a low switching cost \* in the market as almost all foodstuffs are basic.
* Women marketers say that marketing farm produce does not require too much effort because food is a necessity for survival.

***Common strategies used to market farm produce***

Most marketing of farm produce in Ghana happens in local markets. Because demand for food is continuous, and buyers visit the market daily to take care of pressing needs, marketers do not need aggressive methods to advertise their produce.

Market women typically adopt the following marketing strategies:

* Due to low switching costs, market women ensure they have the best quality products available.
* Due to the many sellers at local markets, market women use competitive pricing to attract customers.
* To retain customers, market women sometimes offer cash or quantity discounts to regular customers.
* Some market women brand their stores to increase visibility and appeal. For example, 48-year-old Victoria says that her billboard is a key element in communicating the variety of produce she sells and it helps buyers easily locate her market space.
* Product display is another component of marketing. Peace and Silvia are market sellers who say that how they show their goods communicates the state, quality, and availability of the goods they sell.
* Personal behavior attracts customers. Market women say that friendly, sociable behaviours like smiling, laughing, gentleness, and happiness encourage people to buy from them.
* Online marketing is also used these days, but very few buyers or sellers at local markets are interested or have the technical capacity or resources to use it. However, using mobile phones to make enquiries and conduct money transfers is increasing.
* Market women largely rely on demand and supply to price their commodities.

***Big challenges in marketing farm produce***

* The high level of waste due to the short shelf-life of farm produce.
* Volatile or fast-changing sales cycle. Sales are based on preferences which can change at any time.
* Managing marketing businesses is time-consuming because they are mostly managed by single women. Children typically help take care of the store when mothers are away from the market.
* Difficulty in predicting sales where demand is elastic and determined by consumer income and price, among other factors.
* Market businesses are capital-intensive due to waste and market uncertainty.
* Seasonal unavailability of some foods, especially during the harmattan / lean season when prices increase strongly.

***Role of gender in marketing farm produce***

* According to vendors (both male and female), gender does not play a significant role in the success of marketing farm produce. Though the industry is dominated by women, vendors say that buyers do not patronize them simply because they are women. Rather, patronage is based on quality, price, and availability of a buyer’s desired goods. For example, Victoria, a 48-year-old market seller, says her husband sometimes manages the store when she is away, as do her sons. Silvia and her brother manage the store when their parents are away. In both cases, the gender of the marketer or person does not affect sales.
* Women are sometimes disadvantaged because they don’t directly visit the farm, and therefore mostly buy at higher prices from men who access goods directly from the farm. Although some women are able to go to farms, access to transport vehicles or manual labour to carry products from the farm to the market is difficult for most women.
* Middlemen, also known as aggregators, buy from smallholder farmers and sell to companies and market women. Market woman Haman Mercy says that “buying from middlemen makes her foodstuffs expensive.”
* Most markets establish *market queens*. The role of a market queen is to determine who can or cannot sell in the market, and to regulate market prices where necessary.
* Market queens don’t buy directly from farms, but they sometimes block unwanted sellers or middlemen from entering the market, instead taking produce off these people and selling it to authorized market women. Thus, they serve as gatekeepers to the market.

***Cultural factors affecting the gender of marketers***

Women may be more suited to the needs of produce marketing jobs because of the traditional social roles they play in most Ghanaian societies. Women’s roles as mothers, housewives, cook/chefs, and home managers make them more available to market farm produce.

Peace, a 34-year-old produce marketer with three years’ experience selling plantain and maize, says that she has met few men in the business. She suggests that it may not be an attractive business for men because society assumes that women know more about food than men and have more experience cooking in the home. She explains that buyers sometimes prefer to purchase produce from marketers who have experience using their own products because they give better advice.

Some of the cultural factors that may contribute to the higher number of women in the market include:

* Household activities and child-rearing make it more difficult for women to participate in the formal labour force and more likely engage in self-employment.
* Due to childcare responsibilities, economically active women often leave the labour market, reducing their work experience in the formal sector.
* For new mothers, flexibility is often more important than economic benefit. Because of time constraints, women are more likely to work in part-time jobs and in informal arrangements. These provide less pay and/or fewer benefits but more flexibility.

***Gender and produce marketers***

* There are more male middlemen or aggregators than women.
* Women play a major role in marketing urban vegetables. This allows them to attend to domestic activities while at the same time generating income for their households.
* In keeping with traditional gender roles, male farmers do not generally engage in direct marketing to consumers. Rather, they work in production and as middlemen/aggregators.

***Recognition and self-esteem in the market***

Most women marketers of farm produce believe that they are appreciated by their customers because of the essential products they sell. For example:

* Victoria is proud of her business and it gives her joy to see that people have food to eat.
* Janet Odei Danso says selling fruits makes her feel important, especially because her goods contain nutrients that are beneficial to her buyers.
* Maa Boatemaa says she is happy selling maize and plantain because she values a flexible work schedule. She receives money every day, which is better for her than receiving a monthly salary from a formal job.

***Solutions to produce marketing challenges***

Since farm produce may fall either into the classification of Giffen goods, \* or normal goods, price is a key marketing element. Therefore, women propose the following solutions to help control rising and falling prices.

* Job creation for better sources of livelihoods and incomes. This will increase demand for produce because some types of produce are income-elastic and demand tends to rise as buyers’ incomes increase.
* Good roads to facilitate transportation of products from farmers and reduce cost, allowing sellers to maintain competitive pricing.
* Better storage facilities to increase shelf-life of products and reduce wastage.

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***Key definitions***

*Demand*: Willingness and financial ability to buy a product.

*Elastic demand*: Demand is elastic when price or other factors have a big effect on the quantity of goods consumers want to buy. For example, if the prices of books, clothing, airtime, and other goods go up, people may decide to reduce their purchase of such items. In contrast, food, shelter, water are inelastic goods because they are basic necessities that will be purchased whether prices go up or not.

*Giffen good*: A product that people consume more of as prices rise and vice versa—violating the basic law of economic demand. Giffen goods include *morri* (fermented maize paste or dough), tomatoes, and plantain, which have no ready substitute or alternative. The demand for such goods increases even as their price rises, regardless of a consumer's income.

*Inelastic demand:* Demand is inelastic when it varies little in response to changes in price or income.

*Necessary goods:* Products and services that consumers buy regardless of changes in their income.

*Normal goods*: Any goods for which demand increases when income increases, i.e., with positive income elasticity of demand.

*Sales cycle:* The process that companies follow when selling a product to a customer, including all activities related to closing the sale.

*Shelf life:* The length of time that a commodity can be stored without becoming unfit for use, consumption, or sale.

*Switching cost*: The costs that a consumer incurs because of changing brands, suppliers, or products.

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