



Psycho-Economic Dynamics of Black Women within the South African Rural Agricultural Landscape

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Abstract

Black women are often the unseen backbone of the South African rural agricultural sector. However, the historical injustices they have experienced have resulted in a complex web of psychological factors that influence their agricultural economic decision making. Conversely, experiencing systematic economic challenges has had an impact on their psychological well-being. The psycho-economic dynamics of black women in rural agricultural landscapes is understudied. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the interplay between psychological factors and economic orientation of black women within the South African rural agricultural landscape. The study used a desktop method where secondary data was collected using search terms focused on agriculture, black women, psycho-economic, psychology, and rural economy on electronic databases. It was found that the psychological influences shaping economic decisions of rural black women in the agricultural landscape were their risk aversion, resilience, locus of control, and their time perspective. Whereas the economic pressures in the rural agricultural landscape that have an impact on the psychological wellbeing of black women were precarious livelihoods, the burden of food security, financial strain, limited resources, and the burden and devaluation of their labour. It was recommended in this study that policymakers and development programs create a more supportive environment for rural black women in the South African agricultural landscape where these psycho-economic dynamics can be acknowledged and addressed holistically.

Keywords

Agriculture, Black Women, Psycho-Economic, Psychology, Rural Economy

1. Introduction

Within the South African rural agricultural landscape, full of potential, black women often function as the unseen backbone. Their labour includes nurturing the soil, planting the seeds, and harvesting the produce that sustains families and communities (Hillenbrand & Miruka, 2019). Yet, their economic decisions are often far from preordained. A complex interplay of psychological factors, deeply rooted in the legacy of discrimination and inequalities presented by patriarchy, apartheid and the harsh realities of rural life, shapes their choices (Zeweld, Van Huylenbroeck, Tesfay, Azadi & Speelman, 2018). For instance, the dislike towards risk taking, a natural consequence of historical injustices and limited access to resources, often guides them towards safer, subsistence crops rather than potentially lucrative but precarious cash crops. This cautious approach is further amplified by the absence of financial safety nets, such as robust credit systems or social insurance (Brody, De Hoop, Vojtkova, Warnock, Dunbar, Murthy & Dworkin, 2015). However, this narrative is not one solely defined by hardship. Rural black women often exhibit remarkable resilience, honed through generations of navigating adversity (Sharaunga, Mudhara & Bogale, 2016). This resilience manifests in their resourcefulness, where they employ traditional knowledge and innovative techniques to stretch limited resources and overcome environmental challenges. Furthermore, their locus of control significantly influences their economic behaviour. According to Hoff and Stiglitz (2016), women who perceive themselves as capable of shaping their environment are more likely to embrace calculated risks and explore new opportunities. It is within this complex interplay of psychological influences and economic realities that the true experiences of black women in the South African rural agricultural landscape unfolds. By unravelling these psycho-economic dynamics, a deeper understanding of their decision-making processes will be gained and, consequently, the capacity to design interventions that empower them to

not only navigate the harsh realities of the present but also become architects of a more prosperous future for themselves and their communities within the agricultural sector.

2. Background of the Study

Despite their crucial role in the South African rural agricultural sector, economic choices and psychological well-being of black women are hampered by a complex web of cultural norms and historical marginalization. According to Kanayo (2021), the country has most of its arable land in rural areas where most black women were predominantly situated due to them being responsible for their family upkeep while men sought jobs away from rural areas. However, the women that make up most of the rural population, compared to men, make up less of the population in rural land and agricultural business ownerships (Osei & Zhuang, 2020). These areas are often characterised by adversity that has a direct link with the psychological state of its people which has an impact on their economic decision making. Decades of patriarchal traditions limit their opportunities for pursuing business ventures and instil a sense of insignificance within the family structure (Galiè, Mulema, Mora Benard, Onzere & Colverson, 2015; and Hansen, Jensen & Skovsgaard, 2015). The perception of wealth and inheritance as solely male domains, often encouraged by traditional leaders and family leaders, further restricts their agency and economic potential. While some young women seek temporary financial support through government grants through early pregnancy and other means, this reinforces the cycle of poverty and dependence. Moreover, cultural preferences can hinder their education and future prospects (Bosak, Eagly, Diekman & Sczesny, 2018). This economic marginalization, coupled with the psychological toll of limited opportunities and a sense of powerlessness, necessitates a holistic approach that addresses both the economic and psychological realities faced by black women in rural South African agriculture.

3. Purpose and Objective of the Study

Despite their undeniable economic contributions to the South African rural agricultural sector, the psychological factors shaping economic decision-making amongst black women in the sector remain underexplored. This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by investigating the interplay between psychology and economics that influences their choices. By understanding these psycho-economic dynamics, a multifaceted resolution can be achieved. First, by identifying areas for intervention such as support for cooperatives by women, they can be empowered to navigate economic challenges and become drivers of agricultural growth. Second, exploring the link between economic hardship and mental health can inform the development of culturally appropriate support systems, fostering the well-being of these women. Third, this research can inform policy and program development, leading to a more equitable and sustainable agricultural sector. Finally, by acknowledging the multifaceted contributions of black women and the psychological factors that shape them, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the South African agricultural sector, paving the way for inclusive development strategies. This study aims to investigate the complex interplay between psychological factors and economic orientation of black women within the South African rural agricultural landscape.

4. Literature Review

This section explores the psychological influences shaping the economic decisions of rural black women in the South African agricultural sector and the economic pressures that result in psychological imbalances. The key psychological factors include risk aversion, resilience, locus of control, and time perspective, all influenced by historical marginalization and cultural values. The legacy of apartheid fostered risk aversion, making women cautious in their economic ventures due to past land dispossession and limited access to resources. Resilience, developed through navigating adversity, enhanced problem-solving skills and resourcefulness, enabling women to stretch limited resources and adopt innovative agricultural practices. Locus of control affects economic behaviour, with women possessing an internal locus of control more likely to take calculated risks and invest in new technologies. Time perspective influences short-term and long-term economic decisions, balancing immediate needs with intergenerational responsibilities. The economic pressures include precarious livelihoods, financial strain, and the devaluation of labour, which contribute to psychological distress. Limited access to resources and financial constraints perpetuates poverty and mental strain. The heavy workload and lack of recognition further impact their well-being, while economic hardships create intergenerational effects, perpetuating cycles of poverty and psychological distress.

4.1 Psychological Influences Shaping Economic Decisions of Rural Black Women in the Agricultural Landscape

The agricultural landscape of South Africa is intricately constructed with the social fabric of its rural communities. Within these communities, rural black women play a critical role, often acting as the backbone of agricultural production (Hillenbrand & Miruka, 2019) and household economic decision-making (Brody et. al., 2015). However, their choices are not made in a vacuum. Psychological factors stemming from historical marginalization, cultural values, and personal experiences significantly influence their economic behaviour.

One such psychological influence is risk aversion. The legacy of apartheid, which saw widespread land dispossession and limited access to resources for black South Africans (Ngomane, 2016), fostered a natural tendency to avoid risky ventures. Drawing from that, this can manifest in crop selection, favouring subsistence staples over potentially higher yielding but riskier cash crops. Furthermore, limited access to financial safety nets, such as insurance or credit, can

exacerbate this risk aversion (Brody et. al., 2015), as losses could have devastating consequences for household food security and income.

On the other hand, Hunt and Samman (2016) stated that the very act of navigating a life marked by adversity can cultivate a sense of resilience in rural black women. Coping with limited resources and unpredictable conditions hones problem-solving skills and resourcefulness (Carnegie, Cornish, Htwe & Htwe, 2020). Drawing from this, the resilience translates into economic decision-making, where women may display a remarkable ability to stretch limited resources and identify creative solutions to agricultural challenges. For instance, they may adopt innovative water conservation techniques or utilize traditional knowledge to improve soil fertility. Furthermore, forming community-based savings and loan schemes, as well as pooling resources.

Another crucial psychological influence is locus of control which, according to Osei and Zhuang (2020), refers to a person's belief in their ability to influence their environment. Akinola (2018) states that women with an internal locus of control, believing in their own agency, may be more likely to take calculated risks in their economic decisions. Therefore, they are more likely to invest in new technologies, new farming techniques or explore alternative marketing channels. Conversely, those with an external locus of control, attributing outcomes to external factors like government policies or market forces, may be less proactive and more hesitant to invest in long-term improvements (Benería, Berik & Floro, 2015; and Njuki, Boote & Doss, 2019). Thus, understanding the dominant locus of control within a community is crucial for designing interventions that empower women and encourage them to take ownership of their economic success. The time perspective adopted by rural black women also shapes economic choices. The immediate needs of food security and household well-being may lead to a focus on short-term gains (Sharaunga et. al., 2016), influencing crop selection and marketing strategies. However, Jabeen, Haq, Jameel, Hussain, Asif, Hwang and Jabeen (2020) assert that cultural traditions and a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility can also motivate a long-term perspective when making economic decisions. Women may make decisions that benefit future generations, such as adopting sustainable land management practices, investing in the production of free-range chickens and small stock, or saving for the education of their children.

4.2 Economic Pressures in the Rural Agricultural Landscape that Trap Black Women in a Cycle of Psychological Distress

Rural black women in the South African agricultural landscape are the backbone of their communities, playing a vital role in food production and household economic security (Hillenbrand & Miruka, 2019). However, the very nature of their environment creates a dilemma, trapping them in a cycle of economic hardship and psychological distress. This complex interplay between economic realities and mental health will be explored below.

Precarious livelihoods and the burden of food security often contribute to psychological distress. According to Adama, Asaleye, Oye and Ogunjobi (2018), the success of a rural household hinges on the often unpredictable yields of small-scale agriculture. Uncontainable circumstances such as drought, pests, and volatile market prices create a constant state of uncertainty and anxiety for women responsible for putting food on the table. This chronic stress can manifest as feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, particularly when faced with the impossible task of stretching limited resources to meet the basic needs of their families (Magagula & Tsvakirai, 2020). Furthermore, the pressure of making critical economic decisions with limited resources adds another layer of burden. Drawing from this, choosing between long term and short-term needs such as investing in improved seeds for a potentially higher yield the following season or using the money to buy food for the present creates a constant state of mental strain and guilt.

Another factor that contributes to psychological distress includes financial strain and the impact of limited resources. Davison (2019) states that decades of historical marginalization have resulted in limited access to credit and financial resources for many black South Africans. This lack of capital restricts the ability of women to invest in essential agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and improved seeds. Without these resources, they struggle to increase productivity and income (Lalani, Dorward, Holloway & Wauters, 2016), perpetuating a cycle of poverty. According to Galiè et. al. (2015), financial strain associated with lack of resources translates into feelings of powerlessness and social isolation. Furthermore, poor rural infrastructure, with limited access to storage facilities and reliable transportation networks, can lead to post-harvest losses and difficulty accessing markets (Zaridis & Logotheti, 2020). This translates to wasted effort and reduced income, further contributing to feelings of frustration and discouragement.

The burden and the devaluation of the labour by women also leads to mental distress where rural black women typically carry the weight of a burden, bearing both agricultural labour and household chores. This immense workload creates physical and emotional exhaustion (Akinola, 2018). The relentless nature of their responsibilities leaves little time for self-care or leisure activities (Kabeer, 2018), further impacting their psychological well-being. Compounding this burden is the lack of recognition for their vital agricultural labour. According to Ngomane (2016), the work of women often remains largely unpaid or underpaid and undervalued within the community. This lack of recognition can lead to feelings of devaluation and decreased self-esteem.

Jabeen et. al. (2020) asserts that the economic hardships faced by women in rural communities creates an intergenerational impact and perpetuates the cycle of poverty leading to a cascading effect on their children. Limited access to education and other necessities due to financial constraints can trap future generations in a cycle of poverty (Njuki et. al., 2019). Witnessing the struggles of older women can also take a toll on the mental health of the following generation, creating a sense of hopelessness and despair. The stigma surrounding mental health issues in rural

communities prevents many women from seeking help for anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges. This lack of access to support furthers the negative impact of economic hardship on their well-being (Iyiola, & Azuh, 2014). Furthermore, without culturally appropriate mental health services and a safe space to discuss their struggles, women are left to cope with the burden alone.

5. Research Methodology

This study delves into the intricate relationship between psychology and economics as it is some of the factors that influence decision-making by black women in the South African rural agricultural sector. Here, a secondary data approach is employed, gathering information and conducting research through existing sources rather than within a specific organization (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Shevchuk and Kalyazina (2019) stated that this method allowed for leveraging of previously published research findings by other scholars. According to Zaridis and Logotheti (2020), this approach offers a broad understanding of the field without the time or resource limitations often associated with primary research.

Secondary data collection, through reviewing past research, was particularly fitting for the objective of this study which was to explore the complex interplay between psychological factors and economic decision-making among black women in South African agriculture. Electronic databases like Google Scholar, Science Direct, ResearchGate, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal online library were systematically searched to identify relevant academic publications between the year 2014 and 2024. Search terms focused on agriculture, black women, psycho-economic, psychology, and rural economy to locate national and international research on this topic. Figure 1 illustrates that 83 publications were screened, 64 were assessed for eligibility, and 28 were included in this study.

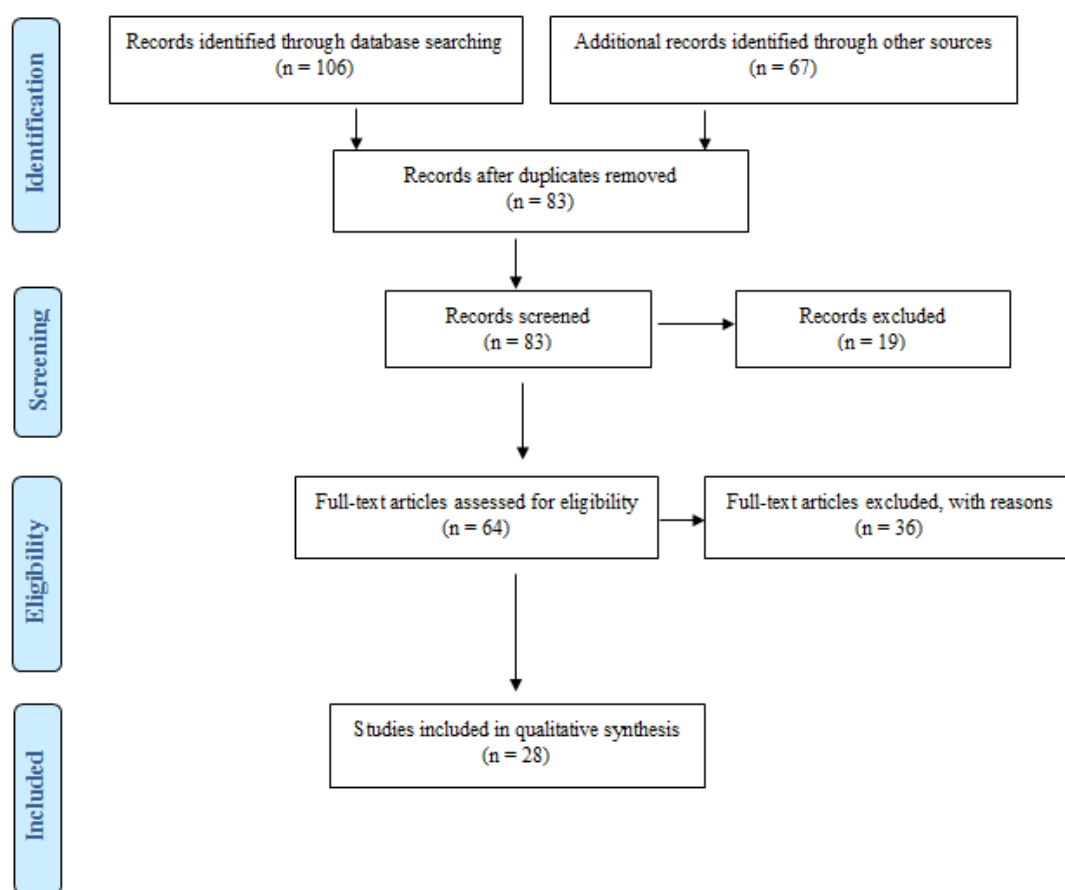


Fig. 1 PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram

(Source: Adaptation by researcher from Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman & the PRISMA Group (2009)).

The information gathered from these various sources were analysed and compared to identify key themes and insights that illuminate the experiences of black women in South African agriculture. This analysis aimed to shed light on the psychological factors that influence their economic decisions and economic pressures that inflict a psychological imbalance on women within this critical sector.

6. Findings and Discussion

This study argues that understanding the psycho-economic dynamics of black women in the South African rural agricultural sector is crucial. By examining the interplay of cultural conditioning, economic realities, and psychological impacts on their decision-making, valuable insights can be gained. This knowledge from a psycho-economic lens can

inform interventions that address both the economic and psychological needs of these women, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and sustainable agricultural future. The aim of this study was to investigate the complex interplay between psychological factors and the economic orientation of black women within the South African rural agricultural landscape.

The main findings of this study regarding the psychological influences shaping economic decisions of rural black women in the agricultural landscape were their risk aversion, resilience, locus of control, and their time perspective. Conversely, the main findings of this study for the economic pressures in the rural agricultural landscape that trap black women in a cycle of psychological distress were precarious livelihoods, the burden of food security, financial strain, limited resources, and the burden and devaluation of their labour.

Focusing on the findings of the psychological influences shaping economic decisions of rural black women in the agricultural landscape, the traits of risk aversion, resilience, locus of control, and time perspective in black women are often termed as traits of strength, instead of trauma responses posed by historical traumatic injustices. This is to an extent that women, especially black women, are usually called “imbokodo” (a rock), a term often popularized around South African Women’s Day to praise women for their ability to withstand hardships from systems and their ability to challenge those systems that least favour them, whether in the workplace, family structure, society, etc. This form of reverse psychology has conditioned women into thinking their worth is tied to their ability to withstand hardships, neglecting the psychological impact that comes with constantly proving their worth and that they belong in spaces that were predominantly for a gender and races that society deemed superior.

The risk aversion trait that some women possess in the rural agricultural landscape is a significant indication of the impact that historical injustices and marginalization have had on them. Historically, women were often not allowed ownership of land, whether culturally, where chiefs reserved land ownership for men, or politically, where policies stated that women were perpetual minors of men. Furthermore, the legacy of apartheid’s land dispossession continues to make women more cautious and risk averse. Pursuing high-risk ventures can be particularly dangerous for women, especially in a male and white-dominated industry like agriculture. High-risk ventures require high-risk inputs such as credit and resources that women previously had limited access to, which could mean that women have limited knowledge on how to access and manage these inputs. Mismanagement could lead to severe consequences such as debt or repossession of resources, further leading to psychological distress.

The patriarchal systems established by traditional leaders and the government have contributed towards propelling women towards forming a trait of resilience. Despite the adversity experienced by women in rural agriculture, they have demonstrated the ability to stretch the limited resources available to them. This has strengthened their problem-solving skills and highlighted their solution-driven nature. The resilience of black women can be observed in female community-based initiatives where women collaborate, use their indigenous knowledge, and pool resources to achieve common goals. Various successful women-led, community-based rural agricultural initiatives have thrived due to resilience, such as the Wiphold initiative. This initiative, started in 2012 by the Centane and Mbashe village women in Eastern Cape, has expanded to 34 villages with a total of 2023 project members and secured sponsorships from Old Mutual and Nedbank by 2017 (Ngcukaitobi, 2021).

Furthermore, this resilience feeds into their internal locus of control, where they believe in their own agency once they see their initiatives succeed. This encourages them to pursue risky ventures since they believe in themselves and their ability to succeed. Women who perceive themselves as capable of shaping their environment are more likely to embrace calculated risks and explore new opportunities. However, those with an external locus of control might be more hesitant to invest in long-term investments, especially since agriculture is a high-risk sector with unpredictable weather impacts, fluctuating market prices, changing consumer preferences, unforeseen disease outbreaks, theft, etc. Understanding the dominant locus of control within a community is vital for potential interventions that could empower women and encourage them to take ownership of their economic success.

Most women in rural areas view agricultural ventures as a means of survival rather than long-term investments for the benefit of future generations. Consequently, they farm for short-term gains and invest in commodities that yield quick returns, such as poultry and vegetables with short production periods. This interplay between immediate and long-term considerations highlights the complex web of factors that shape their economic decisions.

Turning to the findings on economic pressures in the rural agricultural landscape that confine black women in a cycle of psychological distress, the precarious livelihoods, the burden of food security, financial strain, limited resources, and the devaluation of their labour are often the results of historical systemic marginalization. These challenging experiences underscore the need to dismantle systems that continue to disadvantage women. Such circumstances perpetuate the indoctrination of some women into believing that being a woman is inherently linked to these challenges. The psychological distress resulting from these circumstances is often overlooked. Black communities sometimes go to the extent of labelling psychologically distressed individuals as bewitched due to a lack of awareness, misinformation, and the misconception that psychological challenges are exclusive to other races.

Precarious livelihoods and the burden of food security are economic pressures that often place a mental strain on women in rural agriculture. The unpredictable nature of small-scale agriculture, with threats like drought, pests, and volatile market prices, creates constant anxiety about food security and a stable income from agricultural production sales. Furthermore, the unstable livelihoods resulting from balancing long-term and short-term needs exacerbate mental strain. It is common for women to be single mothers or primary caregivers of families and extended families, prioritizing the

short-term needs of their dependents over long-term goals such as establishing agricultural businesses with their available resources.

Moreover, limited access to essential resources and severe financial strain can be highly frustrating for women, hindering their ability to invest in necessary agricultural inputs and impeding productivity and income. Limited resources and financial strain can also result in power imbalances, where influential individuals, particularly men like chiefs and counsellors, exploit women seeking assistance. It can be very discouraging for women in such positions to continue pursuing agricultural practices, as they may feel compelled to offer inappropriate favours for assistance, translating to the devaluation of their efforts in the industry.

The devaluation of labour, often agricultural labour and household chores, leads to physical and emotional exhaustion. Leisure and self-care activities are often not prioritized within black society. Women frequently perform the majority of primary agricultural labour, which typically requires long hours and is physically strenuous. Moreover, they are sometimes underpaid for their labour, leading to feelings of devaluation and lack of recognition for their hard work, which impacts their self-esteem. Additionally, these women are expected to perform household chores, further adding to their exhaustion. Limited time for relaxation due to their responsibilities can be highly frustrating.

Economic hardships leading to psychological impacts can have intergenerational consequences, where subsequent generations experience similar traumas. This cycle is often perpetuated by women avoiding addressing the mental health issues that arise from their roles in the agricultural industry, whether as farm workers, small-scale farmers, or commercial farmers. Although women have created supportive platforms such as “society” clubs, church solidarities, and stokvels where they share their experiences and offer each other support, it is uncommon for psychological well-being matters to be discussed in these platforms. These issues are not seen as important as food security and financial security, leading subsequent generations to overlook the importance of addressing mental health issues resulting from economic hardships.

7. Recommendations

By recognizing the interplay of these psychological influences, policymakers and development programs can create a more supportive environment for rural black women in the South African agricultural landscape. This could involve initiatives that build financial literacy and confidence in managing risk, while simultaneously promoting access to credit and insurance schemes. Additionally, fostering cooperatives by women can strengthen their bargaining power in markets and provide a platform for collective decision-making. Ultimately, addressing the psychological factors that influence economic decisions is crucial for empowering rural black women and unlocking their full potential as drivers of agricultural growth and rural prosperity in South Africa.

Breaking free from these challenges necessitates a multi-pronged approach. Financial literacy training and access to credit can equip them to manage risk and invest in improved practices. Land reform initiatives can empower them through ownership, giving them a stake in the future. Most importantly, dismantling the stigma surrounding mental health and providing culturally appropriate support services is crucial. By acknowledging these psycho-economic dynamics and addressing them holistically, a more supportive environment can be created for these women.

9. Future Research

Future research should look into conducting research on the prevalence and types of mental health challenges faced by rural black women in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, explore culturally appropriate interventions to address mental health issues and promote well-being among these women. Investigate ways to empower women and increase their locus of control through financial literacy training, access to credit, and market access initiatives. Analyse the effectiveness of existing programs aimed at supporting rural black women in agriculture, considering the psychological factors discussed in this study. Examining the impact of improved rural infrastructure on women's economic decision-making and psychological well-being.

10. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the intricate web of psychological influences shaping economic decision-making among black women in the South African rural agricultural sector. Risk aversion, a natural consequence of historical marginalization, leads them to favour safe options. Yet, their remarkable resilience translates into resourceful solutions for stretching limited resources. Additionally, their locus of control impacts their willingness to embrace calculated risks. Their time perspective, encompassing both immediate needs and long-term goals, influences their crop selection and investment strategies.

However, the harsh realities of rural life often trap these women in a cycle of hardship. Precarious livelihoods, fuelled by unpredictable yields and volatile markets, create constant anxiety about food security. Financial strain, due to limited access to credit and resources, hinders productivity and income, further perpetuating the cycle. The immense burden of agricultural labour and household chores, coupled with the devaluation of their work, leads to physical and emotional exhaustion. These economic pressures have a cascading effect, impacting their mental well-being and potentially trapping future generations in poverty.

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