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Barriers and enablers to women smallholder farmers' adoption of agricultural innovations in Rwanda

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Abstract

Agriculture is the main source of employment in Rwanda, and women represent more than half of the country's farmers. Despite their central role in food production, women smallholder farmers continue to face persistent constraints that limit their ability to adopt agricultural innovations. This study examines how women engage with selected agricultural innovations and identifies the barriers that hinder, and the conditions that support, their adoption.

The research addresses two questions: which socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers prevent women from adopting small-scale irrigation, composting, and Juncao technology; and which policy, training, and support mechanisms can facilitate adoption.

A mixed-methods approach was applied. Eight potential innovations were initially identified and assessed using the Relevance, Opportunity, and Feasibility (ROF) framework in consultation with experts, and subsequently prioritised by women farmers. Three innovations were selected for in-depth analysis. Data were collected across five agroecological zones through structured interviews with 37 farmers, six focus group discussions, and 11 key informant interviews.

The findings show that women's adoption of agricultural innovations is primarily constrained by limited access to information and training, insufficient skills, high costs, and restricted access to credit. Social norms, time constraints linked to household responsibilities, and limited decision-making power further shape women's ability to engage with innovations. Across all three innovations, access to training and information emerged as the most important enablers, followed by financial support mechanisms.

Overall, the study highlights that improving women's adoption of agricultural innovations requires addressing financial, informational, and social constraints in an integrated manner. It underscores the importance of gender-responsive support measures that reflect women's daily realities and strengthen their agency within agricultural innovation systems.

Keywords: Agricultural innovation, gender barriers, innovation enablers, women farmers

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