

Gender relations in farmer groups' performance: Voices of Women in Western Kenya

Nasambu, M.J.¹, Ariya, G.², Wamalwa, F.¹, Njoroge, R.³ & Abigael, N.O.A.³

¹Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, School of Agriculture & Biotechnology, University of Eldoret, P.O Box 1125-30100, Eldoret, Kenya

²Department of Tourism and Tour Operations Management, School of Business, Economics and Management Sciences, University of Eldoret, P.O Box 1125-30100, Eldoret, Kenya.

³Department of Soil Science, School of Agriculture & Biotechnology, University of Eldoret, P.O Box 1125-30100, Eldoret, Kenya

Corresponding author: nasambujoyce@gmail.com

Abstract

The gender role in farmer groups' performance is a feminism debate that often emerges in feminist studies in Sub-Saharan Africa. The debate challenges the question of why feminism has not been enthused in rural farm yet women's activities in rural agriculture are characterized by global gender gaps in policy-level biases, community-level structural inequalities, vulnerabilities and increased masculinization of resources. This study examines the gender dynamics and challenges faced by rural women in farmer groups in Bungoma County and farmer association in Siaya County in western Kenya. The study draws on the African feminist theory to explore the lived narratives of rural women identified through purposive sampling in a focus group discussions guided by African oral tradition of storytelling. The study uncovers a gendered division of labour, limited decision-making power, and unequal access to resources. Women encounter gender biases and stereotypes that undermine women's capabilities in commercial farming. Despite these challenges, some women farmers exhibited resilience and resourcefulness, actively seek knowledge, join farmers groups/associations, and assume leadership roles to improve their farming practices and income generation. Recommendations include promoting gender equality, enhancing resource access, strengthening farmer organizations, providing training, encouraging women's participation in decision-making, fostering market linkages, and supporting empowerment. Implementation of these recommendations can create an inclusive and sustainable agricultural sector, empowering women farmers and improving their livelihoods in western Kenya.

Key words: Gender relations; Farmer groups/association; Lived experiences; Western Kenya; Women

Résumé

Le rôle du genre dans la performance des groupes de producteurs est un débat féministe qui émerge souvent dans les études féministes en Afrique subsaharienne. Le débat remet en question la raison pour laquelle le féminisme n'a pas été encouragé dans les fermes rurales, alors que les activités des femmes dans l'agriculture rurale sont caractérisées par des écarts mondiaux entre les sexes au niveau des politiques, des inégalités structurelles au niveau communautaire, des vulnérabilités et une masculinisation accrue des ressources. Cette étude examine les dynamiques de genre et les défis auxquels sont confrontées les femmes rurales dans les groupes de producteurs du comté de Bungoma et les associations de producteurs du comté de Siaya dans l'ouest du Kenya. L'étude

s'appuie sur la théorie féministe africaine pour explorer les récits vécus des femmes rurales identifiées par un échantillonnage raisonné lors de discussions de groupe focalisées guidées par la tradition orale africaine du storytelling. L'étude révèle une division du travail fondée sur le genre, un pouvoir de décision limité et un accès inégal aux ressources. Les femmes rencontrent des préjugés et des stéréotypes de genre qui sapent leurs capacités dans l'agriculture commerciale. Malgré ces défis, certaines agricultrices ont fait preuve de résilience et d'ingéniosité, cherchant activement à acquérir des connaissances, rejoignant des groupes/associations de producteurs et assumant des rôles de leadership pour améliorer leurs pratiques agricoles et générer des revenus. Les recommandations incluent la promotion de l'égalité des genres, l'amélioration de l'accès aux ressources, le renforcement des organisations de producteurs, la fourniture de formations, l'encouragement de la participation des femmes à la prise de décision, la promotion des liens avec les marchés et le soutien à l'autonomisation. La mise en œuvre de ces recommandations peut créer un secteur agricole inclusif et durable, autonomisant les agricultrices et améliorant leurs moyens de subsistance dans l'ouest du Kenya.

Mots-clés: Relations de genre, groupes/associations de producteurs, expériences vécues, ouest du Kenya, femmes

Introduction

Gender disparity in terms of socially constructed notions of femininity and masculinity has elicited global debate on traditional smallholder agriculture. Several recent literature have focused on women's position in agriculture with cross-country differences (Druzca and Peveri, 2018; Khatri-Chhetri *et al.*, 2020; Yokying and Lambrecht, 2020; Anderson *et al.*, 2021; Asadullah and Kambhampati, 2021; Dunne *et al.*, 2021; Ingutia, and Sumelius, 2022; Matthew *et al.* 2022; Peralta, 2022; Williams and Springs, 2022).

The studies point to certain 'natural abilities' ascribed to specific sexes in terms of differential ownership and access to household resources, benefits and healthy food; decision-making concerning agricultural activities; division of labour; contribution of women engagement to human capital development; information exchange and recognition; agrarian policy; and feminization of farming and household food security. Early literature also indicates that the societal traditions and norms influence how farmers socialize with and learn from each other, as well as how they produce, disseminate and apply knowledge (Berdegue', 2005; Hall *et al.*, 2002; Spielman, 2005).

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), there is increased argument that the traditional society in which women and men had different roles and spheres of activities has exacerbated masculinization of household farm practices and emancipation of women. Nonetheless, the transition from traditional to modern society does not mean more equal gender relations, sameness or equal worth in access and benefit from productive resources (IFAD, 2016). For instance, the proportion of women who own agricultural land varies greatly, ranging from 5% in Mali to 30% in Botswana and Malawi (FAO, 2011). This disparity restricts women's participation in agriculture and jeopardizes their productive capacity (Ingutia and Sumelius, 2022).

While increased research and development efforts have established limited accessibility and participation of women in agricultural activities, the status quo or minimum positive outcomes remain (Ingutia and Sumelius, 2022). There has been relatively little attention on what can facilitate women's access to productive resources and

decision making (Markelova *et al.*, 2009; Mojo, 2017; Peralta, 2022). In the same view, Bayeh (2016) emphasized that; sustainable development is impossible without women's involvement in promoting gender equality. This is due to the fact that women have played critical roles in agriculture throughout history, across time, and across generations (Sachs and Alston, 2010), and their presence in agriculture is on the rise to more than 75% in SSA countries (World Bank, 2016; FAO, 2018; Slavchevska *et al.*, 2019; Obayelu *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, gender inequality costs SSA approximately 95 USD billion per year, according to the 2016 Africa Human Development Report. The 2015 McKinsey Global Institute study also suggests that 12-28 USD trillion could be added to the global economy if women achieved economic parity with men (Anderson *et al.*, 2021).

Recent evidence suggests mixed findings on the role farmer groups play in overcoming the constraints faced by rural women. According to Geleta *et al.* (2017), allowing women to organize themselves in form of associations and groups is an important approach to participation in development. Positive findings indicate that empowering farmer group members economically and socially contribute to access to credit, farm inputs and market; improved skills, innovation, crop yields and income; providing clean, abundant accessible water for irrigation, sanitation, and hygiene to improve health and nutrition; governance of nutritious foods and to increase women's resiliency to economic and climate-induced food insecurity (Miller, 2001; Fletschner and Kenney, 2011; FAO, 2012; Spielman *et al.*, 2012; Nkuranga and Wilcox, 2013 and Lecouetre, 2017). Nevertheless, other previous studies by Poulton *et al.* (2010) and Mwaura (2014) suggest that farmer groups fail to impact farmers positively. These studies explored diverse nature of farmer groups as well as different methodological approaches.

This study makes an empirical contribution towards understanding how local gender relations influence farmer groups/association performance in a unique approach hardly documented in academic literature. In line with previous studies (See Ingutia and Sumelius, 2022), we argue that smallholder farmer groups and associations, where women are the majority, are instrumental in Kenya's agricultural production yet face myriad challenges. Through University based Community Action Research for increasing viability of cereal/legume value chains towards improved nutrition and livelihood in Sub-Saharan Africa (UniCARSSA) project, we focused on increasing agricultural productivity and diversifying cropping systems through soil nutrient-use efficiency, enhanced value chain operations, reduced post-harvest losses and improved nutritional contribution of cereals and legumes in smallholder farmer groups in Siaya County and farmer association in Bungoma County, Kenya.

At the project inception, we identified knowledge gap on gender relations in farmer groups/association performance. This is also premised on the recommendation by Vemireddy and Choudhary (2021) on the need for further research on gendered differences in agricultural inputs. Using qualitative approach, this study is grounded on African feminist theory to establish the impacts of the project on social relations within farmer groups and farmer association performance. Moreover, no previous study has considered female narratives of smallholder farmer groups, which are administratively and operationally different from smallholder farmer associations to elicit differential voices of women in agricultural activities like division of labour, access to resources and benefits, decision-making, contribution to food security, information sharing, women recognition, group benefits, and challenges.

Study Methodology

The study was carried out in Bungoma and Siaya counties within Kenya's Western region where gender disparities is reported to be prominent (Mikalista, 2010; Diiro *et al.*, 2018). The study targeted the UniCARSSA project beneficiaries between January and March 2022 in two communities - one farmer association in Bungoma and nine farmer groups in Siaya counties - to establish the impact of the project on gender relations, in particular division on labour, access to resources and benefits, decision-making and gender norms. Drawing from the contemporary gender theory of African feminism (Orido, 2017; Mekgwe, 2008), the study employed qualitative research approach based on the narratives of the group participants through African oral tradition of storytelling to share real and abstract experiences (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Agan, 2006; Orido, 2017). Initially, the study participants were identified through purposive sampling technique (Tracy, 2013) as beneficiaries of the UniCARSSA project, then latter through simple random sampling to be part of qualitative focus group-discussions (FGD). A total of 48 direct female UniCARSSA beneficiaries (3 groups with 8 participants from each county) formed the study participants. A key characteristic of the study is the differentiation between female in individual farmer groups in Siaya County that were structured differently from female in farmer groups under one association in Bungoma County who benefited from the project.

Data was collected through audio-taped storytelling discussions among the study participants with prompt questions guiding storytelling sessions. The study findings took a narrative analysis approach (Franzosi, 1998), using particular narratives of participants as empirical evidence that relate to gendered experiences of their farm work environment. Finally, the study linked the empirical information from the data to theories on the contingent nature of gender representation.

Results and Discussion

Gender relations are dynamic and complex in the context of agricultural activities in Western Kenya. Traditionally, the communities were patriarchal, where gender roles have been deeply ingrained in the social fabric. Agricultural work was well-defined in terms of gender roles and responsibilities that dictate how farm households work is divided along gender lines. In this section, we present and discuss the narratives of women engaged in agricultural farm household activities under UniCARSSA project in farmer groups and farmer association in Siaya and Bungoma Counties respectively.

Women experiences regarding division of labor in farmer groups/association. Women in farmer groups/association narrated their experiences on division of labor at household level. Rhoda (pseudonym), a woman in Bungoma County and a member of farmer group under an association narrated her experience:

“During land preparation, my husband and I do hand ploughing together, we then do the harrowing together, we plant with the children and leave the crops to germinate. I do weed all by myself. Harvesting is done by both of us but the post-harvest activities are done by me and the children. However, (she giggles) when it comes to selling, my husband does not involve me mostly and I find that not pleasing but I'd rather not speak to preserve my peace.”

This experience contextualizes the dynamics of gender relations within agricultural farm households by shedding light on various farm tasks and responsibilities assigned to different family members. There is a description of a shared effort between the couples during land preparation, emphasizing a collaborative approach to the physical demanding task of land ploughing and harrowing. This suggests a level of equality and cooperation between a couple in the initial stages of household farming. The involvement of their children in planting also demonstrates a collective family effort in family farm activities.

However, there is an expression of dissatisfaction when it comes to selling of the harvested crops, which depicts a sense of exclusion and disempowerment. This exclusion from the market activities can have significant implications on women's economic agency and decision-making power within the household. This potentially reinforces traditional gender roles where men often have more control over financial matters; a gender identity described by Martnez and Paterna (2009) as traditionally been marked by paid work. There is hesitation to speak up about the feelings as a way to preserve peace and this highlights the complex dynamics that exist within gender relations. It suggests a reluctance to challenge traditional gender roles and norms, potentially due to societal expectations or fear of conflict within household.

This mixed experience is somewhat different from women in individual groups in Siaya County. Mercy (pseudonym) gave her experience too:

“I will start by saying, men in this County (Siaya) don't like farming and it is left to women, most of the farm work here is left to women and others can attest to this (other women in the group nod in agreement). Personally, I do most of the farm work and sadly I am not recognized at community level, but I have to do the farming to ensure I have food from season to season. I plough, plant, weed, harvest, and do the post-harvest activities all by myself because my husband is a drunkard, all he does is wake up and leave to go and have more drinks and so I have to work all alone most of the time and he only comes in when we want to sell. Well, he helps me sometimes but at a very minimal rate.”

The narrative illustrates women's frustration with the gendered division of labor in farming and overall well-being within Siaya community, which is acerbated by the consequences of alcoholism. The assertion that men in the county do not like farming, leaving the responsibility (from ploughing to post-harvest activities) solely on women indicates the extensive household workload women handle alone. This observation is supported by the agreement and nods of other women in the group, suggesting that this gendered division of labor is a shared experience among them. The workload burden is the traditional norm in developing countries where rural women devote a significant percentage of their time to household activities (Agesa and Agesa, 2019).

Furthermore, lack of women's recognition at the community level for their contribution to ensuring food security for the household, indicates objectification of women in household farming where their contribution go unnoticed and undervalued. This lack of recognition can have detrimental effects on women's self-esteem, status within the community, and access to resources and opportunities. The mention of alcoholism highlights the importance of examining the underlying factors that contribute to such imbalances and further marginalize women in their agricultural roles. Chant (2008) also noted men's economic disengagement, labour exploitation, hidden labour, and feminization of obligations.

This socio-economic and structural environment of women objectification in household farming is further depicted in Bungoma County. Consider Agnes' (pseudonym) sentiment:

“We as women here in western Kenya have been brought up believing that household chores belong to a woman. Therefore, we wake up, skip our husbands (laughs), and start the day even before breaking of dawn. First, we start with cleaning the house and then milk the cows, feed the animals, before we prepare our children to go to school. All this time, the husbands are still sleeping (everyone laughs). They only get to wake up after children are gone to school and tea is ready. Most of us do the house chores and still go to the farm.”

The traditional perception of the two rural communities regarding objectification of women in household farming seemed not to vary. The traditional gender roles and expectations still hold strong. The communities adhere to conservative values and beliefs that reinforce gender stereotypes and prioritize the division of household labor based on traditional roles. The household chores are primarily the responsibility of women as humorously mentioned that women wake up early, skipping their husbands who are still sleeping, and immediately begin their daily chores. This sets the tone for the rest of the day, where women engage in various tasks including cleaning the house, milking cows, child-rearing, preparing children to school, and feeding animals. A condition explained by Cerrato and Cifre (2018) that everyday household activities are deemed feminine.

Furthermore, the situation highlights women's multitasking abilities and additional responsibilities they undertake beyond household chores. It illustrates the imbalance and disproportionate burden placed on women, who are expected to fulfil domestic responsibilities while also participating in agricultural work. Rose (pseudonym) from Siaya County also augments:

“I go with my husband to the farm, we work together almost half day in the hot rays of the sun, but when we come home, he sits under a shade and I have to go cook for him because that's what women should do. He will then shower and leave for I don't know where while I wash the utensils and start preparing dinner. For us women, it's work, work, work and more work (sighs). We can't do anything about it because any minute of rebellion can be your last day in that house.”

This describes the experience of rural women who works alongside their husbands on the farm, yet faces an additional burden of domestic chores and the expectation to fulfil traditional gender roles. It is a situation of frustration, indicating that women are burdened with constant work, both on the farm and home, while their husbands do not share the same responsibilities. This disparity can lead to exhaustion, physical strain, and limited time for self-care or personal pursuits. It also suggests that women feel constrained in their ability to challenge or question these gendered expectations. Therefore, they are forced to conform to prescribed gender roles to maintain their place in the household.

The narratives are reflection of the traditional gender norms, which are still crucial in the division of labor within farm households in Western Kenya. Bikketi *et al.* (2016) in Kakamega Central within Western Kenya established that women perform most agricultural activities like land preparation, planting, weeding, watering crops (vegetables), harvesting, livestock feeding (particularly poultry feeding) and animal milking. However, men also assisted in land preparation, planting, harvesting, pesticide and herbicide application, and farm produce marketing. While gender-responsive initiatives like the UniCARSSA project have provided platforms for women to organize themselves, amplify their voices and stories, share experiences and advocate for their rights, the change is not expected to be immediate in deep-rooted African cultural beliefs and norms resilient

to gender-responsive change. Addressing the objectification of women in household farm performance requires a multi-faceted approach of rural feminism that dismantles deep rooted African traditional patriarchal structures and norms that perpetuate objectification. Nevertheless, the involvement in the UniCARSSA activities brought some level of family cohesion and sense of unity and respect between spouses, particularly in the families with the commercially viable agricultural production of the new legumes.

More of such initiatives should be tailored to advocate for the recognition of women's rights and contributions within the agricultural sector, including fair compensation, access to training and education, promoting gender equality, and representation in financial decision-making processes. The initiatives should also challenge rural societal expectations that limit women's roles through grassroots organizing, community dialogues and advocacy efforts that highlight the diverse roles and contributions of women in rural farming communities to realize a more inclusive and equitable agricultural practices.

Women decision-making in farmer groups/association. Women's participation in farm decision-making processes has been considered to be quite low (Chayal *et al.*, 2013; Damisa and Yohanna, 2007). The level of decision-making varies in terms of geographical region; gender norms; stereotypes and low self-esteem; level of access to education and information; socio-cultural and economic structures of rural communities among others. Women have been regarded as inferior when it comes to decision-making at farm and household level yet are actively engaged in farming activities and contribute to various aspects of farm management. Consider Vivian's (pseudonym) experience from Siaya County:

“We sometimes make joint decisions with my husband regarding issues at household level. This means we have to discuss before we come up with what we want to do exactly. These decisions include; how to use agricultural benefits and resources, what to plant when planting season arrives, how to distribute funds among our agricultural enterprises and as much it's not enough, it is something. At least he involves me (giggles).”

In contrast, Veronica (pseudonym) in the same focus group discussion also shared her experience:

“We as farmers depend on farming for food and income altogether, because it's all we have. In my house I can say I have a mandate to make very few decisions where most of them are not important or impactful towards agriculture. That makes it difficult for me to carry out serious agriculture because each time I have to go as per my husband's decisions. There are things that I might have knowledge on but he is the head of the house (looks down seemingly in shame)”.

The narratives present divergent perspectives of women engagement in farm decision-making from the groups. Some women are actively engaged in decision-making processes within their households. This suggests that some rural couples recognize the significance of involving both partners in farm discussions and reaching mutual agreements. By doing so, they create an environment of collaboration and shared responsibility; shedding light on the importance of gender-inclusive decision-making in rural agricultural contexts. This may contribute to a sense of empowerment and partnership within farm household relationships.

However, there is recognition that the decision-making processes not being “enough”, implies the limitations or challenges that may still exist within farm households. While the involvement of partners is appreciated as positive experience for the women, it suggests that further improvement could enhance the level of shared decision-making in the farm households.

On the other, some female farmers expressed challenges and limitations they face regarding decision-making. Despite emphasis on the significance of farming for both sustenance and income generation that demands effective decision-making, some women have limited authority in making farm decisions.

The mention of husbands being the “head of the house” suggests a traditional power structure within the households and the expression of looking down seemingly in shame indicates their dissatisfaction with this arrangement and their recognition that their knowledge and expertise in farming activities is not granted enough weight. They believe that their opinions and knowledge may not be fully considered or valued in the decision-making process.

This lack of decision-making power restricts women’s ability to carry agricultural activities as they would like and create obstacles in implementing ideas or practices that could positively impact their agricultural endeavors. It underscores the need for more inclusive and equitable decision-making processes in farming communities, where all stakeholders, regardless of gender, can actively contribute and participate in shaping agricultural practices and strategies. Furthermore, efforts to promote gender equality and empower women in decision-making can lead to more sustainable and successful agricultural practices, as diverse perspectives and expertise are taken into account. Encouraging open dialogue, mutual respect, and shared decision-making can also help ensure that all members of the household have the opportunity to contribute their knowledge and skills, fostering a more inclusive and productive farming environment.

The power imbalance in decision-making among women was also manifested under farmer association in Bungoma County despite the skills and knowledge women gained through the UniCARSSA project activities. Nancy (pseudonym) had this to say:

“Women in this county have potential in farming, both for subsistence and commercial purposes. We have the potential and skills, thanks to what we have learnt. As we speak, I grow most cash crops but in small scale because I don’t have full support from my husband, and this is because of what people believe in western Kenya, that women have no capability to grow crops at cash crop level. Truthfully, am stuck and am just forced to help my husband grow maize.”

The UniCARSSA project activities and membership in association provided the platform for women to gain skills for farming, both for subsistence and commercial purposes. This statement challenges the traditional perception that farming is primarily a male-dominated activity. It acknowledges that women possess the necessary abilities and knowledge to engage in farming activities effectively, especially when empowered through activities like UniCARSSA project. However, there is a suggestion that decision-making power in farming activities is not equally shared between men and women in Bungoma County.

Women's lack of full support from their husbands, despite their potential and skills, highlight a common barrier faced by women in many societies, where traditional gender roles and beliefs restrict women's access to resources and decision-making power. This lack of support restricts their ability to expand their farming operations or goals beyond specific crops (maize cultivation) as directed by their husbands. Moreover, the traditional belief in western Kenya that women are incapable of growing cash crops reflects the persistence of gender stereotypes and biases that women are incapable of managing cash crop farming. This perception undermines women's agency and hinders their ability to fully engage in and benefit from agricultural activities in the region.

This societal attitude and expectation also limit women's autonomy and control they have over their farming practices and choices. It further suggests that women's voices and perspectives may not be adequately considered or valued in decision-making processes related to agricultural activities. This also perpetuate gender inequality and restrict women's economic empowerment in the agricultural sector in the region.

Hellen (pseudonym), a widow from the same association, also shared her personal and challenges that prevailing beliefs and gender roles related to women's involvement in farming and commercial agriculture:

“Well, I'll share my story on this (she pauses) in terms of my own personal experience. My husband died three years ago. We did farm activities together but then I had not joined this association or any group for that matter. After he passed on, I did everything alone and even joined this farmer group because now I made all the decisions. From what I learned from the group, I implemented easily, and that was mainly the part where I could grow cash crops. Yes, people have a belief, saying that women can't be commercial growers but as you can see am doing really well and I supply tomatoes everywhere in this community, same goes for peanut butter that I make from the groundnuts I grow. Honestly, these beliefs only bring women down and if this can be dealt with, we will see women flourishing and even support their own families.

Hellen's decision after the death of her husband demonstrates how she took on the responsibility of managing the farm alone and her shift to join association empowered her to make all the decisions regarding farming activities, allowing her to implement what she learned from the association. Through the association, she acquired knowledge and skills that enabled her to easily transition to growing cash crops. Despite the prevalent belief that women cannot be successful commercial growers, her narrative proves otherwise. By mentioning her success in supplying tomatoes and making peanut butter from the groundnuts she grows, she demonstrates that women have the ability to thrive in commercial agriculture.

This provides emphasis that the beliefs about women's limitations in farming only serve to hold women back; a demonstration that challenging and overcoming these beliefs would lead to women flourishing and being able to support their own families economically.

Women's access to farm resources. Women's access to farm resources is an important but complex issue in African household setup. Land ownership and tenure is one of the primary obstacles for women. In many traditional African rural societies, land is predominantly owned and controlled by men, making it difficult for women to secure access to land for farming on their own. The study by Bikketi et al. (2016) in Kakamega showed that cultural

behavioral standards govern access to and control over land where women obtain land through marriage. This study also established that in both Bungoma and Siaya, women had little access to land yet the availability of such land is critical to their ability to farm. To build on this theory consider Margaret's (pseudonym) sentiments from Bungoma County:

“In terms of access of land, women here live under the ‘authority’ of the husband. If you dare ask about land issues you’ll be asked [did you come with land from your home?]. We therefore prefer to remain silent regarding issues of land. The only time I can get to use the land freely is when am with my husband, or when I ask for permission from him of which he refuses to grant me sometimes not knowing maybe I would have grown something profitable (exhales). I really wish I could have my own land; I would really produce a lot.”

The narrative emphasizes the subordinate position of women in terms of access to land, as they are often expected to live under the authority of their husbands. This points to the prevailing gender norms and expectations that grant men the primary control over land and property, while women are relegated to a subordinate role. Therefore, women's access to land is often contingent upon their marital status, and they face scrutiny or skepticism if they try to assert their rights or voice their concerns.

As a result, women tend to remain silent on land issues, reflecting a sense of powerlessness and fear of repercussions. They hesitate to advocate for their land rights due to societal pressure, the fear of confrontation, or the potential backlash they might face within their families or communities. This silence perpetuates the existing inequalities and inhibits women from asserting their rights and benefits from productive land-use. Furthermore, the dependency on male approval undermines their ability to make independent choices, creativity and may stifle their potential productivity.

Nevertheless, women have a strong desire to have their own land. It underscores the recognition that if women had their own land, they could contribute significantly to agricultural production and generate economic benefits. This reflects the potential that women hold as agricultural producers and the missed opportunities resulting from the existing gender inequalities in land ownership and control. This condition is supported by Rachel's (pseudonym) opinion:

“In my marriage, I do not own anything, and any possessions I acquire belong to my spouse. When it comes to asset ownership, there is no equality. Except for the money I may receive from my sales and a group investment that I do not tell to him. My husband owns all I have purchased. However, I have little access over other farm inputs.”

This unequal asset ownership dynamics further highlights the challenges and disparities faced by women in terms of economic autonomy and control over resources within the context of marriage. There is a common pattern where women's economic contributions, whether through income or purchases, are not recognized or valued as independent assets. Instead, they are automatically attributed to the husband's ownership, reinforcing gender imbalances in property and wealth accumulation.

To counter this, women venture into undisclosed investments like group investments as a strategy to retain some money and gain a certain degree of economic agency and retain some control of resources. This indicates a need for women to navigate within the existing power dynamics and find ways to secure some level of economic independence, often through informal or hidden means.

Gender norms in farmer groups/association. Gender norms play significant role in household farming and can influence the participation, roles, and decision-making power of men and women within the groups or associations. Ideally, there should be no specific norms that restrict farmers (women or men) from performing any agricultural activity. However, there are norms that promote and support men's provider duties as head of the house, making agriculture a challenging journey for women to embark on. Many policymakers and rural advisory services classify their target populations based on characteristics such as "head of household" or "cash crop versus subsistence crop farmer," while women are viewed as subsistence producers (Manfre *et al.*, 2013; Farnworth and Colverson 2015).

This study also found out that there are certain norms that impose certain duties to men, making it hard for men and women to work together for the betterment of agriculture. Consider Caroline's (pseudonym) experience from Siaya County:

“It is hard for me to carry out commercial agriculture because the norms people have on women as subsistence farmers makes it hard for my husband to support me even though I think I have the capability to work up to that capacity. It has reduced the value of women farmers who have resolved to focus on subsistence farmers as they want us to be. This does not make subsistence farming exciting anymore because we want to do more”

This narrative suggests that societal norms perceive women primarily as subsistence farmers, limiting their opportunities to engage in commercial agriculture. This perception may stem from the deeply rooted traditional gender roles and expectations that confine women to specific agricultural activities, often with a focus on household food security rather than commercial ventures. As a result, restricting women's access to resources, financial support, and market opportunities needed to transition into commercial farming.

Moreover, the devaluation of women farmers who choose to focus on subsistence farming can create a perception that women's contribution to agriculture are limited and should remain confined to traditional roles. This perception undermines the potential of women farmers to become successful entrepreneurs, generate income, and contribute to agricultural development and economic growth. It perpetuates gender inequalities and restricts women's ability to explore new opportunities, expand their skills, and diversify their agricultural activities.

Women personal journey to empowerment and success is underscored by the importance of providing the women with access to knowledge, resources and support systems like the UniCARSSA project activities. These systems provide women with a platform to realize their full potential, contribute to their communities, and become self-sufficient providers for their families. Women's experiences in this article depicts set-backs of deep-rooted gender inequalities that still exist in the African societies, specifically in western Kenya, but also as an inspiring example of how empowering women in farming can lead to positive outcomes for individuals, families and communities as a whole.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This article sheds light on the prevailing gender relations and societal expectations that influence gender relations in western Kenya. The experiences reveal a consistent pattern of gendered division on labor, where women are actively involved in farm work, including land preparation, planting, weeding, and post-harvest activities.

However, they also bear the primary responsibility for household chores and childcare, leading to disproportionate workload.

Furthermore, the experiences depict limited decision-making power that women have, particularly in matters related to agriculture, as men tend to make key decisions regarding farm activities, resource allocation, and marketing. This imbalance is exacerbated by unequal access to resources, such as land, farm inputs, and credit, which are often controlled by men. The study also exposes the pervasive gender biases and stereotypes that undermine women's capabilities as farmers, particularly in the context of commercial farming. These beliefs perpetuate the devaluation of women farmers and limit their opportunities for growth and success.

Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, some women demonstrated resilience, determination, and resourcefulness by seeking knowledge, joining farmer groups/associations, and taking on leadership roles to improve their farming practices and income generation. To address these issues, interventions like UniCARSSA project activities should promote gender equality, challenge harmful stereotypes, and create an enabling environment that supports women's agency, decision-making power, and access to resources.

Specifically, these should be strategies that promote gender equality by working towards challenging and changing gender norms and biases that limit women's role and decision-making power in farming through awareness campaigns, education, and advocacy to promote gender equality at all levels; enhance equitable access to resources such as land, credit, farm inputs, and technology for women farmers through policies that promote women's land ownership rights, providing targeted financial services, and improving women's access to agricultural extension services and training programs; support and empower women-led farmer organizations like the groups and associations to provide networking opportunities, access to markets, collective bargaining power of women, and capacity-building programs to enhance their leadership skills; offer training programs and technical support tailored specifically to the needs of women farmers like climate-smart agriculture and business skills to improve their productivity, market access and income generation; promote women's active participation and representation in agricultural decision-making processes at the household, community and policy levels by creating platforms for women's voices to be heard, engaging men as allies in promoting gender equality, and implementing gender-responsive policies and programs; facilitate access to markets and value chains for women farmers by strengthening market linkages, value addition and agribusiness activities, promoting fair trade practices, and providing market information and opportunities; implement initiatives that empower women economically, socially, and politically through providing financial literacy and entrepreneurship training, promoting women's rights and agency, and addressing gender-based violence and discrimination; and conduct further research on gender-disaggregated data to better understand the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities faced by women farmers to inform evidence-based policies, programs, and interventions to address gender disparities in agriculture effectively.

By empowering women farmers and recognizing their contributions is not only essential for their own well-being and economic independence but also for achieving sustainable agricultural development, inclusivity, and food security in western Kenya region.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge funding from the National Research Fund (NRF) under the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MEST), Kenya within the auspices of the LEAP-Agri Initiative (grant id: LEAP-Agri 271). LEAP-Agri is a joint Europe Africa Research and Innovation (R&I) initiative related to Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (FNSSA) involving 30 partners, including 24 Ministries and Funding Agencies (Group of Funders) from 18 European and African countries set up to spur research in Africa. The research opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect Scientific views of the funders and partners. This paper is a contribution to the 19th RUFORUM Annual General Meeting and Conference held 28th October-02 November 2023 in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

References

- Adib, A. and Guerrier, Y. 2003. The interlocking of gender with nationality, race, ethnicity and class: The narratives of women in hotel work. *Gender, Work & Organization* 10 (4):413-432.
- Agan, A.O. 2006. Storytelling as a means of disseminating knowledge in museums: The example of “Sigana moto moto.” *Museum International* 58 (1–2):76–82.
- Agesa, R.U. and Agesa, J. 2019. Time spent on household chores (Fetching Water) and the alternatives forgone for women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from Kenya. *The Journal of Developing Areas* 53 (2). doi:10.1353/jda.2019.0019.
- Anderson, C.L., Reynolds, T.W., Biscaye, P., Patwardhan, V. and Schmidt, C. 2021. Economic benefits of empowering women in agriculture: Assumptions and evidence. *The Journal of Development Studies* 57 (2):193-208.
- Asadullah, M.N. and Kambhampati, U. 2021. Feminization of farming, food security and female empowerment. *Global Food Security* 29:100532.
- Banks-Wallace, J. 2002. Talk that talk: Storytelling and analysis rooted in African American oral tradition. *Qualitative Health Research* 12 (3):410–426.
- Bayeh, E. 2016. The role of empowering women and achieving gender equality to the sustainable development of Ethiopia. *Pacific Science Review B: Humanities and Social Sciences* 2 (1):37-42.
- Berdegue, J.A. 2005. Pro-poor innovation systems. Background Paper, IFAD, Rome, pp.1-42.
- Bikketi, E., Ifejika Speranza, C., Bieri, S., Haller, T. and Wiesmann, U. 2016. Gendered division of labour and feminisation of responsibilities in Kenya; implications for development interventions. *Gender, Place & Culture* 23 (10):1432-1449.
- Cerrato, J. and Cifre, E. 2018. Gender Inequality in Household Chores and Work-Family Conflict. *Frontiers in Psychology* 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01330>
- Chant, S. 2008. The Feminisation of Poverty’ and the ‘Feminisation’ of Anti-Poverty Programmes: Room for Revision? *The Journal of Development Studies* 44 (2):165–197
- Chayal, K., Dhaka B., Poonia M., Tyagi, S. and Verma, S. 2013. Involvement of farm women in decision-Making in agriculture”. *Studies on Home and Community Science* 7 (1):35-37.
- Damisa, M. and Yohanna M. 2007. Role of rural women in farm management decision making analysis: Ordered Probit Analysis. *World Journal of Agricultural Sciences* 3 (4):543-546.
- Diirro, G.M., Seymour, G., Kassie, M., Muricho, G., and Muriithi, B.W. 2018. Women’s empowerment in agriculture and agricultural productivity: Evidence from rural maize farmer households in western Kenya. *PLoS one* 13 (5):e0197995.

- Drucza, K. and Peveri, V. 2018. Literature on gendered agriculture in Pakistan: Neglect of women's contributions. *Women's Studies International Forum* 69:180-189.
- Dunne, C., Sietto, C. and Wilson, P. 2021. Investigating the economic visibility and contribution of UK women in agriculture through a systematic review of international literature. *Journal of Rural Studies* 86:330-345.
- Farnworth, C.R. and Colverson, K.E. 2015. Building a gender-transformative extension and advisory facilitation system in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security (Agri-Gender)* 1 (302-2016-4749):20-39.
- Fletschner, D. and Kenney, L., 2011. Rural women's access to financial services credit, savings and insurance. ESA Working Paper No. 11. Agricultural Development Economics Division, FAO, Rome, Italy.
- Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). 2018. Food Security Statistics. Rome, Italy: FAO, Available at: <http://www.fao.org/economic/ess/ess-fs/en/> [Accessed 12 January 2023].
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). 2011. The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011: Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e00.htm> [Accessed 12 January 2023].
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). 2012. Cooperatives: empowering women farmers, improving food security. FAO, Rome, Italy
- Franzosi, R. 1998. Narrative analysis - or why (and how) sociologists should be interested in narrative. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1):517-555.
- Geleta, E.B., Elabor-Idemudia, P., Henry, C. and Reggassa, N., 2017. The challenges of empowering women: the experience of pulse innovation project in Southern Ethiopia. *Sage Open* 7 (4):2158244017736802.
- Hall, A., Rasheed, S.R.S., Norman, C., Sivamohan, M.V.K. and Yoganand, B. 2002. "Public-private sector interaction in the Indian agricultural research system: an innovation systems perspective on institutional reform. pp. 155-176. In: *Agricultural research policy in an era of privatization*. Wallingford UK: CABI Publishing.
- Hussein, K. and Suttie, D., 2016. IFAD Research Series 5-Rural-urban linkages and food systems in sub-Saharan Africa: The rural dimension. IFAD Research series.
- IFAD. 2016. Rural development report. Gender equality and women's empowerment. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/documents/30600024/9cc7a558-a038-4630-a5fc-bdf00c881a33> [Accessed 15 January 2023].
- Ingutia, R. and Sumelius, J. 2022. Do farmer groups improve the situation of women in agriculture in rural Kenya? *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* 25 (1):135-156.
- Khatri-Chhetri, A., Regmi, P.P., Chanana, N. and Aggarwal, P.K. 2020. Potential of climate-smart agriculture in reducing women farmers' drudgery in high climatic risk areas. *Climatic Change* 158 (1):29-42.
- Lecouetre, E. 2017. The impact of agricultural co-operatives on women's empowerment: evidence from Uganda. *Journal of Co-operative Organization and Management* 5 (1):14-27.
- Manfre, C., Rubin, D., Allen, A., Summerfield, G., Colverson, K. and Akeredolu, M. 2013. Reducing the gender gap in agricultural extension and advisory services: How to find the best fit for men and women farmers. *Meas Brief*, 2, pp.1-10.
- Martínez, M.C. and Paterna, C. 2009. Gender perspective applied to work-family conciliation. *Géneroy Conciliación de la Vida Familiar Laboral*, pp.17-44.

- Matthew, O., Osabohien, R., Lakhani, K.H., Aderounmu, B., Osadolor, N.E., Adediran, O. and Igharo, A.E. 2022. Women engagement in agriculture and human capital development in developing countries: An African sub-regional analysis. *Plos one* 17 (12):e0277519.
- Mekgwe, P. 2008. Theorizing African feminism (s). *African Feminisms* 11.
- Mikalitsa, S.M. 2010. Gender specific constraints affecting technology use and household food security in Western Province of Kenya. *African Journal of Food Agriculture Nutrition and Development* 10 (4):2324-2343
- Miller, B. A., 2001. Empowering women to achieve food security: rights to livestock. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington. DC, USA.
- Mojo, D., Fischer, C., and Degefa, T., 2017. The determinants and economic impacts of membership in coffee farmer cooperatives: recent evidence from rural Ethiopia. *Journal of Rural studies* 50:84-94.
- Mwaura, F., 2014. Effect of farmer group membership on agricultural technology adoption and crop productivity in Uganda. *African Crop Science Journal* 22 (s4):917-927.
- Nkuranga, T. and Wilcox, K., 2013. Cooperative performance index. Field results and analysis. enabling market integration through rural group empowerment. (EMERGE) USAID, Washington, DC, USA.
- Obayelu, A.E., Ogbe, A.O. and Edewor, S.E. 2020. Gender gaps and female labour participation in agriculture in Nigeria. *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies* 11 (2):285-300.
- Orido, C., 2017. Challenges faced by female chefs in the Kenyan hospitality industry: A study through an African oral tradition of storytelling. Thesis, Auckland University of Technology. Retrieved at: <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/10626>. [Accessed 20 January 2023].
- Peralta, A. 2022. The role of men and women in agriculture and agricultural decisions in Vanuatu. *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 9 (1):9-80.
- Peralta, A. 2022. The role of men and women in agriculture and agricultural decisions in Vanuatu. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 9 (1):59-80.
- Poulton, C., Dorward, A. and Kydd, J. 2010. The future of small farms: New directions for services, institutions, and intermediation. *World development* 38 (10):1413-1428.
- Sachs, C. and Alston, M. 2010. Global shifts, sedimentations, and imaginaries: an introduction to the special issue on women and agriculture. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35 (2):277-287.
- Slavchevska, V., Kaaria, S. and Taivalmaa, S.L. 2019. The Feminization of Agriculture. *The Oxford Handbook of Food, Water and Society*, 268.
- Spielman, D.J., Kelemwork, D. and Alemu, D. 2012. Seed, fertilizer, and agricultural extension in Ethiopia. Food and agriculture in Ethiopia: *Progress and Policy Challenges* 74:84-122.
- Spielman, D.J. 2005. Innovation systems perspectives on developing-country agriculture: A critical review. International Food Policy Research Institute: Washington, DC
- Tracy, S.J. 2013. Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Vemireddy, V. and Choudhary, A. 2021. A systematic review of labor-saving technologies: Implications for women in agriculture. *Global Food Security* 29:100541.

- Williams, J. and Springs, S. 2022. Food for all: an interview with Sam Springs of Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture. *North Carolina Medical Journal* 83 (2):117-118.
- World Bank. 2016. World development indicators. Washington, DC, World Bank.
- Yokying, P. and Lambrecht, I. 2020. Landownership and the gender gap in agriculture: Insights from northern Ghana. *Land Use Policy* 99:105012.