
GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES IN KIAMBU COUNTY, KENYA

Francis Luyayi Ajega¹, Wycliff Oboka² and Charles Wambu³

¹²³Department of Community Development and Environmental Management, School of Cooperatives and Community Development, The Cooperative University of Kenya

Correspondence: ajega.francis@student.cuk.ac.ke

Manuscript received September 27, 2024;

Revised October 6, 2024;

Accepted October 13, 2024;

Published November 5, 2024.

ABSTRACT

While agricultural cooperatives are noted to hold a unique potential to foster gender equality in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, gender disparities have persisted agricultural cooperatives in different value chains. This study thus analyses gender inclusivity in agricultural cooperatives in Kiambu County, guided by Erikson's Social-Ecological Model and Feminist Political Ecology. The study adopted a mixed-methods research design. The target population for the study included a total of 18,963 members of dairy and coffee agricultural cooperatives in Kiambu County. The study sampled 303 respondents using simple random sampling procedure while purposive sampling was used to select Key informants. Data was gathered using questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions and key informant interviews. STATA software was used to analyze quantitative data while NVivo software was used to analyze qualitative data. Findings reveal there is under representation of women in cooperative management boards. Cultural norms were the main barrier to women's ascendancy into leadership roles. The study concluded that gender-neutral opportunities for involvement exist within agricultural cooperatives, showcasing a parallel trend across the sector. The study recommends that agricultural cooperatives in Kiambu County adopt specific policies to increase women's representation in leadership roles by setting gender quotas and providing leadership training for women members.

Key Words: *Gender, Inclusivity and Agricultural Cooperatives*

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural cooperatives have been noted to have potential to empower smallholder farmers and address gender disparities, particularly the barriers women face in accessing resources and decision-making roles (Ahmed et al., 2021). Effective cooperatives can enhance members' social and economic standing, fostering inclusive practices that bolster resilience and employment (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2020). However, gender disparities in agriculture have persisted, often limiting productivity and economic growth, as women frequently have less access to resources like land and inputs (Kaaria et al., 2016). The United Nations Women

(2021) estimates that closing gender gaps in agriculture could boost productivity by 2.5–4% in developing countries.

Despite their vital contributions to agriculture, women participation in cooperatives is noted to be hampered by limited access to resources and decision-making roles, which mirror broader gender inequalities (Mwaura & Otieno, 2019). These barriers, coupled with gender norms and structural issues like land ownership laws further marginalize women in rural economies (Karuku et al., 2017; Kamau & Ndung'u, 2018).

In Kenya, while women account for over 60% of the rural population and produce 80% of food resources (Kabeer, 2019), their participation in agricultural cooperatives is noted to be lower than that of men. Thus, this study, employing Social Ecological Model (SEM) and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), analyzed gender inclusivity in agricultural cooperatives, analyzing how the interconnected individual, interpersonal, community, and structural factors that shape gender equity. This study sought to evaluate the level of gender inclusivity in key cooperative activities; hindrances to women inclusion in leadership and cooperatives activities; and member perception of efforts by co-operatives to achieve inclusivity.

METHODOLOGY

The choice of Kiambu County as the study area is grounded in its agricultural significance, making it ideal for investigating gender inclusivity in cooperatives. Known for its fertile soils, favorable climate, and proximity to Nairobi, Kiambu provides access to major markets and supports diverse farming activities, including coffee, dairy, and horticulture (Kiambu County Government, 2018). This diversity offers a unique opportunity to explore different agricultural landscapes and cooperative dynamics. Additionally, the county's strategic importance in Kenya's agricultural sector, combined with its relevance in post-COVID-19 recovery efforts, makes it a representative region for examining gender disparities in cooperative membership and leadership. Insights gained from Kiambu can inform broader policies on gender inclusivity in Kenya's agricultural sector.

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional design incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods was employed. Stratified random sampling was used to select 303 respondents from a target population of 18,935 registered members of dairy and coffee cooperatives. Structured questionnaires were administered to these respondents to collect quantitative data, while qualitative insights were gathered through three focus group discussions (FGDs) with men-only, women-only, and mixed groups, each consisting of 12

participants. Additionally, 11 key informants, including cooperative managers and CEOs, were interviewed to validate the findings and provide expert perspectives. Pre-testing of the instruments with 35 respondents from similar cooperatives (excluded from the main study) resulted in a reliability score of 0.813, confirming the tools' consistency and validity. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, and qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents revealed key insights into agricultural cooperative membership dynamics. Women comprised 43.6% of dairy cooperative members, highlighting their significant presence in this sector, while men dominated coffee cooperatives, making up 64.5% of the members. This finding underscores the crucial role that women play in agricultural production, particularly in dairy cooperatives, which challenges previous findings by Asongu and Odhiambo (2020), who noted women's lower representation in cooperatives due to barriers like limited access to land and agricultural resources. In this study, the active participation of women in dairy cooperatives suggests a shift in these dynamics, demonstrating that their increasing involvement in production correlates with higher cooperative membership.

The age distribution of respondents further reflected cooperative engagement trends. Most respondents were between the ages of 25 and 54, indicating that younger and middle-aged individuals are actively involved in agricultural activities as their primary livelihood. Older individuals tended to withdraw from cooperative participation, a trend that aligns with observations from FAO (2020), where older farmers often reduce their engagement in agricultural cooperatives due to factors such as physical limitations or shifts in priorities. This pattern also highlights the importance of targeting younger and middle-aged members in cooperative initiatives to ensure sustained agricultural participation and cooperative growth.

Marital status did not significantly influence women's participation in cooperatives, which contrasts with findings from Doss (2018) who suggested that married women are more likely to join cooperatives. Instead, in this study, individual engagement in farming was the key factor driving cooperative membership for both men and women. This indicates that while household

responsibilities may still play a role, women's membership in cooperatives is primarily influenced by their direct involvement in agricultural activities.

Regarding income, the study revealed that farming was the primary source of livelihood for 47% of dairy cooperative members and 27% of coffee cooperative members. This finding is consistent with Mahamud and Aligula's (2019) study, which emphasized the significance of agriculture in rural livelihoods. However, disparities in income were evident, with men typically being the primary income earners in most households. Men were also more prevalent in higher income brackets, with 18% of men and only 7% of women earning between Ksh. 20,000 and Ksh. 29,999. Similarly, in the Ksh. 30,000 to Ksh. 39,999 range, 22% of men fell within this bracket compared to just 12% of women. These disparities reflect persistent gender inequalities in income distribution, even within the cooperative framework, where men dominate leadership roles while women tend to be involved in less influential but essential activities. These findings are consistent with World Bank (2019) studies that document gender income gaps in rural economies, where men typically earn more due to greater access to resources, higher-paid roles in agriculture, and leadership positions.

Gender representation in cooperative organs

In determining this, the respondents were asked to indicate the gender representation in cooperative leadership organs. Results are presented in table 1;

Table 1: Gender representation in cooperative organs

Cooperative Organs	Men (n)	Percent (%)	Women (n)	Percent (%)	Men equal Women (n)	Percent (%)	Don't know (n)	Percent (%)
Management board	147	49%	96	32%	51	17%	6	2%
Supervisory committee	126	42%	105	35%	63	21%	6	2%
Employees / staff	75	25%	189	63%	27	9%	9	3%
Cooperative delegates	102	34%	69	23%	99	33%	30	10%
Executive committee	135	45%	81	27%	72	24%	12	4%
General membership	120	40%	108	36%	60	20%	12	4%

The table 1 above illustrates how members of cooperatives perceive gender distribution patterns within dairy and coffee. Findings indicate, men predominantly held positions on the management board, with 49% of respondents indicating this trend. Women were reported as forming the majority of cooperative employees by 63% of respondents. The supervisory committee showed a more balanced representation, with 42% indicating men and 35% indicating women.

Responding to the question on which gender forms the majority of membership in the cooperatives, one of the KII respondent said:

According to my current cooperative registers, on average men formed a large percentage of members 59% while women formed the remaining 41% in the coffee value chain cooperatives while women (51%) forms the majority in the dairy value chain cooperatives compared to men (49%).

Table 2 summarizes the gender composition in the cooperatives' decision-making organs based on IDIs with managers, showing men dominating with 57% and women representing 43%. The organs include the Management Board, Supervisory Committee, Employees/Staff, Cooperative Delegates, and Executive Committee.

Table 2: Gender representation in the cooperatives' organs

Cooperative's name	Total members in the cooperative organs	Men	Percent (%)	Women	Percent (%)
Ndarugu Dairy Cooperative Society Limited	30	16	53	14	47
Muguga Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society Limited	34	15	44	19	56
Kabete Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society	42	23	55	19	45
Lari Dairy Farmers Co-Operative Society Limited	47	24	51	23	49
Multi Farm Dairy	28	12	43	16	57
Total gender representation in Dairy cooperatives	181	90	49	91	51
3 G's Coffee Growers Co-Operative Society Limited	25	17	68	8	32
Buchana Coffee Growers Cooperative Society Limited	30	19	63	11	37
New Gatukuyu Coffee Farmers' Cooperative Society	34	21	62	13	38
Kimaratia Coffee Farmers' Cooperative Society	24	14	58	10	42
Gititu Coffee Growers Cooperative Society Limited	38	25	66	13	34
Gitwe Coffee Farmers Society	40	26	65	14	35
Total gender representation in Coffee cooperatives	191	122	64	69	36
Total	372	212	57	160	43

Another IDI respondent who was a manager from Ndarugu Dairy Cooperative Society Limited noted:

In the last five years, we have seen a significant increase in women joining our cooperative, following efforts to encourage their participation through initiatives like forming chamas and promoting cooperative membership for economic empowerment. Before this campaign, fewer than 20 women were registered, but now the number has grown to over 70, without impacting men's involvement in the cooperative.

A similar finding from the key informants was recorded where, the a KII who was cooperative officer from Gatundu North sub-county also reported:

In my area, both women and men are equally members of the agricultural cooperatives. We have held several forums with the community members that seek to empower both men and women to eradicate poverty and it seems the initiative has born fruits.

According to the analysis on gender representation in the cooperatives' organs, while the participation of women in staff roles is encouraging, their underrepresentation in decision-making positions highlights a gap in gender inclusivity at higher levels of authority. This mirrors findings from other studies in similar contexts, such as those reported by Njenga et al. (2020), which suggest that patriarchal norms continue to limit women's access to leadership roles in agricultural cooperatives. This imbalance could hinder the overall empowerment of women in agricultural sectors where decision-making power is critical.

Gender participation in cooperative activities

The study aimed to identify whether men or women constituted the majority in attendance at cooperative activities, with the findings displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Gender representation cooperative activities

Cooperative Activities	Men (n)	Percent (%)	Women (n)	Percent (%)	Don't know (n)	Percent (%)
Annual general meetings	95	32%	65	22%	5	2%
Member Education Day	85	26%	73	25%	5	2%
Training to members	92	29%	67	22%	5	2%
Production of produce	95	32%	66	22%	5	2%
Delivery of farm produce	94	32%	68	23%	5	2%
Operating the account for receiving proceeds of sale	95	32%	69	23%	5	2%

Men were more involved in annual general meetings and operating the account for receiving proceeds of sale, with 95 men (32%) participating in each activity compared to 65 women (22%) and 69 women (23%), respectively. Additionally, men have a notable presence in the production of produce, with 95 men (32%) involved compared to 66 women (22%).

Data from KIIs and IDIs confirmed that while men have a slightly higher membership in cooperatives, women are more active in tasks like produce delivery and training, often representing their husbands, reflecting Kiambu County's patriarchal social structure.

A male respondent from the men only FGDs reported:

In our cooperative activities, we don't face any restrictions on freedom of choice. However, around 60% of women, particularly those in male-headed households, do not have complete freedom of involvement. This is because many women here still face challenges in making decisions

independently and must often seek permission from their husbands to participate in any agricultural cooperative activity.

However, findings from both the mixed FGD and the women-only FGD contradicted the previous statements. These FGDs established that women were encouraged and given opportunities to participate in leadership positions within their agricultural cooperatives of choice. One female participant in the mixed FGD noted,

Most of the time, the county officers meet with us during meetings and encourage us to participate in various cooperative activities, including choosing leaders. We try to engage, but you know, women have a lot of work.

This statement was echoed by a female IDI who stated:

Some representation of female leadership members in all cooperatives demonstrate a growing commitment to women's empowerment because 'few female leaders are treated equally like their male leadership members.

In addition, the respondents were asked whether they were offered equal rights to attend trainings and the results showed that majority of the respondents agreed and this was confirmed by the second KII who reported;

When we organise trainings in the sub-county, women form most of the attendees while only few men show as the latter claim to be busy fending for their families.

Data from the IDIs indicated that 60% of cooperative managers were women. Also from the mixed FGD it was commented that men tend to attend annual general meetings primarily due to the politics surrounding the election of new leaders.

These findings are supported by studies like Ochieng et al. (2019), which discuss how patriarchal norms often limit women's autonomy in agricultural cooperatives, affecting their ability to engage fully in productive and leadership activities. However, the contradiction raised by the female-only FGD, where women felt encouraged to participate, suggests that efforts are being made to reduce these barriers, though such initiatives may be limited in their reach or impact.

Hindrance of women inclusion in leadership and cooperatives activities

The respondents were asked to state factors that prevent women from participating fully or taking up leadership positions in cooperative activities and their responses were presented on Table 4 below;

Table 4: Hindrance of women inclusion in leadership and cooperatives activities

Hindrance	Men (n)	Percent (%)	Women (n)	Percent (%)
Cultural norms and values restrictions	112	78%	137	88%
Stereotyping of leadership positions	45	31%	101	65%
Low levels of education	68	47%	90	57%
Gender load burden	40	28%	78	50%
Lack of courage to take up leadership	122	85%	66	42%
Inability to meet criteria for leadership	118	82%	80	51%
Other factors	91	63%	140	90%

The study identified cultural norms and values as major barriers to women's participation in leadership and cooperative activities, recognized by 78% of men and 88% of women. Additional hindrances were noted in qualitative data from an IDI at Kabete Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society, which echoed these findings:

During training activities, many women members often attend but leave early to prepare lunch for their children or pick them up from school. When schools are closed, they must bring their young ones or stay home to care for them, which presents a significant challenge.

This finding is consistent with a study by Kabira (2018), which emphasized the persistence of socio-cultural barriers such as cultural norms which hindered women's advancement in African agricultural settings. However, Kamau and Ndung'u (2018) noted that there was a growing support for women's leadership within cooperatives in Kenya, as many communities advocated for equitable sharing of household responsibilities and rotational leadership positions as strategies to enhance women's participation. This shift signaled a positive trend in women's empowerment and recognition within the agricultural sector.

Member Perception of Efforts by Co-operatives to Achieve Inclusivity

The respondents were asked to present their opinions regarding the efforts made by their cooperatives to achieve inclusivity by indicating their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements about these efforts arranged on a Likert scale of 5 items that is: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree; and 6 = not applicable. The responses were illustrated on Table 5 below.

Table 5: Member Perception of Efforts by Co-operatives to Achieve Inclusivity

Member Perception of Efforts by Co-operatives to Achieve Inclusivity	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
The cooperative has articulated its commitment to gender inclusiveness to staff, members and community (via handbooks, policies, newsletters, etc.)	0.03%	0.07%	0.02%	0.08%	1.01%	1.29%	28.5%	20.1%	20.7%	20.1%	0.01%	0.09%

The cooperative has designated one or more individuals who are responsible for questions or concerns about gender inclusiveness	0%	11.2%	0.1%	0.12%	0.2%	0.2%	30.4%	20.4%	10.1%	30.6%	0.2%	0.2%
The cooperative has organized and/or participated in staff training explicitly focused on gender expression and gender identity, and gender inclusive practices.	0%	0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%	0.24%	34.2%	6.8%	38.1%	22.3%	1.1%	4.8%
The Cooperative has conducted members training explicitly focused on gender expression and gender identity.	0.1%	0.34%	0.1%	4.6%	0.1%	2.5%	18.4%	20.4%	26.3%	34.2%	0%	0%
Our cooperative has and makes available resources for members based on gender diversity.	0.03%	0.07%	0.05%	0.05%	0.06%	0.004%	25.8%	24.1%	21.5%	29.4%	0.09%	0.01%

Our cooperative does not conduct activities that are segregated by gender	0.1 %	0.23 %	0.21 %	0.41 %	0.41 %	1.7 %	19.5 %	35.6 %	20.6 %	30.5 %	0.1 %	0.16 %
Members have raised questions and engaged in discussions about gender diversity in my meetings	0.5 %	0.7 %	0.2 %	11.3 %	0.3 %	5.3 %	26.1 %	24.2 %	17.3 %	30.1 %	2.0 %	0%

Based on the data presented in the table for indicators of inclusion in cooperatives, one outstanding statistic is the high percentage of women (11.3%) who brought up questions and were involved in discussions about gender diversity in meetings (Statement 4, Women). This percentage significantly surpasses the corresponding percentage for men (0.5%) in the same category, highlighting a notable disparity in active engagement in discussions about gender diversity within cooperative. These findings are in line with studies that highlight women's active engagement in gender equality initiatives when given the opportunity (Maina, 2017). However, the limited involvement of men in these discussions is concerning, as their participation is essential for achieving broader cultural and structural changes within cooperatives.

Measures to promote greater participation of women in leadership and cooperatives activities

Lastly, under the first study objective, the researcher also engaged the respondents in suggesting what measures should be taken to enhance gender inclusivity in agricultural cooperatives and results were indicated in table 6 below.

Table 4: Measures to promote greater participation of women in leadership and cooperatives activities

Measure	Men (N)	Percent (%)	Women (N)	Percent (%)
Implementing a one-third rule	44	7.30%	40	6.70%
Affirmative action (Setting aside certain positions)	52	8.70%	32	5.30%
Education and training on electoral process and rights	32	5.30%	32	5.30%
Equitable sharing of household gender roles	366	61%	432	72%
Awareness creation on the need for gender equity/equality	42	7%	42	7%
Creating an enabling environment for women in elections	18	3%	6	1%
Offering rotational leadership options for either gender	132	22%	54	9%
Policy and by-laws modification to accommodate women	48	8%	18	3%

The table 6 illustrates disparities between men and women in their participation across various measures aimed at promoting gender equity within cooperative settings. Men contributed substantially to implementing a one-third rule (44 responses, 7.30%) and offering rotational leadership options (132 responses, 22%), whereas women's involvement was notably lower in these areas (40 responses, 6.70% and 54 responses, 9%, respectively). Conversely, women were more actively engaged in equitable sharing of household gender roles, representing 432 responses (72%) compared to men's 366 responses (61%). However, there remains a stark contrast in contributions to creating an enabling environment for women in elections, with men providing 18 responses (3%) versus women's 6 responses (1%). These findings underscore the need for targeted efforts to address gender disparities and enhance women's representation and influence in cooperative leadership roles.

Findings from both the focus group discussions (FGDs) shed crucial light on the shared priorities within the dairy and coffee value chains. One male respondent from the mixed FGD group reported:

In our recent general meeting, we agreed that promoting women's leadership in our cooperative requires equal sharing of household responsibilities. With more support at home, women can devote more time and energy to their leadership roles.

This sentiment was echoed by everyone in the group, highlighting a common understanding and commitment to fostering gender equity and empowering women in Kiambu County. Proposals such as increasing women's leadership roles and providing targeted training align with recommendations from other gender-focused studies (Muriithi & Wachira, 2021). However, for these measures to be effective, they must be accompanied by concerted efforts to challenge the deep-rooted cultural norms that continue to restrict women's participation.

CONCLUSIONS

The research established that both men and women within agricultural cooperatives demonstrated the capacity to engage in various activities and assume leadership or decision-making roles. This indicates gender-differentiated participation, where individuals, regardless of gender, dominate different activities within their cooperatives. The study concluded that gender-neutral opportunities for involvement exist within agricultural cooperatives, showcasing a parallel trend across the sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that agricultural cooperatives in Kiambu County adopt specific policies to increase women's representation in leadership roles by setting gender quotas and providing leadership training for women members. This approach is essential during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that women's unique concerns are addressed. Additionally, cooperatives should regularly collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data to identify gaps and take targeted actions to close them. Prioritizing gender inclusivity in decision-making will create a more balanced and effective cooperative structure.

Acknowledgements

This project received funding through the Women's health and economic empowerment for a COVID-19 Recovery that is Inclusive, Sustainable and Equitable (Women RISE), an initiative of Canada's International Development Research Centre, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Grant No. 110022). The funders were not involved in the study design, data collection, analysis, publication decision, or manuscript preparation. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not reflect those of the funders.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, R., Rahman, M. M., Khanam, R., & Pervin, R. (2021). Women's empowerment in agricultural cooperatives: The role of gender-responsive policies and programs. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(7), 98-114.
- Asongu, S. A., & Odhiambo, N. M. (2020). How enhancing gender inclusion affects inequality: Thresholds of complementary policies for sustainable development. *Sustainable Development*, 28(1), 132-142.
- Kaaria, S., Osorio, M., Wagner, S., & Gallina, A. (2016). Rural women's participation in producer organizations: An analysis of the barriers that women face and strategies to foster equitable and effective participation. *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security (Agri-Gender)*, 1(302-2016-4754), 148-167.
- Kabeer, N. (2019). Gender and women's empowerment: What is it and why does it matter? Working Paper 548. *Institute of Development Studies*.
- Kamau, M., & Ndung'u, R. (2018). Women in agricultural cooperatives: Constraints and opportunities in leadership positions. *International Journal of Gender Studies in Developing Societies*, 2(1), 68-84.
- Karuku, G. N., Kimenju, J. W., & Verplancke, H. (2017). Farmers' perspectives on factors limiting tomato production and yields in Kabete, Kiambu County, Kenya. *East African Agricultural and Forestry Journal*, 82(1), 70-89.

- Mujawamariya, G., Ferrer, S. R. D., & Goeb, J. L. (2018). Gender, agricultural production, and the Ebola virus disease in Liberia. *World Development*, 105, 59-70.
- Mwaura, P., & Otieno, A. (2019). Gender roles in agricultural cooperatives in Kenya: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(4), 455-469.
- Njoroge, P., & Njenga, M. (2021). Gender inequalities in agricultural cooperatives: A case study of Kiambu County, Kenya. *Gender & Behaviour*, 19(1), 16594-16607.
- UN Women. (2021). COVID-19 and gender equality: Advancing the SDGs in crisis response and recovery. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/04/covid-19-and-gender-equality-advancing-the-sd>
- UNESCO. (2017). Building bridges for gender equality in education: Recommendations from a global consultation. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2021). Building forward better: Sustainable agriculture and food systems post-COVID-19. New York: UNDP.
- International Co-operative Alliance. (2016). The Guidance Notes on Cooperative Principles. Retrieved from <https://ica.coop/en/media/library/the-guidance-notes-on-the-co-operativeprinciples>.