

GENDER-RELATED BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES IN KAJIADO COUNTY

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Manuscript received October 1, 2024;

Revised October 9, 2024;

Accepted October 15, 2024;

Published November 25, 2024.

ABSTRACT

Despite their pivotal role in agricultural productivity, women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in different parts of the world remains low. This study analyzed gender-based barriers to women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Kajiado County, Kenya. The study was anchored on Social Capital theory and intersectionality theory. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The target population for the study included women affiliated to agricultural cooperatives, cooperative Chief Executive Officers, and Chairpersons in Cooperative Management Boards and county cooperative officers. The study included 285 respondents selected using simple random sampling. Data was collected using questionnaires, Focus Group Discussion guide, and Key Informant Interview guide. The findings revealed that women constituted the majority of cooperative members, their representation in leadership positions in the cooperatives remained disproportionately low. The study found economic constraints, socio-cultural barriers, and the lack of gender-supportive by-laws to curtail women's engagement and leadership opportunities in the cooperatives. The study concluded that various gender-related barriers affected women's participation in agricultural cooperatives. The study recommends enactment of gender-supportive by-laws, and continuous gender transformative programmes for cooperative members to eliminate gender-related barriers to women in cooperative leadership and promote women's involvement in cooperative leadership and decision-making.

Key Words: *Gender-based barriers, Women participation, agricultural cooperatives*

I. Introduction

Globally, agriculture remains a critical sector for economic development, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where it provides livelihoods for billions of people. Despite their substantial contribution to agricultural production, women face disproportionate barriers compared to men in accessing agricultural cooperatives. These barriers, which include limited access to land,

credit, and agricultural extension services, significantly hinder their agricultural productivity (FAO, 2021). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), if women had equal access to productive resources, global agricultural output could increase by up to 4%, positively affecting food security and poverty reduction. However, deeply entrenched gender inequalities continue to limit women's full engagement in cooperative structures, restricting their potential contributions to economic development (FAO, 2021).

Agriculture is a vital sector for economic development across Africa, particularly in regions like West, East, and Southern Africa, where it supports millions of livelihoods. Women contribute 60-80% of the labor in agricultural production, yet they remain underrepresented in decision-making roles within agricultural cooperatives, which are crucial for improving market access for small-scale farmers. This underrepresentation is reinforced by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and customary laws that limit women's access to essential resources like land, credit, and agricultural services (World Bank, 2020; African Development Bank, 2019). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where women make up over half of the agricultural workforce, socio-cultural barriers, economic constraints, and limited political participation further entrench these disparities, contributing to the feminization of poverty and restricting women's potential to drive economic growth. Despite global efforts, such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration, which aimed to advance gender equity, significant obstacles remain, impeding women's full participation in agriculture and their ability to benefit from the sector's economic opportunities (Njobe & Kaaria, 2015; Padavic et al., 2020). Addressing these barriers is crucial for promoting gender-inclusive agricultural development across the continent.

In Kenya, agriculture is the backbone of the economy, employing over 70% of the rural population, with women constituting nearly half of the agricultural workforce (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Despite their essential role, women remain largely excluded from formal agricultural cooperatives, particularly in regions like Kajiado County, where pastoralism and livestock farming dominate. The cultural norms of the Maasai community, which traditionally assign women to household management and caregiving roles, present significant barriers to their participation in cooperatives (UNDP, 2020). These challenges, such as lack of access to land ownership, financial resources, and education, exacerbate women's exclusion from economic activities in agricultural cooperatives.

Agricultural cooperatives, which are grounded in principles of self-help, equality, and democratic processes, provide a framework for fostering inclusive economic growth (Wanyama, 2016). Cooperatives contribute significantly to Kenya's socio-economic development, accounting for 35% of the agriculture sector, 32% of insurance, 19% of wholesale and retail trade, and smaller percentages in other sectors (World Cooperative Monitor, 2018). Kenya ranks seventh globally in cooperative development, with over 23,344 registered cooperatives by 2017 contributing to the economy, enhancing rural livelihoods, and fostering community development (Cooperative Policy, 2019). Studies have demonstrated that increased participation of women in agricultural cooperatives positively impacts cooperative performance, governance, and socio-economic outcomes (Asamu et al., 2020; Coleman & Mwangi, 2013).

This study therefore sought to analyze gender-related barriers to women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Kajiado County. The study is grounded in Intersectionality Theory, which highlights how various social identities such as gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to shape individuals' experiences of oppression or privilege (Hancock, 2019). This theory is particularly useful in examining how gender inequalities in agricultural cooperatives are influenced by broader socio-cultural and economic factors.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1 Context of the Study

The study was conducted in Kajiado County, a diverse region in Kenya that combines rural and urban dynamics, as well as the traditional pastoralist lifestyle of the Maasai community. The county, largely arid and semi-arid, borders Nairobi to the north, which has led to some urbanization and economic diversification in recent years (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Despite this urban influence, agriculture, especially livestock farming, remains the backbone of the local economy (Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries, and Cooperatives, 2022).

Additionally, the county's cosmopolitan nature has emerged over recent years, driven by increasing migration and economic opportunities in agriculture, trade, and services. Individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds have settled in Kajiado, creating a unique socio-economic fabric where modern practices meet traditional norms. This blend of influences presents both challenges and opportunities for addressing gender disparities in agricultural cooperatives, especially with regard to women's participation in decision-making processes (Waweru & Suda, 2020). Given this complex socio-cultural and economic backdrop, Kajiado County was selected as the study area to investigate the barriers limiting women's participation in agricultural cooperatives. The region's mix of traditional pastoralism and emerging urbanization provides a dynamic environment for exploring both the persistence of gender-based inequalities and the potential for socio-economic transformations.

2.2 Study Methods

The research adopted a cross-sectional survey design, enabling the assessment of women's participation in agricultural cooperatives, alongside the barriers and effectiveness of interventions. This design was ideal for capturing data at a single point in time, providing insights into current conditions affecting women's involvement in cooperatives. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized to collect data, to gain a holistic understanding of barriers to women participation in cooperatives. The target population included women in cooperatives, as well as cooperative Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Chairpersons of Cooperative Management Boards, and County Cooperative Officers to offer a governance perspective. A multi-stage sampling design was applied, utilizing random and purposive sampling at different stages to ensure both representativeness and targeted insights from key stakeholders. The Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula applied was as shown below to determine the study sample size;

$$S = \frac{X^2 NP (1-P)}{D^2 (N-1) + X^2 P (1-P)}$$

Where (S) = required sample size, (N) = given population size, (P) = population proportion assumed to be 0.5 for maximum possible sample size, (D) = degree of occurrence with the highest occurrence, and (X^2) = table value of Chi-square for one degree of freedom. Inserting the required information into the formula where $N=1106$, $P=0.5$, $D=0.05$ and $X^2 = 3.841^2$ gives:

$$S = \frac{3.841^2 \times 1106 \times 0.5(1-0.5)}{0.05^2(1106-1) + 3.841^2 \times 0.5(1-0.5)}$$

=285 respondents obtained from households with women as registered members of the five agricultural cooperatives in Kajiado County.

The study employed a variety of data collection instruments tailored to different respondents. A total of 285 questionnaires were administered to women members of dairy cooperatives to gather quantitative data. Qualitative data was collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with separate groups of women, men, and mixed-gender groups to explore qualitative insights on gender-related barriers. In-depth interviews (IDIs) with CEOs and Chairpersons of Cooperative Management Boards and key informant interviews (KIIs) with County Cooperative Officers for were used to gain expert perspectives on barriers to women's participation. Quantitative data was descriptively analyzed using STATA software, while qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo software, through thematic analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

The study collected demographic data, including age, marital status, education level, principal income earner, and monthly household income. Regarding age, a significant proportion of respondents were under 35 years (60.2%). This trend suggests that younger individuals are more likely to engage in cooperative activities, aligning with Huyer's (2016) argument that younger individuals are generally more adaptable to new agricultural practices. However, Kinyua (2018) critiques this, suggesting that the younger demographic may also face higher barriers to entry due to limited access to resources.

Regarding marital status, 34.4% of dairy cooperative members were married. Njuguna et al. (2020) emphasize that married women often face restrictions tied to household responsibilities, supporting the study's finding that family dynamics influence participation. Conversely, Odhiambo (2019) argues that the impact of marital status can be overstated, with economic factors playing a more dominant role. Concerning education, the majority (22.1% and 18.3% respectively) of respondents had completed either primary or secondary education, with only 3.2% reaching university level, indicating basic to intermediate educational backgrounds. The study's finding that most participants had only primary or secondary education, limiting engagement, is supported by Doss (2018), who links lower education levels with reduced capacity to leverage cooperative benefits. However, Wambugu (2020) critiques this, highlighting that practical skills, rather than formal education, are often more critical in agricultural settings.

Regarding the principal income earner per household, in 56.1% of households, men were the primary income earners, potentially influencing economic decisions and cooperative participation. The dominance of men as principal income earners, influencing household decision-making, is consistent with Hauberer's (2011) application of social capital theory, which emphasizes the role of networks in shaping economic dynamics. Lastly, regarding monthly household income, most households (40.3%) reported a monthly income between Ksh. 25,001 and Ksh. 50,000, with only 6.2% earning Ksh. 75,000 or more, highlighting economic constraints that may affect participation in cooperative activities. Mutua and Tschirley (2019) further agree, noting that economic stability is crucial for cooperative participation, although Karanja (2016) argues that socio-cultural norms, rather than purely economic factors, are the main hindrances.

3.2 Gender-related barriers to women's participation

The study sought to assess the gender-related barriers to women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Kajiado County. The section is divided into 5 sub-themes which include; the respondents' participation in decision-making in their households, how much control the

respondents have over income that they generated from agricultural production, who made major decisions on sales, purchase and transfer of farm assets such as livestock and farm equipment, factors affected the level of participation in agricultural cooperatives activities and extent to which the provided statements applied to the respondents concerning participating in cooperatives activities.

3.2.1 Participation in decision-making in their households

The respondents were requested to specify their involvement in decision-making within their households. The highest proportion of respondents (55.2%) indicated key decisions in their households were made by their spouses. Only 23.3% of the respondents indicated decisions were jointly with their spouses. On the other hand, 15.4% of the respondents indicated they made decisions by themselves, while 7.2% indicated decisions were made by others. Most notable was a finding of 55.3% of the participants indicating that their spouses largely made decisions at the households. The finding that 55.2% of respondents indicated that their spouses made key household decisions highlights a significant gender disparity in decision-making authority within households. This aligns with traditional gender norms, where men are often viewed as primary decision-makers, particularly in financial and resource-related matters. These results were supported by findings from the qualitative analysis, which appeared to suggest that decisions were largely made by men in the households. A participant in the men only FGD reported:

In many cases where women are not involved in income-generating activities, it's often observed that decisions within the household, including expenditures in traditionally considered "women's" domains like purchasing clothes for children, are predominantly made by men.

One respondent from the mixed-gender FGD said:

In my household, my partner is a housewife, which means I take on the sole responsibility for decision-making. This includes tasks typically associated with women, such as grocery shopping and meal planning. It often feels like I am the one navigating our daily needs, deciding what to buy, planning meals for the week, and ensuring that we have everything we need to function smoothly.

The qualitative data reinforces this by demonstrating a perception among men that they must handle decisions related to income and expenditures, even in areas traditionally associated with women, such as purchasing clothing for children. Supporting studies indicate that women in many cultures frequently experience limited autonomy in decision-making, often relegated to secondary roles even in domestic matters (Mabala, 2019; Oduro et al., 2020). Furthermore, women's participation in decision-making is crucial for achieving gender equity and improving family outcomes, as their insights can enhance resource management and overall family welfare (Quisumbing, 2020).

3.2.2 Control Over Income Generated from Agricultural Production

The researcher determined the level of control respondents had over income generated from agricultural production. The highest proportion of respondents in the study (49.1%) indicated they had partial control over income from agricultural production. On the other hand, 32.2% indicated

they had full control, 19.2% indicated they had no control. The analysis revealed that nearly half of the participants, 49.4%, reported having partial control over the income generated from agricultural production. This distribution reflects the varying degrees of economic empowerment among women in agricultural cooperatives in Kajiado County. It is worth noting that 19.3% of the women who participated in the study indicated they had no control over income from the sale of agricultural produce from the household.

Interviews with participants revealed nuanced perspectives on this partial control. A participant from the mixed group articulated:

I can decide how to use the money I earn, especially when it comes to buying necessities like food for our children or small household items. However, when it comes to larger expenses or significant financial decisions, my husband tends to take charge, and his opinion usually determines how the money is ultimately spent.

Further, qualitative analysis indicated that women with full control often reported increased confidence and satisfaction in their financial decision-making. One respondent from women only group shared:

Having control over my income gives me the power to make decisions that benefit my farm, like investing in better seeds or buying fertilizers to improve production. It's empowering, and I feel a sense of pride in what I'm able to accomplish on my own without having to rely on anyone else.

In the analysis also revealed that some respondents highlighted feelings of frustration and helplessness that they had no control, with one participant from the mixed FGD stating:

I put in a lot of effort working in the fields, but when it comes to how the money is spent, my husband makes most of those decisions. There are times when I don't even know exactly how much we earn from our work.

Therefore, the findings revealed a complex landscape of control over agricultural income among women in Kajiado County. While there was a notable proportion of women with partial or full control, the significant number of women lacking any control highlights persistent barriers to economic empowerment. Research supports these findings, indicating that women's economic participation can lead to improved family welfare and investment in children's education (Duflo, 2012; Adoho et al., 2014). However, the presence of economic control by men often limits women's agency and can lead to frustration, as articulated by participants in the study.

3.3.3 Major decision-maker on sales, purchase and transfer of farm assets

Respondents were asked to indicate who made major decisions on sales, purchase and transfer of farm assets such as livestock and farm equipment. The most notable finding is that 32.4% of the respondents said it was the husband who made major decisions on sales, purchases, and transfers of farm assets such as livestock and farm equipment. The results were backed by a qualitative analysis of responses from both men and women FGD where a male participant's explanation of joint decision-making illustrated this point:

I discuss with her, expressing my concerns about the sales, purchase, and transfer of farm assets. We share ideas, but ultimately, I have the final say

on major decisions. While I value her input, I feel responsible for making sure everything runs smoothly, especially when it comes to big expenses or investments.

This jointly way to decisions making was as also highlighted in the women only FGD, with one woman noting:

I inquire about our farm products, and he responds, emphasizing the necessity for both of us to be involved because a woman cannot manage alone without a man's assistance. He believes that while I handle certain aspects, the bigger financial decisions, like investments or major purchases, need his input to make sure everything is done right.

In the mixed focus group discussion, a man described joint decision-making, saying:

I communicate with her, expressing my views on the sales, purchase, and transfer of farm assets. We often sit down together to discuss how things are going on the farm, and I make sure to include her thoughts in the conversation. It's important for me that she feels valued in these discussions, as her input helps guide our decisions.

The collaborative decision-making approach was evident in the accounts provided by women. One woman described consulting her husband about decisions concerning their farm products, emphasizing the need for joint effort and highlighting that mutual collaboration was essential for effective management. This illustrates the intertwined roles of men and women in managing agricultural activities.

Similar studies show that male dominance in decision-making roles is prevalent in many agricultural settings, perpetuating gender inequalities (Tadesse & Hanna, 2019). The emphasis on shared responsibility in decision-making is often overshadowed by traditional views that prioritize men's expertise and authority.

3.3.4 Factors affecting level of participation in agricultural cooperatives activities

Participants were asked to indicate which factors affected the level of their participation in activities of their agricultural cooperatives.

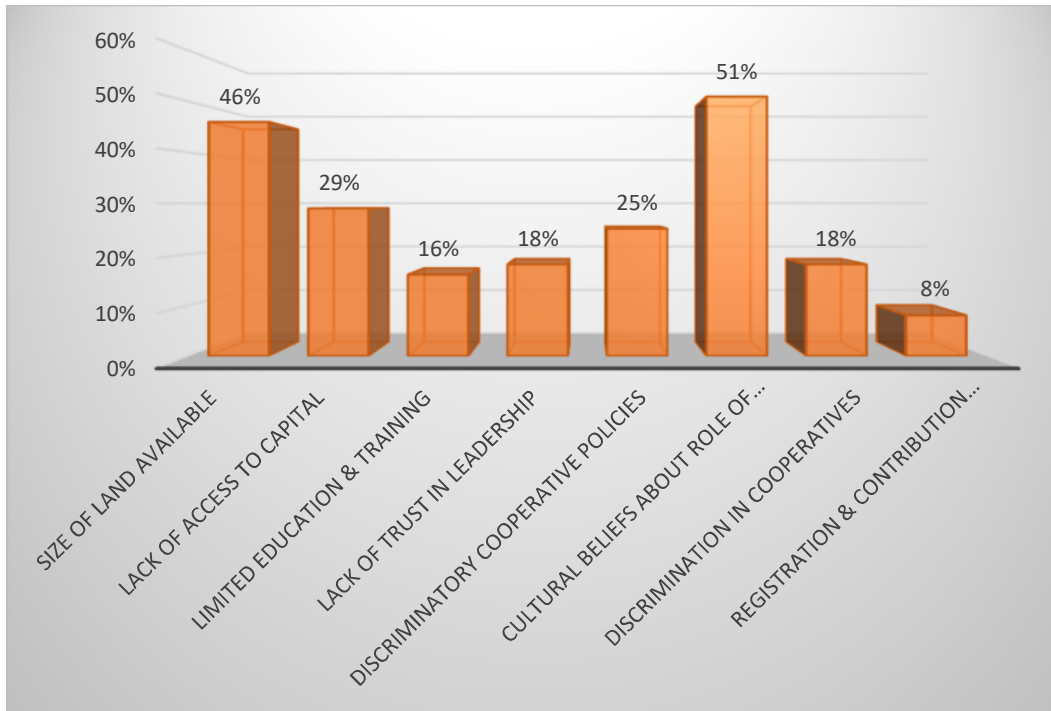


Figure 1: Factors Affecting Participation in Agricultural Cooperative Activities

The analysis revealed that 51% of respondents identified cultural beliefs about the role of women as the most significant barrier to their involvement in agricultural cooperatives. This finding was corroborated by qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews. Participants reported that cultural norms and traditional gender roles create barriers to women's full participation. They noted that there are unfair differences in access to resources, education, and training between women and men. Additionally, the division of labor often reflects these traditional roles, limiting women's involvement and contributions within cooperatives. The qualitative responses also highlighted that women's underrepresentation in decision-making positions discourages their active engagement in cooperative activities. These insights illustrate how deep-seated cultural norms and structural inequalities continue to impact women's participation in agricultural cooperatives.

A KII based at Kajiado South stated that:

There are unfair differences in how resources, education, and training are accessed, and in how work is divided between women and men. Women are not well-represented in cooperatives, which discourages them from taking part in many activities within these agricultural groups.

The analysis showed that cultural beliefs as a major barrier to participation in agricultural cooperatives, and traditional gender roles not only restrict women's access to resources but also limited their engagement in cooperative activities. Supporting literature emphasizes that cultural norms often dictate women's roles, limiting their access to education and financial resources, which in turn affects their participation in economic activities (World Bank, 2020).

Participants were requested to express their agreement or disagreement with statements concerning their participation in cooperatives. The responses were arranged on a Likert scale of 5 items that

is: 1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree, as shown on Table 1 below;

Table 1: Relevance of Statements on Respondents' Participation in Cooperative Activities

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
I rarely have enough time to participate in cooperative activities	9.1%	15.2%	16.2%	38.1%	22.3%
I spend most of my time taking care of children and other domestic duties	12.3%	16.4%	7.4%	37.3%	28.2%
I am actively engaged in decision making concerning sales, purchases and production at the farm	28.1%	22.2%	15.3%	17.4%	18.2%
I have the right education and training to make informed decisions concerning production	29.2%	41.3%	6.3%	14.2%	10.3%
Time limits my availability to attend meetings, trainings and other cooperative activities	10.2%	14.3%	9.1%	30.2%	37.2%
My level of education make me shy of to participate in discussions, elections and decision making in agricultural cooperatives	5.1%	10.2%	8.4%	39.3%	38.2%
Our cultural believes and norms affects my access and control to factors of production such as land and my participation in discussion elections and decision making where men are majority	9.3%	9.2%	6.2%	37.4%	39.3%

The majority of respondents (60.4%) agreed or Strongly Agreed that they rarely have enough time to participate in cooperative activities. A high proportion of respondents (67.4%) agreed, or strongly agree that time limits their availability to attend meetings, trainings and other cooperative activities. On the other hand, 77.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their level of education makes them shy to participate in discussions, elections and decision making in agricultural cooperatives. Likewise, 76.5% of the respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement that their cultural believes and norms affects their access and control to factors of production such as land and their participation in discussion, elections and decision making where men are majority This was interpreted to mean that low levels of education attainment among women, and domestic chores were key factors that curtail women participation in cooperatives and their leadership.

This quantitative finding was further supported by qualitative insights from women-only focus group discussions (FGDs) which reported:

We encounter more challenges than men when it comes to accessing capital and commodity markets, thus, the cooperatives' management prefer involving men in discussion of elections and key decision-making processes concerning the cooperatives because they are more informed than us.

Participants expressed that they face greater challenges compared to men in accessing capital and commodity markets. Additionally, it was noted that cooperative management often favors involving men in discussions about elections and critical decision-making processes, as men are perceived to be better informed.

In contrast to this response, a man from the men only FGD reported:

Women can never be good decision makers, and their main duty is take care of the family property including children, and cooking for the family as the man should have his own time to run his errands away from home. Therefore, men always available to participate in the activities of the cooperative unlike women who are tired at home by household chores. Again, in our clan women are not allowed to make any decisions for me, they should only listen to their men always. Therefore, I can never support women trusted to make leadership decisions in the cooperatives.

The findings revealed that women face multiple, interrelated barriers to participating in cooperatives, including time constraints, domestic responsibilities, educational gaps, and cultural norms. These findings concurred with a study by Kiran and Reddy (2019) who provided empirical evidence supporting the assertion that women face multiple, interrelated barriers to participating in cooperatives, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to promote gender equality and empower women within cooperative structures.

4. Conclusion

The study concluded that various gender-related barriers affected women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Kajiado County, including time constraints due to domestic responsibilities, educational gaps, and restrictive cultural norms. These interrelated factors, along with discrimination in decision-making processes and inadequate access to resources, hinder women's engagement and confidence within cooperatives. The findings reflect deeper societal norms and institutional biases that require comprehensive strategies to ensure equal opportunities for women.

5. Recommendations

The study recommends the enactment of gender-supportive by-laws and the implementation of continuous gender transformative programs for cooperative members. These initiatives aim to eliminate gender-related barriers that hinder women's participation in cooperative leadership and decision-making processes. By fostering an inclusive environment and equipping both men and women with the necessary tools and knowledge, these measures will promote women's involvement in leadership roles within cooperatives, ultimately contributing to more equitable decision-making and enhanced community development.

Acknowledgements

This project is supported by funding from the initiative "Women's Health and Economic Empowerment for a COVID-19 Recovery that is Inclusive, Sustainable, and Equitable (Women RISE)," sponsored by Canada's International Development Research Centre, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council under Grant No. 110022. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the funding organizations. The funders were not involved in the design of the study, data collection, analysis, decision to publish, or manuscript preparation.

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