

## **Gender Contribution and Constrains to Rural Agriculture and Household Food Security in Kenya: Case of Western Province**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the contribution of gender with special emphasis on women farmers towards rural agriculture as well as factors constraining access to rural agricultural production and consequently household food security in Western Province of Kenya. Data were collected from a total of 161 women farmers, 32 women groups as well as 254 individual males farmers engaged in small-scale production of various food crops in Western Province in Kenya for a period of 1 year. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews administered to the sampled individual farmers and women groups. Outputs from individual farm productions were used as a measure of agriculture production. Comparisons were made between exclusively female owned farms, women groups and male farms. Results indicated that farms owned exclusively by women did not differ significantly ( $P>0.05$ ) in agriculture production from those owned by males. Farms owned by women groups performed much better and had higher unit productions. Further results indicated that women had more obstacles constraining their productivity in rural agriculture. 12 out of the 18 factors studied fitted the logistic regression model as constraints for women in agricultural production compared to only five factors constraining men. This study demonstrated that women could provide many yardsticks to unlocking agricultural production in Kenya, which is currently erroneously left to the domains of men. The study recommends adoption of strategies such as formation of women cooperatives and education to change the customary laws curtailing women roles in economic development.

Keywords: Food security, Gender, Kenya, Women Cooperatives

### **Introduction**

The concept of gender has been considered in agriculture and development where agricultural opportunities are not the same for men and women. What is commonly accepted as the typical attributes of men and women differ among cultures, societies, and classes over time. Gender disparities embodied in households stand in the way of transforming relations between males and females at the agricultural level.

Ostergaard (1992) notes that there is still too little insight into the full effects of gender issues on the nutritional health status of most rural communities. It is a drawback that nutrition and food policies are more often treated separately at the national level and by international organisations. Nutritional deficiencies that arise from inadequate agricultural information, in Kenya for instance have a strong interaction with diseases, as they lower the body's immune response. This eventually impacts negatively on the community's socio-economic development efforts.

Globally, around 800 million people are undernourished. Malnourishment hinders people's levels of activity, stunts their growth and leaves them

vulnerable to disease. Poor nutrition still poses as a major challenge to many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.. Reflecting this development priority, the first (1<sup>st</sup>) Millenium Development Goal has adopted a target to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of the people in developing countries who suffer from hunger and poor nutrition deficiencies.

Rural women are responsible for half of the world's food production and between 60 and 80 percent of the food produced in most developing countries. This situation affects the food security in most households, particularly in many parts of Western Province of Kenya. In sub-Saharan Africa, women produce up to 80 percent of basic foodstuffs both for household consumption and for sale. According to Onian'go and Mukudi (2002) and UNDP (2003), rural women provide most of the labour for post-harvest activities – storage, handling, stocking, processing and marketing, and are primarily responsible for meeting the nutritional needs of their households. Despite this, gender concerns have not been fully integrated within the overall policies and programmes geared towards achieving sustainable food and nutritional security at the household level.

Rural people's knowledge, in the form of beliefs and practice, is sometimes harmful according to the values of rural people themselves. Chambers, (1991) notes that there are beliefs and practices in health and nutrition, which make things worse, not better.

In Kenya, Toroitich-Ruto (1998) observes that poor nutrition affects the poor more than the rich because of factors associated with income, poverty, female illiteracy levels and a subsequent lack of access to sufficient nutritional information, food insecurity, and a poor health environment.

Gender equality and particularly the empowerment of women is one of the effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease, and to stimulate sustainable development. The government of Kenya has made efforts to promote women's active involvement in all areas of societal development, in addition to ensuring that development is based on the contributions and concerns of both men and women. Despite these efforts, there are still clear gender inequalities in areas where both men and women's roles are visible, for

example in health, education and agriculture.

### Materials and Methods

Data was collected using structured questionnaires and interview schedules. The questions in the questionnaire were sequenced to solicit farming opportunities of the respondents and agricultural preference of the respondents. Data collected were both quantitative and qualitative. Measures of frequency formed quantitative data while qualitative data included outputs from individual farm productions were used as a measure of agriculture production. Comparisons were made between exclusively female owned farms, women groups and male farms.

### Results and Discussion

The division of labour between men and women is a major constraint on increased food production, particularly when the fact that men specialize in cash crop production leads to a reduction of labour in the production of food crops. Although domestic chores absorb a large proportion of women's time, fewer

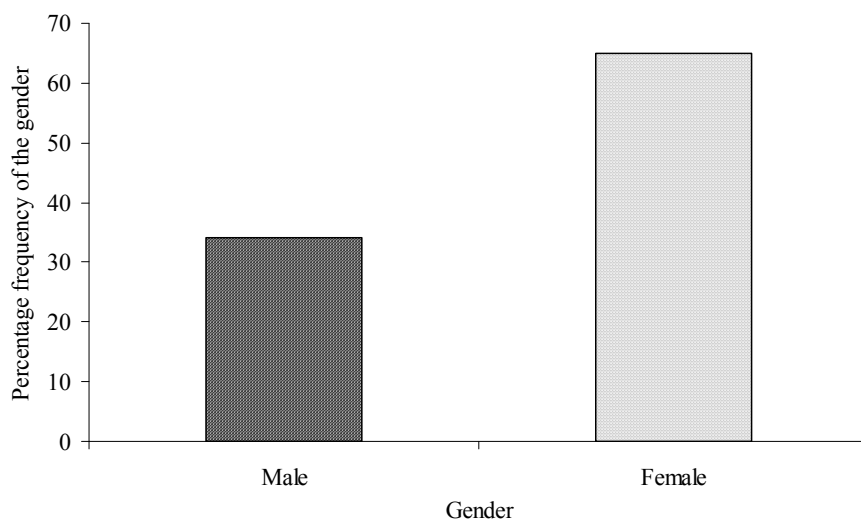
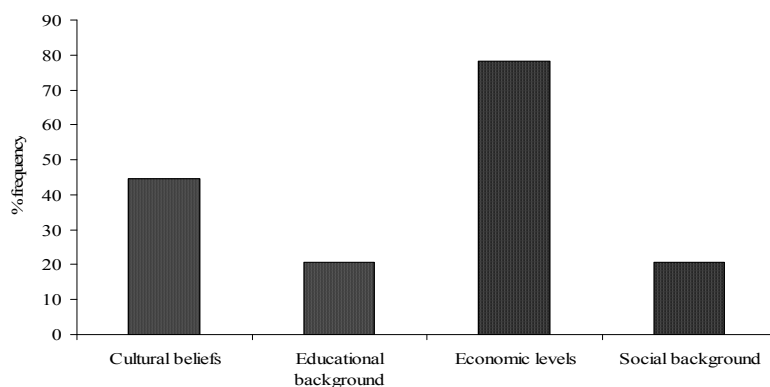


Figure 1: Division of farm labour between men and women



**Figure 2:** Women's obstacles to agricultural productivity

resources are directed to women, who provide households with their food.

In Western Kenya, a clear understanding of gender roles and their impact on the economic conditions and well-being of these households is essential. As far as division of labour is concerned, it was established that women do most of the work throughout the year.

Female-headed households are greatly affected by the problem of labour, since they belong to low-resource groups usually affected by food shortages all year round. In such cases women are forced to sell their labour for food.

Gender-based division of labour was explored in order to identify obstacles to agricultural productivity. Gender imbalances were assessed. It was shown that men have more leisure time than women, since men do not substitute women for certain tasks, above all domestic chores.

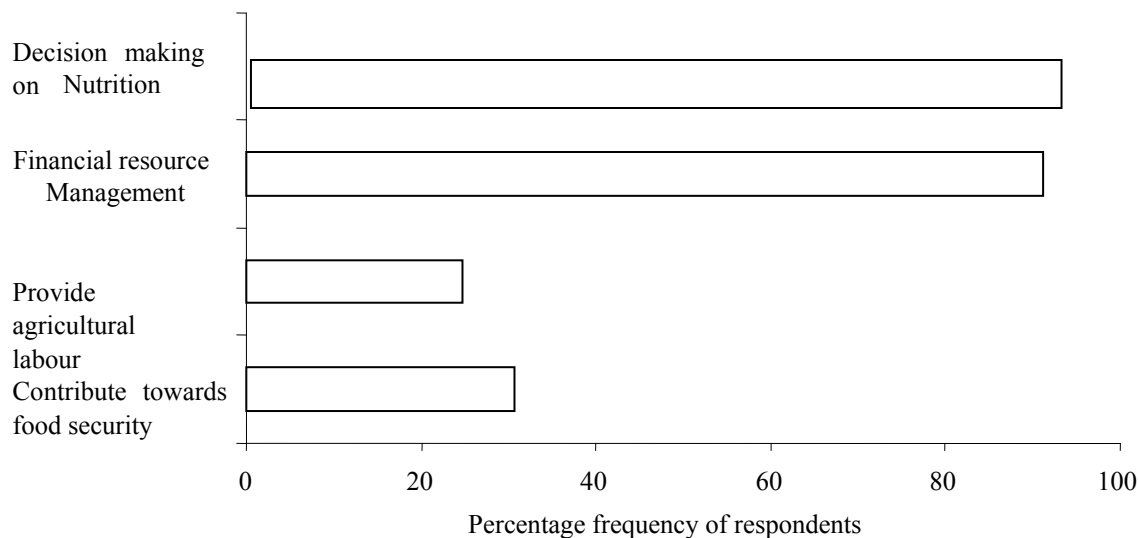
Domestic chores in Western Kenya were also seen to be women's tasks, sometimes with assistance from female children. The fact that men could not substitute women in carrying out certain tasks, not only within the house but also in some aspects of agricultural production, was observed. The varying engagement of women in farm work was superimposed on the rigidity

of their time commitment to household work.

It was established that changes in the division of labour between men and women often intensify the work of women while resulting in a loss of economic independence and social status, changes in cropping patterns and farm technology. The fragmentation of women's time allocation has adverse effects on household food security, leading to a reduction in the number of meals per day in some of the households interviewed. It emerged that the frequency of eating was lower during the cropping season.

Women were forced to walk for many kilometers to look for firewood. This greatly affects their contribution to agricultural production and thus on food security.

There is a higher illiteracy rate among rural women than among their male counterparts, despite the policy of equal education for all children of school age. This problem is aggravated by the existence of gender imbalance in the division of labour. After school, most girls help their mothers perform domestic tasks and have no time to study, while boys frequently have free time for studying.



**Figure 3:** Male contribution to agricultural productivity

The power to make decisions is traditionally vested in the hands of men. Although women and men have equal rights and opportunities constitutionally, women are under-represented in the decision-making process at the household level. This leads to men risking household food security by selling food reserves.

**Conclusions**

- To increase the understanding and awareness of gender factors in agriculture and rural development, policy-makers, regional and district planners, community development officers, and statisticians need to increase their capacity to integrate such factors into planning processes.
- Women do not have equitable access to land and agricultural services such as credit, agricultural inputs, training and extension, and marketing services. Women and men should have equal opportunities to own land.
- Women's participation in the implementation of measures and programmes to promote food security and to alleviate poverty should be significantly enhanced.

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