



# APRA Brief

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## Women's Empowerment and the Commercialisation of African Agriculture

### Key messages

- Women's empowerment in the context of commercial agriculture is shaped by their individual and collective action, other dimensions of social difference (e.g. class, ethnicity, geography), shifting dynamics between actors in global value chains and women's capacities to engage with changing social and economic conditions.
- Key areas for research on women's empowerment in relation to commercial agriculture are: household assets and control over income, land tenure security, care work, food security and nutrition, and collective action.
- Research should explore the relationship between changes in the local agrarian and wider political economy, and in household relations between women and men, as people move along different commercialisation pathways.

### Introduction

This brief presents a summary of key issues in research on women's empowerment, drawn from an APRA working paper<sup>1</sup> commissioned to support the design of APRA's research on pathways to agricultural commercialisation in Africa.

Empowerment is a process of change through which groups that have been denied the ability to make 'strategic life choices' come to acquire that ability (Kabeer 2005). In relation to aid and international development, women and girls are understood to be disempowered because socially ascribed gender roles restrict their ability to make and enact choices. Those restrictions become reproduced across generations, society and institutions. Development interventions typically aim to relax those restrictions by empowering women and girls with respect to localised patriarchal control. However, processes of disempowerment are socially complex and shaped not only by gender, but also other markers of social difference, including wealth, age, marital status, ethnicity, indigeneity, and location, which can lead to marginalisation or exclusion.

Development thinking on women's empowerment as a process of change has generally taken an individualistic approach, placing particular focus on 'economic empowerment' of individual women, and treating the purpose and outcome of empowerment as enabling women to gain control over incomes and access to markets (Esplen and Brody 2007). This individualistic approach has been criticised for failing to challenge power relations, or to take into account the shared nature of the changing economic and social contexts that women face (Chopra and Müller 2016), or how patriarchy adapts to fit changing social and economic conditions.

In the context of African agriculture, as women move along different pathways of commercialisation, the source of their disempowerment may shift from local to more global actors and factors, and the means of empowerment towards more collective

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and political processes (Baden 2013; Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2015). Researching the effectiveness of different pathways of agricultural commercialisation to empowering women and girls therefore requires an approach which explores the relationships between global and local, shifting dynamics as women move into and up global value chains, and changing gender relations in a specific local context (Doss et al 2014).

## How gender matters to agricultural commercialisation

Across all types of commercial agriculture in Africa, gender relations shape employment conditions, job opportunities, and leadership in the workplace, labour organisations and local administrative institutions. Within the household, the division of labour, care and other unpaid work responsibilities, and control over resources including land, are governed by gender. Women's marital status plays an important part in household decision-making, division of labour and the control and use of land. Agricultural commercialisation can shift control over household income and assets, and may also increase time burdens for women. Assessing the impact of agricultural commercialisation therefore demands an exploration of the relationships between gender, marital status and changes in household labour and control over assets and income as people move along different commercialisation pathways.

### 'Social difference' and 'women's empowerment'

Economic liberalisation, commodification (or the process by which goods and services are increasingly exchanged through market rather than other social relations) as well as struggles over resources, produce and deepen inequality, marginalisation and exclusion for social groups that lack the power to take advantage of new opportunities or protect against new risks. To understand how different people experience these changes, it is necessary to explore the interaction between multiple markers of social difference, including gender, age, wealth, marital status, ethnicity (etc). Processes of women's empowerment cannot be understood simply by treating women as a homogenous social category. As the working paper on which this brief is based discusses in more detail, it is essential to analyse the 'intersectional' relationship between gender and other markers of social difference to make sense of how different people are affected by agrarian change.

## Issues for research

### 1. Household assets and control of income

Access to assets and control of income are a common core of definitions of women's empowerment, and the most important indicators of women's economic empowerment (Esplen and Brody 2007). Inequalities in the share of assets within a household have important consequences for women's empowerment and bargaining power, as well as for household well-being, including education, health and food and nutrition security. To understand the effects of changes in household wealth on women's empowerment, it is necessary to analyse the distribution of wealth by gender within households. This requires not only a comparison of differences in wealth accumulation between households headed by men or women, but also an analysis of how wealth is held between husband and wife within



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households. However, a lack of disaggregated wealth data at the household level has masked wealth inequalities within families, leading to an unreliable picture of wealth inequality, or the 'gender asset gap', between men and women (Deere and Doss 2006). The credibility of data on asset accumulation by women and men at this individual level of analysis also depends crucially on an understanding of marital and inheritance regimes of asset-holding in any given context (Deere and Doss 2006).

Household surveys should gather data on wealth and access to assets from relevant individuals, and not assume that the household head governs the household economy in the equal interests of all. In terms of control over income, the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI's) Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index provides a well-established and widely-used set of indicators for measuring women's perceptions of their input into decision-making and control over household income-generating activities, wage and salaried employment and minor household expenditures.

### 2. Land tenure security

The way in which land is acquired and managed within households is a key factor for women's empowerment and participation in agricultural commercialisation. A wave of land law reforms across Africa has promoted security of tenure through individual or joint titling of land, which can then be used as collateral for credit. The aim of such schemes has been to facilitate land markets, create opportunities for business enterprise as well as bring land and business interests within the ambit of state governance through land registration and taxation. At a household level, impacts of early land registration schemes in the 1990s saw many women lose out in circumstances where family plots became registered in the sole name of a husband, and a wife's management of the land was not recognised or reflected in the title document (Yngstrom 2002). More recently, land titling initiatives in some countries have paid greater attention to the need to ensure that women's interests in land are safeguarded. However, studies have also shown a minority of titles registered in women's sole names, and an under-recording of jointly held interests (Doss et al 2014). This has consequences for women's empowerment both in terms of their participation in commercial agricultural schemes as a recognised land-holder, and in decision-making over household agricultural land management.



Research questions on these issues should aim to measure changes in gender inequality ratios in registered and documented land ownership, as well as decision-making over land, including planting, harvesting and disposing of crops, as women and men pass from insecure to more secure land tenure through processes of formalisation (Doss et al. 2015). Linking these findings with other indicators such as control over income and food and nutrition security, may reveal patterns of increasing or reducing women's empowerment. Women who rely on the commons for their livelihoods, pasture and sources of sustenance and fuelwood, are also likely to be most affected by loss of land identified as 'unused' to large-scale agricultural investment. It is important to qualitatively assess how women and men perceive their interests in land, including access to commons, to be changing.

### 3. Unpaid care work

Predominantly unremunerated and performed by women across the world, the work of care in developing countries has been substantially invisible to policymakers, who have typically viewed it, if at all, as natural and costless (Eyben 2012). This invisibility is one reason for the 'male bias' in approaches to rural development (Elson 1995). The responsibilities women bear for unpaid care tasks in most societies form an important part of the constraints they experience within the opportunities for economic advancement through agricultural commercialisation. Women's time and energy, timetables, seasonality and locations, and the need to travel or spend significant periods away from immobile infants, elderly or sick family members shape whether and how much adult women are typically able to participate in income-earning work.

The opportunities for women in commercial agriculture, particularly mothers, are set by their capacities to manage and reorganise unpaid care work. Other women and girls in the household may take on more of the burden, affecting their empowerment, or other services or help may be found (such as childcare facilities). Alternatively, the quality of care may suffer (Chopra 2015). Who wins and who loses from agricultural commercialisation depends in part on how unpaid care work is reorganised as household resources of cash, labour, and time are reallocated.

How care is provided, by whom, and at whose costs of time, effort and resources, is an important determinant of the extent to which women are likely to gain power through participation in commercial agriculture. Feminist approaches to addressing women's unpaid care work burdens prioritise recognising, redistributing and reducing the drudgery of such work (Fälth and Blackden 2009). For these reasons, public policies in relation to public health infrastructure, healthcare and food systems, are acknowledged to play a significant potential role in enabling women's empowerment, and are more likely to matter directly for women's empowerment than for men (Razavi 2011).

### 4. Food security and nutrition

Food security and nutrition are both expected to improve if agricultural commercialisation generates higher productivity and/or agricultural income growth (Von Braun 1995), particularly if women are earning higher incomes. A shift to more industrialised and processed foods may also enable women and families to save on work time necessary for food processing and preparation and to derive greater 'value' overall, including in terms of status, cost and convenience; however, such shifts may also impact on nutrition in adverse ways, depending on what kinds of foods are purchased (Hossain et al. 2015). To understand

these dynamics, we need to recognise how the wider food environment influences food and nutrition outcomes, and how women's participation in agricultural or other rural wage labour markets shapes household food systems and practices.

A key question is: Has there been a shift from self-provisioning of food to purchasing of food? Factors affecting demand for processed and purchased food may include higher cash incomes, time poverty, women's increased work outside the home, changes in allocation of household land and labour, changes in relative prices, changes in the opportunity cost of self-provisioning foods, and wider modernising social changes in tastes and diets influencing rural food habits. However, evidence suggests the relationship between the growth in women's personal and economic power and nutritional outcomes for women and children is not always clear-cut (Malapit and Quisumbing 2015). Higher incomes tend to mean more dietary diversity, but the impacts on household food security may be less positive if dependence on bought foodstuffs, whose price is volatile, pushes people into eating less diverse foods and relying more on staples. Household nutrition may also be negatively affected if families switch to more convenient processed foods with lower nutritional value. This relationship warrants further investigation. It also implies the need for an approach to women's empowerment that takes fuller account of women's labour and the economic and social systems within which they live (Chopra and Müller 2016).

### 5. Collective action, labour and access to markets

Women's disempowerment is not always or only rooted in household relations, and improved economic well-being of individual women may not shift power relations in their favour, particularly if women are unable to take collective action to defend their interests (Kabeer 2005). In relation to commercialising agricultural economies, important gendered power relationships also exist outside the household, in the realm of markets and governance, as women negotiate over agricultural inputs, contracts, wages and labour rights. Agricultural labour markets and labour organisations tend to be highly segmented. This has the impact of reducing the power of policy actions, such as certification standards, to improve pay and labour conditions for all workers. Women may be crowded into the worst jobs in the sector – those that are most poorly-paid and with the worst working conditions (Cramer, Oya and Sender 2008). This in part reflects women workers' 'fallback position', which may be so weak as to prevent strike action or other forms of mobilisation, as well as the nature of demand for



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rural labour, in conditions where wage work opportunities are few.

Women's leadership is widely recognised as an effect of their empowerment, and the leadership of women farmers and agricultural labour or workforce associations is critically important. However, more important, particularly given the spread of women's groups through aid-funded development projects and programmes, is their activism. A critical question to ask here is: How effective is collective action over conditions of labour and contract in agricultural commercialisation? In which forms and sectors does it succeed in bringing about equitable change, and among which groups of farmers, workers, women and others? It is also important to understand the extent to which formal laws and policies influence actual labour and contract regimes. Where are the mechanisms of accountability to ensure that they do so?

## Conclusion

To make sense of the full range of impacts of agricultural commercialisation in Africa, APRA has adopted a social difference lens to assess how participation in new agricultural markets is likely to influence processes of women's empowerment. The methodologies proposed explore how an individual's agency interacts with wider power relations, social and institutional structures, and political economic factors to shape livelihood trajectories and their impacts on women. Attention to the range of intersecting dimensions of social difference is necessary to understand how different women win or lose from agricultural commercialisation. This calls for a mixed-methods approach that takes fuller account of women's productive and reproductive labour and the economic and social systems within which women live.



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## Image captions:

Cover – Ambassador Ertharin Cousin visits an association of women rice farmers and processors in northern Ghana

Page 2 – Farmers from Koinadugu Women's Vegetable Cooperative in Sierra Leone harvesting carrots

Page 3 – Anel (pictured) helps her grandmother sell produce at Victoria Market in Port Victoria, Seychelles

Page 4 – A Kenyan cabbage farmer standing with her produce

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