

# **Gender Disparity in Member Participation in Agricultural Cooperatives in Kenya**

## **Introduction**

Women play a significant role in rural economies in developing countries as farmers in their own farms, unpaid laborers on family-owned farms and as laborers in other agricultural enterprises (Onyalo, 2019). Despite their indispensable contribution, their underrepresentation in agricultural cooperatives remains a significant concern (Majurin, 2012). This is because agricultural cooperatives serve as powerful agents of change, capable of empowering smallholder farmers and advancing gender equality within the agricultural sector. They can also enhance women's resilience to external shocks, disasters and crises by providing social safety nets, risk sharing mechanism and collective support systems (Ingutia and Sumelius, 2022). However, the transformative potential of agricultural cooperatives is impeded by pervasive gender disparities that threaten to undermine the equitable distribution of their benefits. Women often face exclusion, unequal access to resources, and limited representation, reflecting broader patterns of gender inequality (Hansen and Asmild, 2023). Additionally, limited access to resources of production like land and livestock hampers women's productivity, profitability, impacting on membership and overall contribution to agricultural cooperatives. Gender norms and stereotypes may also limit women's participation, while, regional disparities can impact women differently based on their locality and socio-economic wellbeing. Power dynamics within agricultural cooperatives leadership often reflect broader societal inequalities, with dominant groups (typically men, higher-income individuals, and those from privileged backgrounds) controlling resources and decision-making processes further disadvantaging women.

The ability of cooperatives to satisfy the unique and changing needs of their members makes them ideal for addressing most of the challenges faced by women (Mhembwe *et al.*, 2017). The democratic and horizontal nature of cooperative governance, which operates on the tenet of "one member, one vote," guarantees that every member, regardless of gender, has an equal say in the decision-making processes of the cooperative (ICA, 2016). However, in practice, there are still societal factors and prevailing socio-economic and institutional factors that marginalize women, making it difficult for them to take advantage of the equal opportunities that cooperatives provide. This study looks into various dimensions of identity, such as gender, education level, household size, area of residence, average income among other social factors on women's membership and participation in agricultural cooperatives. The approach recognizes that women hold multiple social identities simultaneously, which intersect to shape their membership and participation in agricultural cooperatives.

## **Methodology**

*Design:* This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive design to investigate the intersectional factors that influence women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Kenya. The study was conducted in Kiambu, Kajiado and Taita Taveta Counties situated in the Central and Eastern regions of Kenya. The counties exhibit distinct socio-cultural, economic and climatic characteristics.

*Sampling:* A total of 510 women respondents were randomly selected from 18 purposively identified agricultural cooperatives spread evenly across the three counties. The cooperatives served as the primary sampling units for the study. Using a comprehensive membership list obtained from each

cooperative, registered members were stratified into quartiles based on the quantities of produce delivered and an equal number of women respondents selected from each quartile per cooperative.

*Data Collection and Analysis:* A structured questionnaire was administered to women members of agricultural cooperatives by trained enumerators. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation in the study. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize key variables, while cross-tabulations were conducted to explore relationships between categorical variables, shedding light on patterns and trends within the data. Logistic regression models were used to examine the relationship between women's membership in agricultural cooperatives and various predictor variables. Coefficients, standard errors, z-scores, and p-values were scrutinized to determine the statistical significance and direction of the relationships.

## **Results**

*Socio-demographic characteristics:* Most women respondents had primary and secondary level of education across all three counties. Married women constituted the majority of respondents across all counties, with Kiambu having the highest proportion of single (12.8%) as well as widowed (24.4%) respondents. Most (73.3%) households were dual headed, while a large proportion (43.1%) of respondents had been members in their cooperatives for over 10 years. Farming was the main source of income most (82.2%) households, with the husband/spouse being the principal income earner in most (61.4%) households. Over half the respondents reported monthly household incomes of below 20,000 KES.

*Membership in agricultural cooperatives - Intersectionality:* A logistic regression analysis revealed significant associations between likelihood of women membership in cooperatives with certain variables, among them, the type of cooperative and value chain (OR=0.64, p=0.012), type of household (dual headed or woman headed) (OR = 4.10, p = 0.007), marital status (OR = 1.87, p=0.035), education level (OR = 1.25, p = 0.014), principal earner in the household (OR = 0.51, p = 0.005), number of children under 18 years in the household (OR = 1.15, p <0.05) and land ownership (OR = 1.21, p = 0.025). Other factors such as county of residence, main source of income, monthly average income, livestock ownership did not show any significant association with women membership in agricultural cooperatives.

*Participation in cooperative leadership:* Men constituted the majority (42.8%) in the management board with women following at 23.9%. Similarly, the supervisory committee was mostly mainly made up of men (44.7%) compared to women (22.9%). As delegates, men were the majority (44.5%), while women accounted for 22.9%. Among cooperative employees, women accounted for 21.8%, trailing behind men at 39.8%. In contrast, cooperative membership showed slightly more women (37.8%), than men (32.4%), with instances of gender equality reported by 18.0% of the respondents. Likewise, women in relation to men dominated those attending annual general meetings (44.5% vs 22.2%), special general meetings (36.9% vs 25.1%) and member education day events (46.5% vs 18.6%).

Further, logistic regression analysis revealed that a higher representation of women in the supervisory committee correlates with an increase in women's membership in agricultural cooperatives. Likewise,

there was a significant positive relationship between women membership and number of cooperative women employees (OR = 1.27,  $p = 0.031$ ). Women's attendance of AGMs was significantly and positively linked to their membership in agricultural cooperatives (OR = 1.311,  $p = 0.001$ ). Likewise, a higher representation of women among delegates was strongly associated with women's membership in agricultural cooperatives (OR = 1.795,  $p = 0.001$ ). Furthermore, participation in member education day events in the cooperative was positively and significantly correlated with women membership (OR = 1.267,  $p = 0.010$ ), implying a higher participation of women in these events with increased women's membership.

## **Discussion**

Our findings highlight the various demographic, socio-economic and organizational factors that influence women's membership in agricultural cooperatives. At the household level, marital status and household type had a significant influence on cooperative membership for women, in favor of those who were married and in a dual-headed households. In addition, households with many household members were associated with increased odds of cooperative membership among women implying that family demographics can influence membership. This suggests that family structure may play a role in women's participation in agricultural cooperatives, potentially due to shared-decision making or support mechanism within the family set-up. The level of education was also associated with women cooperative membership underscoring the role of education and autonomy in decision making, as the more educated women may have greater awareness to engage in cooperative activities. Interestingly, being the principal income earner in the household and having ownership over land showed negative associations with women's membership in agricultural cooperatives, probably pointing to the power dynamics within the household coupled with cultural norms regarding women's roles in economic activities and property ownership.

At the cooperative level, the type of value chain influenced or deterred women from taking up membership in agricultural cooperatives largely due to the requirements for membership (Msosa, 2022). A clear gender imbalance was evident in our study, with men consistently outnumbering women across various leadership roles within cooperatives. This suggests a prevailing gender disparity in decision-making roles, signaling the need for targeted interventions to enhance women's involvement at the managerial level. Consistent with our findings Hansen and Asmild (2023) established that cultural and historical factors have entrenched male dominance of leadership positions, creating a formidable barrier for women. This situation has persisted despite the expansion of agricultural cooperatives where the roles and responsibilities of different leaders, irrespective of gender, have significantly intensified, resulting in higher demands for specialized and diverse skills (Meliá-Martí *et al.*, 2020).

Women slightly outnumbered men in cooperative membership and in participation in cooperative meetings, like the AGMs, SGMs and member education days. This presents an ideal platform to actively engage women in cooperative activities some of which can ultimately result in women taking up leadership position. Overall, the findings highlight a consistent pattern of male dominance in top decision making organs, emphasizing the need to promote inclusivity and gender balance at these

levels. This underscores the need for greater inclusivity of women in cooperatives as members and in governance structures and activities for the realization of gender-balanced leadership. Therefore, addressing the broader socio-economic factors such as access to economic resources, education and training, and creating a supportive environment for women's involvement is crucial for advancing gender equality and empowering women in both cooperative and the societal contexts.

## Conclusion

The gender distribution across different levels of cooperative governance showed an overall notable underrepresentation of women in key decision-making tasks. The study underscores the importance of addressing these disparities to ensure a more balanced and inclusive leadership structure within agricultural cooperatives. Achieving gender equity in agricultural cooperatives demands a holistic and collaborative effort. By addressing structural and cultural barriers, tailoring interventions based on insights, and continuously refining strategies tailored to local contexts, agricultural cooperatives can become more inclusive spaces where women contribute actively and meaningfully.

**Key words:** Agricultural cooperatives, gender, women participation, Kenya

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