



What factors explain women's empowerment? Decision-making among small-scale farmers in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Evidence from studies on women's empowerment suggests that when women have a larger role in decision-making, household well-being improves. Understanding patterns influencing women's empowerment in rural areas is therefore important. We use gender-disaggregated survey data from rural Uganda to explore individual and household characteristics associated with women's empowerment. We find links between empowerment and age, education, proximity to a paved road as well as the marketed share of crop production. Age and education are associated with higher empowerment, but equality in education between the spouses is more important than the average level of education. Remoteness is associated with lower women's empowerment, as is greater commercial orientation in crop production. This may be due to the fact that men are more involved in cash-crop activities, giving them an advantage through higher income. One policy implication is that education needs to target both girls and boys, especially in remote areas, putting special focus on girl's involvement in value added activities.

Introduction

Women play a key role in agriculture. They account for 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries (FAO, 2011). In Africa they are considered responsible for producing up to 80% of the locally consumed food (Palacios-Lopez, Christiansen, & Kilic, 2015). However, a large number of studies on women's role in agriculture have highlighted gender gaps in asset ownership, education, access to credit and extension services, which causes female farmers to be less productive (Quisumbing, 1996; Doss, 2001; World Bank, 2001; FAO, 2011; Quisumbing et al., 2014). These gaps affect income and intra-household distribution, with possible negative effects on education, health, and nutritional status in the households (Sraboni, Malapit, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2014). Thus, the gender gap in agriculture may have long-term implications both from an economic and a development perspective (Manfre et al., 2013).

In order to support women farmers through policy measures, it is essential to understand the dynamics driving the gender gap. Many studies suggest that the gender gap is largely linked to issues relating to women's participation and empowerment (Manfre et al., 2013; OECD, 2015). There are a number of individual, household, and community characteristics that are likely to influence women's empowerment. Identifying, examining and understanding these determinants is a first

step in exploring strategies to reduce gender inequality and promote food and nutrition security. Analysis of women's empowerment therefore needs to be a key aspect of any work in agricultural development.

The aim of this study is to examine some of the key determinants of women's empowerment relating to an agricultural context in Uganda. We use gender-disaggregated survey data from approximately 1440 households in rural Uganda. Using regression analysis, we identify key variables related to empowerment. The survey included an adapted version of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), originally developed for the Feed the Future Program of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Alkire et al., 2012; Alkire et al., 2013). This study also aims to provide insights on using the WEAI as a tool. The results contribute to the literature on women's empowerment and the gender gap in agriculture. It provides input for the design of agricultural extension activities, programs and policies, thus contributing towards improved empowerment, productivity and household wellbeing.

Women's empowerment

Most definitions of empowerment focus on resources, agency and achievement. Resources refer to control over physical, financial, human and intellectual resources (Kabeer, 1994), while agency implies having

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the capability and freedom to make individual life-choices (Desai, 2010; Sen, 1992; Sen, 1999; Sen, 2009). Together agency and resources constitute achievement, or “functioning achievements”, which is related to universally shared basic functionings, but also refers to individual preferences (Kabeer, 1999).

Scientists in the field generally agree on a few key factors that determine or influence empowerment. These include age, gender, marital status, nationality, social role, economic activity, intra-household distribution, and health (Sen, 1992; Sen, 1999; Sen, 2009; Kabeer, 1994; Trommlerová, Klasen, and Leßmann, 2015). Another factor often considered a key element of empowerment is participation in economic activities. Control over resources does not automatically lead to empowerment, but can be a “catalyst for empowerment” (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). While “resources—economic, social, and political—are often critical in ensuring that women are empowered, they are not always sufficient. Without women's individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in their own interests, resources cannot bring about empowerment” (p.9, Malhotra et al., 2002). However, access to and use of resources, is a central theme within the empowerment discourse. Sociological theory has emphasized the relationship between resource control and empowerment on a household level, but also looked at the socio-cultural environment for explanatory factors (Khan and Awan, 2011).

However, it has been suggested that households do not allocate intra-household resources in a fair or even optimal manner, but that power relations play an important role. Household welfare outcomes may depend on the preferences of the person with power (Wouterse, 2016). Therefore, having a voice in intra-household decision-making can be considered an inherently meaningful dimension of empowerment, since it may be desirable in its own right and it can also determine directly how resources are allocated within the household (Peterman, Schwab, Roy, Hidrobo, & Gilligan, 2015, p. 1).

Owning productive resources has been found to strengthen a woman's bargaining position in the household (Meier zu Selhausen, 2016). Land is one such key resource, and women's access to land is therefore an important determinant of empowerment. What it means in the Ugandan context will be discussed further below.

Measuring empowerment and the WEAI

As discussed above, an important part of any research on African agriculture is to understand how gender patterns in agriculture work and how they are changing (Doss, 2013). Although quantifying subjective concepts like women's empowerment and gender equality is difficult, it is necessary in order to influence policy change and measure impact. To do so, relevant and reliable data specifically targeting the realities of women is required. Household surveys have been criticized for using household-level income and consumption data as measures of poverty, rather than recognizing poverty as multi-dimensional, experienced differently by different household members (McGee, 2004). Such an approach bypasses the realities and challenges of women within male-headed households, although it is recognised that “gender inequalities undermine the effectiveness of development policies in fundamental ways” (World Bank, 2001 p. xiii).

A number of methods, measurements and indices have been developed by different scholars and development actors over the years. Often education or employment have been used as proxies for empowerment, but should rather be seen as enabling factors than empowerment outcomes.

In 1995 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report (HDR) for the first time integrated measurements on women's empowerment, including the gender-related development index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) (UNDP, 1995). They have however been criticized for being too limited in scope and lacking many key aspects of empowerment, including women's participation in community and household decision-making

and resource use (Shüler, 2006; Syed, 2010). In response to these criticisms, new gender indicators were included, and also many other measures and matrices were developed (Charmes & Wieringa, 2003).

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture index (WEAI) was originally developed for the Feed the Future program of USAID in 2012 by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (Alkire et al., 2012; Alkire et al., 2013). The WEAI is constructed as an index consisting of five different areas or domains of empowerment, namely *Production, Resources, Income, Leadership* and *Time*, as well as a gender-parity index (GPI). The GPI compares the levels of empowerment between women and men in the same household, which gives an indication to what extent disempowerment, can be considered a specifically gender-related phenomenon as opposed to being a characteristic of the household as a whole. This is possible due to the fact that the WEAI methodology involves asking the same questions of both a man and a woman in the same household.

The overall empowerment score reflects the weighted percentage of dimensions in which a person has achieved adequacy. However, each domain can also be calculated separately in order to analyse the level of empowerment within a particular area. Economic empowerment, specifically ownership and decision-making, are the key domains of the WEAI. It specifically «captures control over resources or agency within the agricultural sector, something which existing indices have not done» (Sraboni et al., 2014, p. 13).

The WEAI can be used as a diagnostic tool for policymakers, development organizations, and academic seeking to increase women's empowerment (Sraboni et al., 2014). It can serve to identify types of households (defined by location, occupation, or other characteristics) in which women are disempowered (Malapit et al., 2014). In the past couple of years an increasing number of studies have used the WEAI to look at how specific development issues are linked to empowerment (e.g. Sraboni et al., 2014; Wouterse, 2016). The approach focuses on identifying underlying problems rather than looking only at the effects. This can help direct policy in targeting core challenges.

Uganda

The Ugandan economy, like many in Sub-Saharan Africa, is highly dependent on agriculture, with a population relying heavily on agriculture for their income. Out of the total working population (13.9 million people aged 14–64), 43% work in subsistence farming, and 72% of the employed population is employed within the agricultural, forestry and fisheries sector. There is a clear gender divide in employment with only 39% of women employed, compared to 54% of men (UBOS (Uganda Bureau of Statistics), 2014).

Coffee is the main export crop, which is commonly intercropped with other crops on small farms. Most small-scale farmers grow cassava, sweet potatoes, and matooke (plantain) for home consumption as well as maize and beans for both consumption and sale (Peterman, Quisumbing, Behrman, & Nkonya, 2011). According to FAO Food Balance Sheets, the four most important sources of calories in the Ugandan diet are maize, plantains, cassava, and sweet potatoes (FAO, 2013).

In terms of land ownership, 80% of the land in Uganda is still held under unregistered customary law, dating back to pre-colonial times. Only a small minority of people have official land titles to back up their tenure today. No single precolonial land-tenure system can be identified, as different ethnic groups had various practices based on different cultural traditions. Under customary law women usually have fewer rights to land and generally do not inherit it from either their fathers or their husbands. Therefore, “women often have only secondary claims to land, obtaining user rights through husbands, sons, or other male relatives” (Doss, Meinzen-Dick, & Bomuhangi, 2014, p. 83).

This is important as studies on women's land rights have identified a correlation between secure land rights and income, both net farm income and off-farm income. However, several different definitions of

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