



Pathways to empowerment?: dynamics of women's participation in Global Value Chains



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ABSTRACT

Gender plays an important role in shaping outcomes of participation within Global Value Chains (GVCs). Employment in GVCs may potentially empower women, but little is known about the dynamics by which GVCs bring about empowerment, rather studies highlight women's rights abuses and on-going gender-based discrimination. This paper considers whether and how employment within GVCs empowers women workers. By drawing from an in-depth empirical study of women workers employed in the Kenyan tea and cut-flower industries, it develops three interlinked pathways to empowerment. These pathways, 'being', 'doing' and 'sharing', offer some positive changes from women workers' perspectives. In so doing, we offer a more nuanced perspective on employment for women in GVCs in African agriculture, acknowledging the constraints but also noting the potential for positive outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Across global agriculture, the expansion of production for the global market has been associated with increases in women's employment. Alongside this is a growing realisation of the important role played by gender in shaping the outcomes of participation within chains. However, knowledge about gendered dimensions of value chains amongst both researchers and practitioners is inadequate to fully understand the dynamics at play, especially with respect to women's empowerment, particularly in an African context (Riisgaard et al., 2010).² However, several studies across sectors with significant female employment have highlighted the opposite, painting a picture of poor health and safety and endemic labour rights violations, with a differential experience for men and women (Bain, 2010; Dolan, 2004; ETI, 2005; Hale and Opondo,

2005; Smith et al., 2004; Tallontire et al., 2005). More broadly the feminisation of labour in GVCs has been associated with greater insecurity, flexibilisation and precarious work (Palpacuer, 2008; Raworth and Kidder, 2009). However, employment of women in firms participating in global value chains may provide economic independence, an alternative to domestic labour and previously unimagined opportunities (Kabeer, 1994). This suggests that the reality from the perspective of women employed in these chains is more nuanced.

Drawing from a study of women workers in Kenyan tea and cut-flower industries supplying European retailers and brands, this paper examines employment experiences and asks how and indeed if female empowerment is generated through employment in GVCs. In particular we develop three interlinked pathways to empowerment and highlight how these may facilitate, or indeed constrain, the potential for employment in GVCs to empower women workers.

The paper begins by highlighting the limited consideration of labour and gender in GVC approaches and briefly considering how 'empowerment' has been conceptualised. It goes on to explain our methodology and provides a context for the study before unpacking the meaning of empowerment for women working in tea and cut-flowers by basing our analysis on three pathways of change. Finally we reflect on how empowerment may be fostered in these GVCs before drawing some wider conclusions.

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² However, see collection edited by Dunaway (2013) for example across the world. Note her work is largely in the context of Global Commodity Chain and World Systems theory (cf Wallerstein, 1995) rather than the Global Value Chains approach, (see Gereffi, 1994), which is the tradition within which we situate our work.

2. Bringing empowerment into global value chain analysis

The analysis of GVCs³ highlights the process of economic development (upgrading), the co-ordination of production along a chain, power relations involved (governance) and the influence of institutions (Dolan and Humphrey, 2000; Gereffi, 1994). GVC analysis has highlighted how powerful buyers such as food retailers and global clothing brands 'govern from a distance' using quality standards, which increasingly include social and environmental dimensions which have implications for how rents are distributed within chains and also shape the experience of suppliers (Dolan and Humphrey, 2004; Gibbon and Ponte, 2005; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). Conventionally, GVC analysis focuses on the firm, but increasingly it is argued that it is important to open the 'black box' of the firm and examine how particular workers or communities benefit from integration in the global value chain (Barrientos et al., 2003; Bolwig et al., 2010). Several studies have highlighted the problems facing workers employed at the base of global value chains; some related to weak labour regulation or global processes of de-regulation associated with neo-liberalism (Barrientos and Dolan, 2003; Barrientos et al., 2011; Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004; Palpacuer, 2008) and others indirectly related to purchasing practices of global retailers and brands (Hale and Opondo, 2005; Hughes et al., 2010; Oxfam, 2004; Raworth and Kidder, 2009). More recently researchers have asked about whether workers and communities benefit from efforts by producers at the bottom of the chain to integrate into GVCs, i.e. does global market access and product and process upgrading enhance 'social upgrading' (Barrientos et al., 2011; Bolwig et al., 2010).

Until recently, while the majority of studies on workers within the GVC literature looked at gender in some form (Barrientos and Ware, 2002; Barrientos et al., 2000; Dolan and Sutherland, 2002; Hale and Opondo, 2005; Lund and Srinivas, 2000), few had gone beyond looking at workers' experiences in the workplace and an acknowledgement of the gendered nature of the labour economy, to also look at how women's employment impacts on household dynamics and structures, particularly in an African context, while extensive work has been undertaken in Latin American agriculture and clothing (e.g. Bain, 2013).

Nevertheless, one study looking at the effectiveness of value chain interventions in terms of their impacts on gender highlighted the scarcity of such studies and widened its scope to also include interventions that did not target gender specifically (Riisgaard et al., 2010). Looking at studies on Kenyan women workers, with the notable exception of Dolan (2001, 2002) and also Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) (2012), analysis concentrates within the workplace rather than household dynamics and how participation within GVCs interacts with this. The word 'empowerment' is surprisingly absent, exceptions being Riisgaard who talks of 'empowerment' as 'worker self-representation' within trade unions (Riisgaard, 2009a,b:33) and the KHRC which uses the word once when stating that "patriarchal systems...inhibit the empowerment of women" (KHRC, 2008:39).

Regardless, various proponents of the sector make claims that employment within it is empowering (representative of Kenya Flower Council (KFC), 2009). Employment in the flower sector has grown, including for women. In the more 'traditional' tea sector the employment of women has been more recent (only since 1989 for Company A) (Said-Allsopp, 2013:80). Thus the sectors investigated here can be seen as part of a broader process of feminisation of

agricultural labour across Africa (Dolan and Sorby, 2003; Langan, 2011; Tallontire et al., 2005).

3. Women's empowerment

Women's empowerment has been analysed in depth within development studies. While the term 'empowerment' has gained considerable currency in recent times within development dialogue, there remain issues with how 'empowerment' has been conceptualised, analysed and assessed; few academics or development agencies can agree on the exact meaning of the term (McEwan and Bek, 2006; Rowlands, 1995, 1997). Rowlands claims that "the term may be used merely to communicate good intentions, and to imply some unspecified recognition of the need for changes in the distribution of power" (Rowlands, 1997:7). This vagueness is related to the multi-faceted, context-defined and specific nature of empowerment processes, which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to define universally. Nevertheless, we can unpack some underlying concepts.

The term 'empowerment' hints at a transfer or acquisition of power, be it by an individual or by a group (Kabeer, 1999, 2000; McEwan and Bek, 2006; Rowlands, 1995, 1997) and for those focusing on citizenship, it is "the process of awareness and capacity-building, which increases the participation and decision-making power of citizens and may potentially lead to transformative action" (Andersen and Siim, 2004). More theoretically, empowerment has been conceptualized as resulting from four different kinds of power. The most common meaning power is given is influence or 'power over' (McEwan and Bek, 2006; Rowlands, 1995, 1997). Other forms of power are 'power to' which is decision-making power, also referred to as "generative or productive power"; 'power with' which is collective power; and 'power within' which is personal power (Rowlands, 1997:13).

The concept of 'power to' is closely linked with the concept of agency and an increase in the amount of 'power to' occurs as people's ability to make choices and the amount of choices available to them expands. This is seen as a positive approach to power, contrasting with negative power, whereby an actor uses their power to force or coerce others to do what they want; this is controlling power or 'power over'. 'Power to', 'power with' and 'power within' contrast with this and can all be conceptualised as positive forms of power (Crawford and Andreassen, 2012:13).

Women's choices can further contribute to practical or strategic gender needs (Molyneux, 1985:232, Moser, 1989). Strategic gender needs are the needs women identify because of their subordinate position in society, achievement of which can alleviate their position within society (e.g. the removal of institutional forms of discrimination) (Molyneux, 1985:232). Practical gender needs (e.g. food, clothing and shelter) are "given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor" (Molyneux, 1985:233).

Questions have been raised about the linkage between women's paid employment and their empowerment and whether the former can in fact bring the latter. Women's triple burdens within society as reproducers, producers and community managers (Moser, 1989) mean that "earning money may extend women's options, but may also intensify their workload and responsibilities without necessarily increasing their autonomy" (Ngai, 2004; Pearson, 2007:207). It is for this reason that it becomes important to not only study women's experiences within the workplace and how this is shaped by the GVC, but also to look at how their employment interacts with women's understanding of their roles in the home and community.

Kenyan tea and horticulture firms' positions as significant employers of women mean that they have great potential to bring

³ Particularly within economic sociology, economic geography and development studies, (Bair, 2005; 2009; Boons and Mendoza, 2010).

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