



# Women's participation in high value agricultural commodity chains in Kenya: Strategies for closing the gender gap



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## ABSTRACT

In developing economies, well-functioning markets are known to provide the poor with avenues for wealth creation. Using a value chain approach, this paper aims at examining bottlenecks to and opportunities for different categories of women to participate in markets for high value agricultural commodities, with a view to identifying feasible upgrading strategies for the different categories. The findings are based on a case study of Kenya's avocado value chain, which depicts export and domestic market orientation. The data were collected through focus group discussions, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews and household surveys. The results suggest that in the more commercialized and well developed chains like that of export, upgrading strategies vary for the different typologies of women. While women in female headed households may require limited efforts such as tailoring financial products to their needs or providing interlinked services coupled with prompt payment for their produce to allow them to produce quality fruits and access lucrative markets, women in male headed households need institutionalization of gender-sensitive policies in the governance of producer groups to enable them to upgrade as chain integrators and chain owners. In the less commercialized domestic chain, limited efforts may be required to upgrade women along the chain, but the need to change from the less marketable local variety to exotic variety is likely to alter women's position, thereby calling for the need to institutionalize gender-sensitive policies in the governance of existing organized groups and use the groups as a platform to introduce the new variety.

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## 1. Introduction

Well-functioning factor and product markets can provide the poor, particularly smallholder farmers and the landless, with avenues for wealth creation, thereby expediting food insecurity and poverty alleviation. When markets function well, trade thrives and farmers are able to recoup returns on investment outlays, thus providing an incentive for reinvestment in agriculture (Jayne et al., 2004). In sub-Saharan Africa, markets for agricultural inputs and

outputs are often missing or disorganised at best (Poulton et al., 2006; Ashraf et al., 2008). While market failure is a major constraint to smallholder farmers, the effects are compounded for marginalised groups such as the poor, women and households in low potential areas (Poulton et al., 2006; FAO, 2011).

The challenges may even be more pronounced for smallholder women farmers because they may face higher entry barriers than men in modern value chains (Dolan and Sorby, 2003). Women generally have the least access to and control over productive resources such as land, capital and agricultural services like credit and training that are necessary for increasing yields and moving from subsistence to market-oriented production (Jiggins et al., 1997; FAO, 2011). In most sub-Saharan African countries, the distribution of physical and human capital favours men and the differences in rights and responsibilities within the household bring about inefficient resource allocation and constrain women's ability to respond to price incentives (Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2010).

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Further, women's engagement in agricultural production and marketing activities does not necessarily translate into increased incomes for them or improved decision making regarding the use of the income generated from agricultural activities (Dolan and Sorby, 2003; FAO, 2011). Women generally produce for more localized spot markets and in smaller volumes than men, and when they are involved in marketing of agricultural produce, they tend to be concentrated at the lower levels of the supply or value chain, in perishable or low value products (Baden, 1998; Dolan and Sorby, 2003). Likewise, women constitute only 20–30% of agricultural wage workers in modern agricultural value chains, yet these chains usually offer wage and self-employment with better pay and working conditions than traditional agriculture (FAO, ILO and IUF, 2007).

Empowering women in the agricultural value chains can create significant development opportunities for them and generate spill-over benefits for their households and communities (Quisumbing and McClafferty, 2006). Integrating women into markets for high value agricultural commodities requires a holistic approach that involves critical understanding and identification of the bottlenecks to, and opportunities for, women to participate in the production and marketing of such commodities (Rubin and Manfre, 2014). Whether to strengthen value chains in which women are already active or rather promote novel opportunities – that may so far have been a male-dominated chain – is far from clear and warrants nuanced analysis (Rubin and Manfre, 2014).

Comprehensive analysis of a value chain is a prerequisite for the development of gender equitable value chains because the analysis is critical for understanding markets, relationships among actors, the participation of different actors and the main constraints that limit the growth of the enterprise as well as competitiveness of individual actors (Coles and Mitchell, 2011; Rubin and Manfre, 2014). Results from value chain analyses have been used to design market oriented interventions and value chain upgrading strategies that are beneficial to smallholder farmers, particularly the marginalized groups, in developing countries (van den Berg et al., 2009; IFAD, 2010; Donovan et al., 2015). However, to the extent that the constraints and opportunities faced by men and women differ (Quisumbing et al., 2014b), interventions that promote equitable development are likely to be different for men and women. Men increasingly move into food crops as well as into the previously neglected fruit trees as the prices of traditional export crops fall (Bolzahi et al., 2010) or men might contest women's access to productive assets as women's benefits from crops previously considered to be of low value increase (Rubin and Manfre, 2014). Both cases illustrate the need for assessing interventions to improve women's access to lucrative markets.

Factors that limit women's participation in high value agricultural commodity markets may differ among women and hence addressing them may require interventions that are tailored to the needs of a heterogeneous group of women. Yet, there is paucity of information on gender-disaggregated value chain analysis (Rubin and Manfre, 2014) as well as on the type of interventions that work for women taking into account differences among them. For example, the needs of widows can be expected to differ from those of married women. Similarly, the needs of married women whose husbands live and work elsewhere may differ from those of women whose husbands work on the farm and depend entirely on farm income. Most studies that have attempted to look into women's participation in markets for high value commodities have considered women as a homogenous group and used data disaggregated by men and women (Dolan, 2004; Dolan and Sorby, 2003; Mathenge et al., 2010).

The objective of this paper is to provide a gender-disaggregated value chain analysis with a major focus on the node of production

and marketing at farm-level in order to identify entry points for interventions tailored to the needs of different typologies of women. The aim is to identify contextually appropriate strategies that can improve women's access to and gains from markets for high value agricultural commodities. Specifically, we analyse export and domestic avocado value chains as case studies and seek to answer three main questions: (1) Does the level of participation by women differ with the degree of commercialisation of the value chain? (2) Do constraints to and opportunities for participation by women in agricultural value chains differ by the typology of the women and the degree of commercialisation of the chain? (3) Which strategies would work best to improve the participation of women in agricultural value chains with low and high degrees of market orientation?

We consider three typologies of women: (1) women in male-headed households whose husbands are engaged in the day-to-day farming activities and farm management (male-male) who are often invisible (Quisumbing et al., 2014b); (2) women in male-headed households whose husbands are engaged in off-farm employment and live away from the household, thereby leaving the women as the farm managers (male-female); and (3) women in female-headed households who are either single, widowed or separated from their husbands and hence are the farm managers and sole decision makers in their households (female-female). We adopt a value chain approach and examine the level of participation by the three typologies of women in the different stages of the value chains, with a major focus on the production and marketing at the household level. We posit that the three typologies of women face different sets of constraints, which dictate the node of the value chain in which they participate as well as the benefits they derive from the value chain. In addition, the level of women's participation and constraints experienced by the three typologies of women are hypothesized to vary by the degree of commercialization of the value chain.

The paper is organised as follows: In Section 2 we provide the conceptual framework that underlies the study; Section 3 provides information on the study areas and sampling design; the findings, including characteristics of the value chains, are presented and discussed in Section 4; in Section 5, conclusions and policy implications deriving from the study are presented.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Several analytical frameworks have been put forth to examine strategies and opportunities for integrating women in market transactions (e.g. McCormick and Schmitz, 2001; Mayoux and Mackie, 2008; Riisgard et al., 2008). This study combines the concepts of the value chain (VC) and the gender empowerment framework. A value chain refers to the activities by firms and people to bring a product or service from its conception to its end use and final disposal (Kaplinsky and Morris, 2002). A major focus in value chain analysis is on governance, and identification of the chain actor who sets the parameters to which other actors adhere (Humphrey and Schmitz, 2001). Value chain development (VCD) intends to answer one key question: At what point can leverage be applied to reach the intended systematic change in a sector or a target group (Donovan et al., 2015)?

Coles and Mitchell (2011) contend that value chain analysis and development as a concept, if properly applied, can be a powerful tool for addressing gender inequities in markets. Rubin et al. (2009) provide three reasons why gender equity is important in value chain development (VCD). First, value chains exist within a social context, which conditions differential access to productive resources (land, labour and capital), support services (credit and training), gender differentiated labour forces hence the choice of

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