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WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

Background

This sector employs 40% of the total population & 70% of the rural population. The sector provides 65% of export earnings.

Women make essential contributions to the agricultural sector in Kenya. Their roles vary considerably between and within the 47 counties and change rapidly in terms of economic and social forces transforming the agricultural sector.

Notably, rural women often manage complex households and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. Their main activities typically include producing agricultural crops, tending animals, processing and preparing food, working for wages in agricultural or other rural enterprises, collecting fuel and water, engaging in trade and marketing, caring for family members and maintaining their homes. Many of these activities are not defined as “economically active employment” in national accounts but they are essential to the wellbeing of rural households.

Despite women’s important role in the agricultural sector, however, empirical evidence shows that they lag behind men with regard to agricultural productivity in Kenya due to the gender inequalities that persist in respect of access to control over the utilization of productivity resources such as land, livestock, labour, education, extension and financial services, and technology.

Inequality in landholding is especially severe in Kenya. Cultural norms and traditions restrict women’s ability to inherit land and contribute to widening gender gaps in the quality and size of ownership farmland. In Kenya, a mere 0.5% of women have access to financial services and only around 6% own land. Limited land ownership by female farmers hinders their access to formal credit, since land is a major form of collateral. Other gender inequalities evident for women in Kenya’s agricultural sector include limited access to labour and agricultural markets and less control over revenue from the agricultural production than men.

In addition, women farmers in Kenya spend more time in care and domestic work than their male counterparts which can limit their access to productive resources such as extension and advisory services and participation in incoming generating activities.

Participation of women in the agricultural labour force

In Kenya, women make up for 80% of the agricultural labour force in addition to their traditional domestic responsibilities. Most of this labour force is provided in owner managed small scale, subsistence farming enterprises, and is usually not formally remunerated. The same situation replicates itself in the micro and small enterprises, which is the category where over 85% of female enterprises fall.

It is interesting to note that when analyzing data on formal wage employment in the agricultural sector for example, it is found that there is a higher participation of men than women, where women account for only 33% of the wage employment in the sector. Overall, women constitute 34% of the total wage employment (KNBS, 2018). This would suggest that women are getting stuck in the informal sector, and are limited when it comes to participation in the formal sector. Because of this situation, coupled with what is referred to as the care roles played by women, women are considered time poor. On average, women work longer hours per day (12.9 hours) compared with those of men (8.2 hours), yet they earn less because more of these hours are not remunerated (Kiringai, 2006).

Conclusion

Women's empowerment is perceived as a key factor in closing gender gaps in agricultural productivity. As such, understanding the role of women's empowerment in agriculture is important for policy makers and development partners interested in devising more effective interventions to increase agricultural productivity, enhance household and national economic growth, achieve food security, improve nutrition and reduce poverty.