Research Paper

The impact of agricultural co-operatives on women’s empowerment: Evidence from Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to understanding the potential of agricultural co-operatives to boost women’s empowerment and close gender gaps in sub-Saharan Africa. It provides quasi-experimental evidence of the impact of membership of an agricultural co-operative on women’s capabilities, their power and ability to influence decisions, and intra-household productive and reproductive labour divisions. It uses the P’KWI Farmer to Farmer Co-operative Society in north-eastern Uganda as a case study. It shows that being a member of P’KWI has a significantly positive impact on economic wellbeing, knowledge and adoption of agronomic practices, especially among women. Co-operative membership has a particularly strong positive impact on women’s decision making power at the household, group and community levels. Intra-household domestic and farm related labour divisions, however, did not change as a result of co-operative membership and remain disadvantageous for women. The article concludes that agricultural co-operatives can make a significant difference for women’s empowerment, provided that they actively and consistently address the bottlenecks to achieve gender equality.

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1. Introduction

In developing contexts like sub-Saharan Africa, and especially in rural areas, women remain disempowered and gender inequalities persist even if societies are changing (Silberschmidt, 2001; World Bank, 2012). Recent studies have shown that there are significant gender gaps in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. The productivity of the plots managed by women has been found to be systematically lower than that of the plots managed by men (e.g. Aguilar, Carranza, Goldstein, Kilic, & Oseni, 2014; Ayalew, Bowen, Deininger, & Duponchel, 2015). Gender gaps in agriculture have been linked to gender differential access to and control over assets, information, labour and inputs, and higher child dependency ratios among women farmers (World Bank, 2014). Limited women’s empowerment and gender inequalities are also likely to encumber future sustainable agricultural production as these constrain women’s ability to adopt climate change adaptation strategies (Goh, 2012).

Studies have shown that reducing gender inequalities promotes economic growth, reduces poverty and closes productivity gaps, especially in agriculture (Ellis, Manuel, & Blackden, 2006; World Bank, 2012). The FAO (2011) projected a raise in agricultural productivity between 2.5 and 4 per cent in developing countries if women were to be empowered and gender inequalities were reduced.

Furthermore, gender inequalities and limited women’s agency have been shown to negatively affect the health, nutritional status and education of children, especially girls (Smith, Ramakrishnan, Ndiaye, Haddad, & Martorell, 2003; Quisumbing, Estudillo, & Otsuka, 2003; WHO, 2013). Limited empowerment of women can therefore undermine the potential of future generations and contribute to gender inequalities persevering across generations (World Bank, 2012). Women’s empowerment has been proven to have significant positive impacts on maternal and child health and education (Ellis et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2003; WHO 2013). Moreover, when women have greater agency and more rights in the political arena, there is more emphasis on public investments that favour children and consolidate women’s empowerment (World Bank, 2012).

The revival of co-operatives in Africa has been identified as a promising avenue to contribute to the economic and social empowerment of women and to reduce gender inequalities for a number of reasons (Majurin, 2012). Generally, co-operatives are lauded for their potential to improve livelihoods by addressing the eco-

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A cooperative, as defined by the ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193), is ‘an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise’ (Majurin, 2012).
nomic and social needs of rural populations in developing countries (Devleterere, Pollet, & Wanyama, 2008). Co-operatives are also appreciated in rural contexts as they combine business enterprises with a concern for communal welfare. Most importantly, theory and evidence indicate that notwithstanding a number of limitations, there can be significant direct benefits of co-operative membership for women’s empowerment and important indirect benefits through socio-economic improvement (Majurin, 2012). These will be discussed in detail in the review of theory and evidence.

The existing evidence on the empowering potential of co-operatives for women in sub-Saharan Africa is mainly based on case studies. There are a few larger N studies and cross-context comparative case studies. Evidence of a causal effect of co-operative membership on women’s empowerment is limited. This article aims to contribute quasi-experimental empirical evidence on the impact of membership of co-operatives on women’s empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa. It uses the Popular Knowledge Women’s Initiative (P’KWI) Farmer to Farmer Co-operative Society, an agricultural co-operative that operates in north-eastern Uganda, as a case study. More specifically, this paper will evaluate the impact of membership of the agricultural co-operative on women’s decision making power and their ability to influence decisions at the household, group and community levels and on intra-household labour divisions. It will also analyse the impact of co-operative membership on women’s empowerment in terms of enhanced capabilities by looking at the impact on economic wellbeing, livelihood diversification, knowledge and adoption of good agronomic practices and social networks.

By providing evidence of the extent to which co-operative membership can contribute to social and economic empowerment of women in sub-Saharan Africa, this study can convince policy makers that the promotion of co-operative membership of women as an avenue to address gender gaps in agriculture and to build future healthy, productive and equitable rural societies is a worthy investment.

2. Literature

Gender inequalities with regard to agency, resources, and achievements are grounded in prevailing gender relations, which are multi-dimensional and deep-rooted (Kabeer, 2005). Gender relations embody norms and values and define decision making power, roles, responsibilities and access to productive resources. As such, they govern different aspects of productive and reproductive life. In patriarchal societies, which typify many sub-Saharan African rural societies, gender relations are skewed against women (Silberschmidt, 2001). The multi-dimensional and deep-rooted nature of gender relations and inequalities, often embedded in institutions, makes it hard, though not impossible, to come up with a universally agreed set of targets and solutions to address these issues (Kabeer, 2005; Gammage, Kabeer, & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2016; Pease & Connell, 2015).

Women’s empowerment refers to the processes whereby gender constraints, which result from gender relations or norms that are disadvantageous to women or from economic or social inequalities, are lifted (Kabeer, 1999). Such processes enable women, who have been denied the ability or the freedom to make independent, well-reasoned choices, to acquire such ability and freedom (Agarwal, 1997; Gasper & van Staveren, 2003; Kabeer, 1999). One aspect of empowerment of women lies in enhanced and more effective individual agency, potentially reinforced through increased intra-household bargaining power or relaxed gender constraining roles (Kabeer, 2008).

Enhanced individual agency may not be enough to achieve structural changes in gender relations, which are defined by patriarchy for instance and are sustained by social norms (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1999). Women’s empowerment requires transformative agency (Kabeer, 1999; Gasper & van Staveren, 2003). Transformative agency cannot happen in the absence of enhanced individual agency, consciousness about social perceptions and their impact on one’s identity, roles and responsibilities, and collective agency. Being part of a group plays a significant role for transformative agency. It enhances people’s ability to challenge norms within and outside the household, through peer pressure and group solidarity, and by providing an arena outside the household where (gender) norms are negotiated and reconfirmed (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1999).

The theory of women’s empowerment, building on the seminal work by Agarwal (1997) and Kabeer (1999), and evidence from case studies show how co-operative membership can contribute to women’s empowerment through a combination of processes (Jones, Smith, & Wills, 2012). First, co-operative membership can contribute to women’s empowerment by offering them opportunities to increase individual agency. One of the ways that co-operatives can increase women’s individual agency is through economic enterprises that lift the intra-household bargaining power of women over the allocation of resources and time. Such economic enterprises, undertaken via the co-operative, can increase women’s access to resources, common resources and exchange entitlements (Agarwal, 1997; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011). For instance, in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, co-operative membership was found to be positively related to economic activity and the income of women as well as increased joint decision making by spouses, about household economics (Majurin, 2012). In addition, the economies of scale, commercial networks and increased credit worthiness attained via co-operatives can be advantageous for women as they generally operate with lesser means and less access to markets and financial support (Katungi, Edmeades, & Smale, 2008; Majurin, 2012).

Another way in which co-operatives can empower women by increasing individual agency is through service provision and skill development, especially when these are targeted at women who generally have lower education levels and have less access to agricultural extension services and inputs (Agarwal, 1997; Dol & Hambly Odame, 2013; Ferguson & Kepe, 2011; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011). Particularly if the extension is provided via women and a farmer to farmer approach is used, then its capacity enhancement and empowering potential can be significant (Kondylis, Mueller, & Zhu, 2014; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011).

In addition, in societies where women’s participation in the public sphere is limited because of gender-based norms, gendered division of labour and time constraints, a co-operative can open up opportunities for engaging in the economy, exchanging experiences, exercising voice and accessing leadership training and roles (Ferguson & Kepe, 2011; Majurin, 2012). For instance in Bangladesh, group marketing enabled women in a homestead food production program to overcome constraints in accessing markets due to ‘purdah’ (Hillenbrand, 2010).2 In India, economic and social resources and capacity building accessed through women self-help groups were found to contribute to women’s empowerment. Women in self-help groups gained mobility, were more aware about property and political rights, and had more decision making power within the household (IFAD/OD, 2000). These case studies also pointed out that women in co-operatives can gain more confidence and more respect within and outside their household—partly through the recognition of their economic potential. This may translate in a greater voice and agency within the household as well as in

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2 Purdah refers to a cultural practice of preventing men from seeing women (Hillenbrand, 2010).
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