



Exploring the potential of household methodologies to strengthen gender equality and improve smallholder livelihoods: Research in Malawi in maize-based systems



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Malawi
Gender
women's empowerment
Household methodologies
Maize-based systems
Climate-smart agriculture

ABSTRACT

Household methodologies (HHM) intervene directly in intra-household gender relations to strengthen overall smallholder agency and efficacy as economic agents and development actors. Strengthening women's agency is one mechanism for progressing towards collaborative, systemic farm management. It is expected this will contribute to improved farm resilience in the face of climate change, strengthen food and nutrition security, and improve other development indicators.

HHM are built around a vision, gendered analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), an action plan, and indicators. Some HHM - including Gender Action Learning Systems (GALS), the focus of the research - use drawings making them easy to use for low-literate individuals. There is considerable evaluation report evidence of the efficacy of HHM in strengthening value chains, food security, and gender equality. However, this has yet to be complemented by a robust systematic evaluation of the methodology which includes non-intervention communities as controls. Here we report on the findings of a research study into GALS in Malawi where the National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi (NASFAM) has been implementing GALS since 2013 with 4274 farmers (2821 women and 1453 men to May 2016). We held sex-disaggregated FGDs with 40 GALS households and 40 non-GALS households, all NASFAM members. Community profiles and a matrix activity focusing on task allocation, asset distribution, and expenditures by gender with 125 non-GALS and 135 GALS respondents were also conducted.

Our analyses indicate a significant shift towards sharing of on-farm tasks and household tasks, and joint realization of the benefits from agricultural produce in GALS households. They are building up portfolios of assets including livestock, houses, ox-carts, and land, unlike non-GALS households. Respondents in GALS households, particularly *de facto* women-headed households, report an increase in social standing and participation in community life. In both GALS and non-GALS households, men and women agree that men continue to dominate marketing and are final decision-makers. However, financial transparency and intra-household agreement on expenditures characterize households with GALS participants.

1. Introduction

The 'gender gap' in agriculture in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has become something of a mantra over the past decade. Indeed, a robust literature indicates that women's agricultural productivity on women-managed plots remains lower than that of men on men-managed plots. This is attributed to women's continuing weaker access, in comparison to men *in the same household*, to stocks of

capitals necessary for production: social, financial, human, natural, political, cultural, and physical (Farnworth and Colverson, 2015; World Bank, 2012; Peterman et al., 2014; FAO, 2010; Flora and Flora, 2008; Udry, 1996). Probably more than any other document, the FAO's State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA) Report (FAO, 2010) argument that '*if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 - 30 percent ...*' has shaped contemporary approaches to working on gender inequalities in agriculture.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaridenv.2017.10.009>

Received 5 June 2017; Received in revised form 23 October 2017; Accepted 23 October 2017

Available online 03 November 2017

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Numerous development interventions continue to be based on Women-in-Development (WID) type interventions - in practice if not in word, whereby women are singled out for economic empowerment initiatives in order to close the gender gap (UNWomen, no date; OECD, 2011).

FAO's claim in the SOFA Report appears to be predicated on the assumption that women and men in male-headed households will continue to manage their plots more-or-less separately, at least in SSA. We take issue with this claim by providing research evidence that some plots are jointly managed. Based on this evidence, we consider that interventions built on *expectations* of lack of jointness are misplaced. Instead, we posit that initiatives which foster effective **partnership** between women and men, based on fostering more equal gender relations, are more likely to result in higher productivity and other gains (see Farnworth and Colverson, 2015 for an extended discussion). We do not agree with the apparent assumption behind FAO's and broader work on women's economic empowerment that male productivity will remain unchanged whilst female productivity will increase if women are supported effectively. Rather, we posit that jointness is likely to have synergetic effects contributing to a number of benefits across the farm and within the household. (We also hypothesize that gender inequalities contribute to low *male* productivity in smallholder systems though this has not been researched to our knowledge.)

We consider that improvements in female productivity on smallholder farms in SSA to the extent envisaged by FAO is not achievable unless there are changes on an enormous scale in gender *relations*. Achieving this means shifting away from understanding gender as a characteristic of individuals which can somehow be strengthened, to understanding gender as an iterative dynamic process in which gender is constantly being 'remade'. Shifts and reconfigurations which strengthen women's gender interests and women's voice are unlikely to succeed unless men consider themselves partners *and* beneficiaries of this process. In our view, too much gender analysis has historically been constructed around explicit and implicit dichotomies - his assets, her assets - thus failing to pick up sufficiently on collaborative decision-making processes around assets (Djoudi et al., 2016 for a summary of 41 papers in relation to how gender is framed in relation to climate change; Johnson et al., 2016 for details of GAAP agricultural research worldwide). Analytic simplicity is not helpful and it can also be dangerous to women if programmes are designed on this basis. A number of studies indicate that male violence against women can increase when women are targeted for economic empowerment, though findings are not unanimous (GDSRC, 2012 for a summary of the evidence). There is also evidence that joint decision-making reduces violence (GDSRC, 2012).

In this paper, we examine the potential of a relatively new family of behavioural change methodologies termed household methodologies (HHM) for promoting joint decision-making in the household. They have emerged independently of formal science-led 'research for development' initiatives and have been developed primarily by NGOs (particularly OxfamNovib) and fostered by bilateral and multilateral agencies (especially SIDA and IFAD) in close collaboration with farmer organizations (Farnworth et al., 2013). Private sector organizations (TWIN, Divine, Nestlé, International Coffee Partners, and others) are now implementing HHM in various projects. Whilst the operational details differ, all HHM work to change gender relations within the 'black box' of the household. They do not aim to empower women at the seeming expense of men. Rather, they work to promote the understanding that unequal power relations between women and men may result in failures to make the best decisions possible, and thus contribute to poverty. Improving the gender equity of intra-household decision-making processes is expected to lead to improvements in how households marshal and manage resources across the farm and in off-farm activities, and lead to a more equitable distribution of the benefits to household members.

Before turning to the Malawi case study, we examine the concept of meaningful choice (Kabeer, 1999). We then provide an overview of

research into jointness in farm decision-making in sub-Saharan Africa. We return to these concepts in the conclusion to assess the extent to which the implementation of HHM in Malawi has promoted meaningful choice for women whilst stimulating jointness.

1.1. Intra-household decision-making and meaningful choice

In an attempt to clarify the concept of empowerment, Kabeer (1999) argues that one way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices: to be disempowered implies to be denied choice. The notion of empowerment is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which people who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. Empowerment implies a process of discovering new ways to exercise choice, or new domains in which choice might be exercised.

Choice self-evidently requires options, the ability to choose otherwise (Kabeer, 1999). Some choices have greater significance than others in terms of their importance for people's lives. First order choices are strategic life choices, such as choice of livelihood, where to live, who and whether to marry, whether and how many children to have, and so on. These are critical for people to live the lives they want. First order choices help frame second order choices which may be important for one's quality of life, but do not constitute its defining parameters. The ability to exercise choice can be thought of in terms of three inter-related dimensions:

Resources (preconditions) → Agency (process) → Achievements (outcomes)

Resources include material, human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to make choice. *Agency* is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency can take the form of decision-making, of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as the processes of reflection and analysis. Agency has positive and negative meanings in relation to power. In the positive sense of 'power to', it relates to people's capacity to define their own life choices and to pursue their own goals. 'Power over' refers to the capacity of people to override the agency of others. 'Power with' refers to the capacity to augment power through collective action. Power can also exist in the absence of any apparent agency. For example, the norms and rules governing social behaviour tend to ensure that certain outcomes are reproduced without obvious exercise of agency (Kabeer, 1999).

Over the past two decades or so, considerable attention has been paid to researching individual agency and how to strengthen it, to the extent that some researchers prefer to use the word *autonomy* rather than agency. For instance, Acharya et al. (2010) argue that women's *autonomy* in decision-making is a critical variable to securing beneficial outcomes. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) is constructed around the agency aspect of Kabeer's definition of strategic choice. The WEAI is an aggregate index, reported at the country or regional level, which is based on individual-level data on men and women within the same households. It has two sub-indexes: (1) five domains of women's empowerment (5DE) and (2) gender parity index. The 5DE sub-index measures how empowered women are vis-a-vis men regarding: (1) decisions over agricultural production, (2) access to and decision-making power over productive resources, (3) control over use of income, (4) leadership in the community, and (5) time use (Malapit et al., 2015). The production domain measures women's input into agricultural decisions, and their *autonomy in production* [our italics], "for example, what inputs to buy, what crops to grow, what livestock to raise, and so on - [this] reflects the extent to which the respondent's motivation for decision-making reflects his or her values." (Alkire et al., 2013).

Explicit and implicit analytic and interpretative frameworks, such as the WEAI, are premised on male: female dichotomies, appear to assume

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