

Trends In Women Participation in Coffee Cooperatives in Kiambu County

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<https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v5i2.343>

Abstract

Trends in women participation in agricultural cooperatives reveal the progress of interventions and persistent challenges in coffee cooperatives. Women participation rates in coffee cooperatives in Kenya has remained significantly low, hence it is necessary to analyze the trends so as to determine necessary intervention to keep the trends positive in coffee cooperatives. The study was guided by Gender and Development (GAD) theory and a descriptive research design whereby a sample of 398 respondents was selected through simple random for questionnaire respondents and purposive sampling for interviewees. Data collection involved questionnaires for cooperative members and in-depth interviews with managers, chairpersons and key informant interviews for cooperative officers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed notable upward trends in women's participation in membership, involvement in educational forums, improvements in leadership roles and decision-making processes. However, significant gaps remain, particularly in women's access to leadership opportunities and information. The study recommended sustained efforts to enhance women's access to leadership positions, training and information-sharing mechanisms to support continued growth in gender equality.

Keywords: Coffee Cooperatives, Coffee Sector, Trends, Women Participation

Introduction

Globally, women play a vital role in agricultural cooperatives, yet their participation often remains constrained by structural, cultural and institutional barriers. In the United States, women constitute 36% of agricultural producers and 28% of cooperative CEOs, but gender wage gaps and limited leadership opportunities persist (USDA, 2023). Similarly, in Asia, women's participation in agricultural cooperatives is as low as 10–20%, despite their significant contributions to agriculture. Institutional and cultural restrictions, coupled with a heavy burden of unpaid work, continue to hinder women's decision-making authority and access to resources (Thornton, 2020). Coffee cooperatives worldwide illustrate this disparity, with women contributing a significant portion of labor yet occupying minimal leadership roles or having limited access to resources (Alemán Salcedo et al., 2020).

Despite the recognition of cooperatives as drivers of sustainable rural development, women's participation in leadership and membership within these entities remains disproportionately low. Globally, women represent only 30% of cooperative members and 20% of leadership roles, even as they contribute extensively to agricultural labor (World Cooperative Monitor, 2023). In Kenya, women make up over 70% of the labor force in coffee cooperatives yet comprise less than 40% of members and only 10% of leaders (Cooperative Alliance of Kenya, 2022). In Kiambu County, a significant coffee-producing region, women's participation is reported at 27–30%, restricted by socio-cultural norms and governance exclusions. Efforts to address these gaps have been insufficient, with cooperatives often failing to implement gender responsive policies or governance structures effectively (Global Communities, 2022).

Although there have been efforts to enhance gender equality in cooperatives, studies primarily focus on barriers and strategies without adequately addressing the evolving trends on socio-cultural, institutional and economic dynamics that influence women participation (Woldu et al., 2015; Bala & Ahuja, 2023). In Kenya's coffee sector, the play on trends remains underexplored, limiting the ability to craft impactful interventions. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining trends in women participation, aiming to determine necessary interventions to promote gender equity and enhance cooperative sustainability.

The study is grounded in the Gender and Development (GAD) theory, which provides an understanding of the trends in women participation by addressing the structural power dynamics and social norms that shape gender roles (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1994). It critiques the Women in Development (WID) approach which primarily sought to integrate women into existing systems as GAD emphasize on transforming gender relations to promote equity. By applying the GAD framework, the study examines trends in how to influence women participation, decision-making power and access to cooperative benefits, highlighting shifts towards greater inclusivity and equity over time.

Materials and Methods

Study Context

The study was conducted in Kiambu County, Kenya which is one of the 47 counties with a population of 2,417,735 across 796,241 households, predominantly Kikuyu, with a density of 990/km² (KNBS, 2019). It has 12 sub-counties situated between longitudes 36° 31' and 37° 15' East and latitudes 0° 25' and 1° 20' South. It has a diverse topography with cooler highlands supporting tea and dairy farming and warmer lowlands ideal for coffee and horticulture (Council of Governors, 2018).

Kiambu county receives an average annual rainfall of 1,200 mm and has soils such as; volcanic, upland and plateau that supports various agricultural activities (County Government of Kiambu, 2021). It provides a unique socio-economic and policy landscape since it is the leading producer and earner of coffee in Kenya with a rural-urban mix and influenced by its proximity to Nairobi. This diversity made Kiambu an ideal site for examining trends in women participation in coffee cooperatives, offering insights to bridge gaps in regional research so as to determine interventions that will enhance gender equality in Kiambu County (Council of Governors, 2018).

Methods

The research adopted a descriptive research design which offered a clear and comprehensive portrayal of the trends in women participation and facilitate a deeper understanding of the nuances and patterns within the data collected in coffee cooperatives (McCombes, 2023). It used Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula where a sample of 381 coffee cooperative members was drawn from seven cooperatives located in the primary coffee-growing sub-counties of Githunguri, Gatundu South and Gatundu North in Kiambu County.

Additionally, In-Depth Interviews were conducted with seven Cooperative Managers and seven Chairpersons of Management Board to capture leadership perspectives, while three Cooperative Officers participated in Key Informant Interviews to provide expert insights. Qualitative data was analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis using NVivo software and quantitative data was quantitatively analyzed through descriptive statistics using Jamovi software. Quantitative data was presented in tables and figures whereas qualitative data was presented in narrative summaries.

Results And Discussions

Demographic Information of the Respondents

The researcher sought to establish the demographic information of the respondents addressing gender, age, education, marital status and monthly income. In terms of the gender of respondents who were involved in the research, 54.3% were female while 45.7% were male. The response implies that the gender representation in this research was fair enough for analysis. In terms of age, 102(32.4%) fell in the age bracket of 18-35, 139(44.1%) fell in the age bracket of 36-53 years, 65(20.6%) were in the age bracket of above 54-71 years while 9(2.9%) fell in the age bracket of 71 years and above. Majority being aged 36-53 years and minority 54-71 years. The result implied that while coffee sector is known to be dominated by old farmers, youth were also embracing coffee farming.

On levels of education, 84(27%) had attended up to college/ university, 73(23%) attended other institutions of higher learning. On the other hand, 66(21%) participants in the study had attended up to primary level of education, while 92(29%) had attended up to secondary level of education. Majority had attended up to secondary level while minority attended up to primary school level. The results implied that most of the coffee cooperative members had fairly good level of education, hence had adequate knowledge and understanding about coffee cooperatives.

On marital status, 41(13.0%) are divorced, 176(55.9%) are married, 59(18.7%) were single and 39(12.4%) are widowed. Majority were married while minority were widowed. On monthly household income, 61(19.4%) participants earned between 0 and 9,999, while 62(19.7%) earned between 10,000 and 19,999, 75 (23.8%) earn between 20,000 and 29,999, 62(19.7%) earn between 30,000 and 39,999, 26(8.3%) earn

between 40,000 and 49,999 and 29(9.2%) earn above 50,000. Majority earned between 20,000 and 29,999 while the minority earned between 40,000 and 49,999. The results implied a mixture on the monthly household income, showing that most members earned low to moderate income which could hinder the operation of the family.

The focus of the study was respondents' Trends in Women Participation in Coffee Cooperatives

perception of trends in women participation in coffee cooperatives. The study sought to determine whether respondents perceived trends in involvement of women in decision-making roles, women joining the coffee cooperative, women accessing of information, women attending education forums, leadership and the voice of women is being heard in the coffee cooperative over the last two years.

Table 1: Trends in Women Participation in Coffee Cooperatives

Statement	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
There is an increase in involvement of women in decision-making roles in your coffee cooperative.	165 (52.4)	109 (34.6)	41 (13.0)
There is an upward shift in the number of women who join your coffee cooperative.	220 (69.8)	31 (9.8)	64 (20.3)
There has been an increase in women's access of information in your cooperative.	117 (37.1)	133 (42.2)	65 (20.6)
There is an increase in the number of women who attend education forums in your coffee cooperative.	151 (47.9)	97 (30.8)	67 (21.3)
There is a noticeable shift towards increased leadership roles for women in your coffee cooperative.	159 (50.5)	91 (28.9)	65 (20.6)
The voice of women is being heard in the coffee cooperative.	135 (42.9)	148 (47.0)	32 (10.2)

As seen in table 1, for all the trends in women participation factors analyzed, most of the respondents indicated an upward shift in women participation in coffee cooperatives. The factor on which the highest proportion of respondents indicated an increase in women participation was the number of women who had joined the coffee cooperative over the last two years. A total of 220(69.8%) respondents indicated that there had been an upward shift in the number of women who had joined the coffee cooperative, suggesting that many members had observed an increase in women participation that potentially reflected efforts to attract and include more women in cooperative activities. Additionally, 31(9.8%) respondents reported that there had not been an upward shift, revealing that these respondents perceived stability or a decline in women membership. Lastly, 64(20.3%) respondents were uncertain, indicating lack of awareness or clarity among members regarding recent trends in membership dynamics.

In an IDIs, respondents consistently made statements that pointed to the increase in the number of women joining the coffee cooperatives as captured in an IDI with Chairperson of Management Board who stated.

Most women who were members of the coffee cooperative had access to land and especially family land that was under the management of their husbands. Regardless, most women who were rejoining the coffee cooperative are the ones who have lost their husbands as they have full control of the land.

The findings emphasized that continued efforts to attract and retain women members could enhance gender inclusivity within the cooperative. This finding was consistent with a study by Dohmworth and Liu (2020) which concluded that mixed-gender cooperatives and women-only cooperatives were equally effective at empowering women. But most women were more likely to be able to access women-only cooperatives because they had less access to mixed-gender cooperatives.

Analysis revealed an increase in the involvement of women in decision-making roles within the coffee cooperative over the last two years to be the second most trend. Out of 315 respondents, 165(52.4%) respondents indicated that there had been an increase in the involvement of women in decision-making roles, implying that many members had observed positive changes towards greater gender inclusivity in leadership and decision-making processes. In addition, 109(34.6%) respondents reported that there had not been an increase, implying that these respondents perceived limited progress or no change in promoting gender equity. Lastly, 41(13.0%) respondents were uncertain, indicating a lack of awareness or clarity among members regarding recent developments in leadership dynamics.

In an IDIs, respondents consistently made statements that didn't pointed to the increase in the involvement of women in decision-making roles within the coffee cooperative as captured in an IDI with Chairperson of Management Board who stated;

As a coffee cooperative, we appreciate the role of women but in terms of decision making, the participation is still not there. Women are often held up with home and family chores that hinder them in leadership roles that in turn will need them to be involved in decision making. Additionally, most women don't take the initiative for such positions.

These findings showed that addressing barriers and promoting opportunities for women's leadership could enhance gender equity within the coffee cooperative. The finding was inconsistent with a study by Hamid (2021) that showed that women continued to have less authority than males do, even if they are heavily involved in agriculture and decision-making.

Analysis revealed that a noticeable shift towards increased leadership roles for women in the coffee cooperative over the last two years was the third most trend. A total of 159(50.5%) respondents indicated that there had been a noticeable shift towards increased leadership roles for women in the coffee cooperative, implying that many members had observed progress aimed at promoting women into leadership positions within the cooperative. On the other hand, 91(28.9%) respondents reported that there had not been a noticeable shift towards increased leadership roles for women, implying that these respondents perceived limited progress or no change in efforts to enhance gender equity in leadership within the cooperative. Lastly, 65(20.6%) respondents were uncertain, showing a lack of awareness or clarity among members regarding recent developments in leadership dynamics.

IDIs and KIIs data emphasized the importance of increased leadership roles for women as captured in an IDI with manager who stated.

I have witnessed in our coffee cooperative, the arrangement of trainings that are meant to increase our member's skills and knowledge so as to trigger women to take leadership roles. These trainings have empowered some but their fully potential has not yet been realized.

The findings highlighted that continued efforts to promote and support women's leadership within the cooperative could enhance gender inclusivity and representation in decision-making processes. The findings aligned with a study by Lebailly (n.d.) that showed that society acknowledged women, they

received training on women's empowerment and were urged to engage in their cooperative's decision-making processes.

An increase in the number of women who attended education forums in the coffee cooperative over the last two years was the fourth most trend. A total of 151(47.9%) respondents indicated that there had been an increase in the number of women who attended education forums in the coffee cooperative over the last two years, showing that many members had observed greater women participation in educational activities and forums organized by the cooperative hence potentially reflecting efforts to enhance women's knowledge and skills. On the other hand, 97(30.8%) respondents reported that there had not been an increase implying that these respondents perceived stability or a decline in women participation in educational events despite efforts to promote attendance. Lastly, 67(21.3%) respondents were uncertain, indicating a lack of awareness or limited information among members regarding recent trends in participation.

In-depth interview data supported the view that education was crucial for empowering women within cooperatives as shown with the manager who stated;

Training goes hand in hand with education. As long as there is training in the coffee cooperative, an education will be acquired. Through our training programs, women have been motivated to participate in educational forum as they receive benefits such as firsthand and timely information of the cooperative's activities and planned events.

The findings showed that continued efforts to promote and facilitate women's participation in educational activities could contribute to enhancing knowledge and empowerment within the cooperative. These findings were consistent with a study by Velásquez-Rodríguez and Payán-Durán (2021) showing that farmers that possessed education were likely to be more aware of the advantages of belonging to a coffee cooperative and so have a favorable correlation with membership in the organization.

Analysis revealed that the voice of women was being heard in the coffee cooperative over the last two years was the fifth trend. Out of 315 respondents, 135(42.9%) respondents indicated that they believed the voice of women was being heard in the coffee cooperative, implying that some members perceived progress or efforts towards greater inclusion and recognition of women's perspectives within cooperative decision-making processes. Additionally, 148(47.0%) respondents reported that they did not believe the voice of women was being heard, implying that these respondents perceived barriers that continue to limit the effective participation and influence of women in cooperative governance and activities. Lastly, 32(10.2%) respondents were uncertain, indicating lack of clarity or awareness among members regarding recent changes or initiatives aimed at promoting gender inclusivity.

IDIs and KIIs data revealed ongoing challenges that amplified women's voices hence as indicated in interview with KII by cooperative officer who stated.

My observation throughout this sub-county, I have seen most coffee cooperative member increase and especially in women. This observation may not necessarily indicate that their voice is being heard in the coffee cooperative, but it sure shows there is potential in numbers.

Despite the findings they were inconsistent with a study by Suharno (2020); Manu et al. (2021) that showed that women were now actively participating in cooperative meetings as well as village gatherings and were given a voice and women held positions of power in cooperative societies and were able to negotiate and effect change as their opinions were taken into consideration and acknowledged.

An increase in women's access to information in the cooperative over the past few years was the least trend. A total of 117(37.1%) respondents indicated that there had been an increase in women's access to information, showing that some members perceived improvements in providing information to women a potential at enhancing their engagement and participation. Additionally, 133(42.2%) respondents reported that there had not been an increase in women's access to information, suggesting that these respondents did not perceive significant changes or improvements in how information was made accessible to women within the cooperative. Lastly, 65(20.6%) respondents were uncertain, indicating lack of awareness or clarity among members regarding recent efforts aimed at improving information access for women. These findings emphasized that addressing barriers to information access could potentially improve engagement and inclusivity. The findings were consistent with a study by Tsige et al. (2020) that revealed that cultural norms prevented women from speaking with males while their spouses were not around, which further prevented them from using resources. Hence, women's movements were limited and in turn it limited their access to information.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals a notable upward trend in women's participation in coffee cooperatives, particularly in membership growth, leadership roles and engagement in educational forums. A significant proportion of respondents observed an increase in women joining cooperatives over the past two years, suggesting that targeted efforts to attract female members were yielding positive results. However, while there are indications of increased involvement in decision-making and leadership, many respondents perceive that women's voices remained underrepresented. Despite the strides made, barriers such as social norms, household responsibilities and limited access to information persisted. These findings underscore the importance of sustained efforts to address structural and cultural challenges that hinder full gender equality in cooperatives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that cooperatives should continue to equip women with leadership skills and increase their confidence in taking up decision-making roles. Also, address socio-cultural barriers that hinder women and improve access to information so as to ensure sustainable gender inclusivity and equality.

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