

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN THE COFFEE VALUE CHAIN IN KANUNGU DISTRICT, UGANDA

A case study of using the GALS
and VSLAs methodologies



 **FARM AFRICA**

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the backbone of Kanungu District's economy with bananas, beans, cassava, coffee, maize, matoke, peas, potatoes, rice, sorghum, sweet potatoes, tea and tobacco being the main crops grown. The fertile soils and conducive climate allow for adequate crop production both for subsistence and commercial use. Livestock is reared at a much lower scale compared to crops; with most cattle reared for milk production, while small ruminants, particularly goats and sheep, and a few pigs are reared for meat. The district also gets revenue from the tourism sector based in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, which is the habitat of a significant proportion of the world's population of mountain gorillas.

Although coffee is an essential source of income for smallholder farmers in Kanungu District, women, the key suppliers of labour, have limited access to the income resulting from the sale of this commodity. This is partly due to their limited access to productive assets, particularly land and financial capital, but also socio-cultural constructs that limit their participation in household decision-making.

"Women producers lack access to land and coffee trees, making it difficult to earn a living from coffee farming in their own right. Although equal land rights are enshrined in the law, in practice, patrilineal customary laws take precedence, meaning women are rarely perceived to be equal joint landholders with husbands. Widows and divorced women frequently face the possibility of eviction."*

While access to finance is an issue for both female and male smallholder farmers, women, in particular, suffer access issues due to their lack of assets (typically land) for collateral. They also have limited knowledge of financial services such as loans, semi-formal finance options, and savings associations, which could help

ease these cash flow difficulties. Unreliable and infrequent payments further impede cash flow by coffee growers' cooperatives (CGCs) (Farm Africa, 2018). This reduces available cash and savings to cover household needs or to buy inputs for subsequent seasons and can encourage farm gate selling of green coffee to intermediaries offering lower prices to meet household cash demands.

Most coffee farmers sell their produce through their coffee cooperatives with predominantly male leadership and an under-representation of women in membership at that level. As such discriminatory policies and practices persist. Women in leadership positions may lack sufficient training and self-esteem to be effective in their roles (Farm Africa, 2018).

In September 2019, Farm Africa launched a project in Kanungu district aimed at empowering women in the coffee value chain. The project worked with CGCs and communities to increase the incomes of 2,640 women coffee producers, strengthen their household decision-making power and increase access to resources, enhance the capacity of CGCs to ensure women can leverage market opportunities while also engaging local stakeholders to recognise and reward women's participation within the coffee value chain.

This project aligned with UKAID's strategic objective 4 on "Tackling extreme poverty and helping the world's most vulnerable", and specifically sub objective 4.1 on "Strive to eliminate extreme poverty by 2030 and support the world's poorest people to access sustainable basic services". The project further contributed towards the global goals of [SDG 1](#) (End poverty in its all forms everywhere), [SDG 5](#) (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) and [SDG 10](#) (Reduce inequality).



PROJECT APPROACH

The project was funded by matched funding from the UK government unlocked by Farm Africa's Coffee is Life UK Aid Match appeal in 2019. The project had three broad objectives:

- 1) Households are supported to enable women coffee producers to have better access to resources and participate in decision making over resources and expenditure at the household level
- 2) The capacity of coffee growing cooperatives is enhanced to ensure women can leverage market opportunities
- 3) Local stakeholders are more engaged with the benefits of recognising and rewarding women's participation within the coffee value chain

For these objectives to be realised, the project adopted a combination of reinforcing approaches including [Gender Action Learning System \(GALS\)](#), [Village Savings and Loan Associations \(VSLAs\)](#) and Family Coffee Business Management (FCBM) approach.

The GALS approach involved sensitising households on planning, visioning, gender awareness and gender balancing in the coffee value chain. Strategies to improve production and removing production barriers such as access to land, agro-inputs and resources were explored. Tools

like voluntary land use agreements and advocacy were used. Leadership training was provided to women's groups and women members in the cooperatives. This included formation of policies, and cooperative governance structures, including establishment of 160 gender champions and women-led committees.

Access to resources, especially financial capital was addressed through the establishment of VSLAs. A total of 160 VSLAs were initiated and supported with saving kits. VSLAs played a role in building savings and unlocking financing options for women's businesses that led to increases in their household income, which were used by families to improve education for children where many members have been able to pay school fees for their children. Others have used the incomes to access medical care for their children.

FCBM training was rolled out to sensitise the women about the coffee business and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). Emphasis was placed on good record keeping, while demonstrating the cost benefits of engaging in coffee production in comparison to other agricultural-related enterprises such as tea production. This eventually helped women make informed investment decisions, and revealed coffee production within Kanungu district as the most viable option.

* Gender and the coffee value chain (Farm Africa, 2018)



KEY RESULTS

Between April and June 2021, Farm Africa engaged an external consultant to conduct an end term evaluation of the project. The exercise entailed collecting quantitative and qualitative data from a statistically drawn sample of 526 women in the coffee value chain. Quantitative data was collected through a household survey, whereas qualitative data was gathered through focus group discussions (13 FGDs) and key informant interviews (26 KIIs). Some of the key results include:

- Women from 2,640 coffee-growing households in Kanungu had improved access to, and control over incomes, strengthened household level decision-making power, and increased access to resources and market opportunities.
- Improvement in the overall Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEIA) score from an average of 22% at baseline to 87% at the project endline. The success was mainly attributed to GALS approach training that made men appreciate joint household decision making with their spouse, sustained radio advocacy on shared land use among spouses and youth, among other project initiatives.

- Improvement in average WEIA **resource score** from 14% at baseline to 88% at endline. This score shows improvement in women's ownership and control of productive resources. For instance, the proportion of women with sole control of land for coffee production increased from a baseline of 20% to 72% at project end. The proportion of women with joint control increased from a baseline of 14% to 28%. These results are due to increased appreciation and uptake of the voluntary land use agreements, the roles played by gender champions and sustained advocacy initiatives across the project area.

- The WEIA **income score** improved from 31% at baseline to 96% at endline. More women reported increased income from coffee production and increased control on how this income was utilised. As a result, some women have reinvested part of the income and loans from VSLAs into diversified livelihood opportunities including rearing livestock such as cows and goats to supplement household incomes. Others have moved from temporary housing structures into more permanent housing and have enrolled children into private boarding schools, which has enabled children to access quality education, among other benefits.

- The WEIA score for women's **participation in leadership positions** improved from a score of 32% at baseline to 88% at endline. As a result, more women took up leadership roles in cooperatives, due to the leadership training provided by the project in the households, women's groups and cooperatives. This has also improved their confidence in public speaking.

- The WEIA score for **productive decision making** improved from a score of 22% at baseline to 92% at endline.



- 1,266 voluntary land use agreements were signed following project support on advocacy and sensitisation initiatives. This has resulted in more land being freed up for coffee production for at least 75% of women reached by the project.

- Establishment of 160 women VSLAs, which led to improved access to finance among women. Over UGX 608 Million (approx \$164,324) was cumulatively saved by VSLAs and about UGX 834 Million (approx \$225,405) loans had been given out at 5-10% interest per month.



KEY LESSONS AND SUCCESS FACTORS

➤ VSLAs increase access to informal financial mechanisms among rural women, qualify them for semi-formal and formal financial services, and also act as strong agents of entrenching principles of leadership and confidence. More women assumed leadership positions within VSLAs and other community engagements including being more involved in provision of farmer extension services.

➤ Women are susceptible to exploitative and expensive forms of finance: VSLAs are excellent options for unlocking financing opportunities to women in agriculture. They provide a saving option, which allows women to access loans against their savings. However, interest charged on the loans is quite high at 5% to 10% per month, compared to standard lending rates by bank at 22% per annum. This makes a VSLA loan despite being easily accessible compared to banks, an expensive option, which could limit its sustainability as an alternative lending option.

➤ Voluntary land use agreements have the capacity to increase women's access to land for agricultural production as observed in the key results. However, successful implementation of the land use agreements could be threatened by misconceptions and misinformation when targeted awareness is not

conducted among males. For instance, there were instances where men repossessed coffee gardens after they had been improved by women's efforts, which demoralised a number of women from engaging in coffee-related activities. In some cases, women indicated that they were allocated land that was least productive, hard to till, and required a lot of work for meaningful production.

➤ GALS is an effective approach for gender empowerment especially in the agricultural sector. Despite the gains realised on improvements in WEEIA scores, projects utilising this approach require more than a year in implementation to realistically deliver sustainable results.

➤ Implementation of the GALS approach would benefit from integrating a male engagement strategy to deal with issues of male resistance to freeing access to land and other productive resources as well as participation in decision making. Part of the male engagement strategy could focus on creating awareness around the objectives of GALS. Some women for instance noted that whereas the land use agreements unlocked opportunities where men allocated them land for coffee production, this also saw men neglect their household responsibilities as they believed women no longer required their support now that they have land to produce and generate income.

➤ Access to land and financial resources are the two major challenges affecting engagement of women in productive agriculture. By unlocking these barriers, the project enabled more women and youth to venture into coffee production to improve their wellbeing and incomes.

➤ Increases in household income and empowering women can help tackle intergenerational poverty and can improve living standards.

➤ Access to quality education is interlinked with women's economic empowerment: the women engaged in the project enrolled their children in better schools after being economically empowered. Sharing of household decision making contributed to an improved quality of living.

CONCLUSION

A combination of methodologies and approaches such as VSLA and GALS resulted in the achievements outlined above. While we noticed several changes at the impact and outcome levels, in order for us to sustain the efforts it is important that we direct our efforts on gender transformative approaches, using intersectional analysis for a lasting change. Increases in household income led to families investing in their children's education and health whereby the project to some extent tackled the issue of intergenerational poverty. This highlights the importance of increasing and measuring Living Income where donors can consider investments in generating data and learning on how net income can be calculated and measured and its impacts on households' living standards.

"Farm Africa taught us good methods of farming like emphasising mulching, pruning and digging of trenches to increase coffee yields. Farm Africa also trained our group on how to work together as a cooperative. Farm Africa introduced the VSLA to us and emphasised looking at farming as a business, where record keeping was essential to monitor progress. Now, my family is able to cater for the school fees using our improved income because I practise good farming practices."

Ninsiima Patience



WRITTEN BY DR RITU MAHENDRU, MARCH 2022
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