

The Effect of Gendered Power Relations on Food Production Among Female-Headed Households in Mbarara District, Southwestern Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of gendered power relations on food production among female-headed households in Mbarara District, Southwestern Uganda. The study undertook a cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis. A sample size of 186 respondents was selected randomly from the targeted households in the Mbarara district. Data gathered from the questionnaires was coded, entered into SPSS, and analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Results show that there is a positive significant relationship between gendered power relations and food production among female-headed households in the Mbarara District ($r=0.689^{**}$; $p<.01$). Findings revealed that having control over resources, planning together, and respecting gender roles at household have a positive effect on food production among female-headed households. The study concluded that there is a significant positive relationship between gendered power relations and food production among female-headed households in the Mbarara district. The study recommends that there is a need to advocate for equality in decision-making at household among female-headed households in Mbarara District, southwestern Uganda.

Keywords: Gendered, Power Relations, Food, Production, female-headed, Households

Introduction

Gendered power relations refer to the way males and females exercise influence at the household level in terms of decision-making, planning, resource utilization and executing family affairs from time to time (Agarwal, 1997; Manser & Brown, 1979). These relations define how females and males interrelate while taking steps to handle issues of managing and utilizing resources as well as handling overall family welfare at the household level (Bohren et al., 2024; Weeratunge et al., 2016). Drawing from the traditional African society perspective, gendered power relations are that aspect that defines family norms, roles and values (Heise et al., 2019; Ponthieux & Meurs, 2015). Gender power relations influence food production in many developing countries, as land which is a major factor of production is

largely seen and viewed as a preserve of men to control (Croppenstedt et al., 2013; Rao, 2006). The situation is even more complex among female-headed households, where despite females being household heads, society seems not to trust them with the absolute power they deserve to manage and utilize resources for food production (Agarwal, 1997; Fonjong et al., 2013). This puts the female heads of these households in a more vulnerable state as well as their families (Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2020). In effect, their livelihoods are affected as manifested in terms of inadequate household income, food insecurity, health status, as well as compromised psychological well-being (Myers, 2020; Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2020).

In Mbarara District, female-headed households especially the widowed are entrapped in a challenging socioeconomic livelihood dilemma owing to gendered power relations conflict emanating from the extended family setup (Busingye et al., 2018; Rwangire & Kabeba Muriisa, 2021). The family system which is embedded in an extended family setup has in most cases rendered the would-be female heads, to remain without a say on resources that are theirs (Boonabana, 2015; Rwangire & Kabeba Muriisa, 2021). The UBOS Report 2022 indicate that female-headed households showed a 49% multi-dimensional poverty level compared to their counterparts, male-headed who were at 39%. Similarly, a study by Kes et al (2011) reported that only 30% of female heads of households had full ownership of land in a study done in Masaka district, Central Uganda, with 41% having partial ownership whereas 29% had no control. So far, poverty and land ownership are the two indicators of socioeconomic livelihoods investigated with empirical evidence in the Ugandan context. Studies by Busingye et al. (2018); Nakazawa (2017); and Rwangire and Kabeba Muriisa (2021) on the socioeconomic livelihood of female-headed households, found that female household heads are socioeconomically disadvantaged in terms of land rights, access to finance and decision making at the family level. Whereas these studies were done in rural Southwestern Uganda, where the present study was conducted, the effect of gendered power relations and socioeconomic livelihoods of female-headed households, was not spelt out. This is a basis upon which this study was conducted with a special focus on Mbarara District.

Objective

To identify the effect of gendered power relations on food production among female-headed households in Mbarara District, Southwestern Uganda.

Justification

Studies by Akampumuza and Matsuda (2017); Balikoowa et al. (2019); Busingye et al. (2018); Mwesigye (2021); Nakazi et al. (2017); Nalule (2015) show that female-headed households are prone to vulnerabilities and poverty. In rural communities of Uganda, food production is the main source of livelihood ensuring food security for households and a source of income through selling the surplus harvests. A significant number of female heads of families face a lot of resistance from the family systems in trying to utilize the land for food production. The situation is worse when they try to mortgage the land and acquire financial support from financial institutions to invest in agriculture. These challenges have left many female-headed households in a more vulnerable and disadvantaged state of affairs. Available information on this subject is largely in the form of newspaper columns and opinions, leaving gaps that would have provided tangible empirical evidence to measure the magnitude of the problem. The current study internalized how gendered power relations affect food production in Mbarara District, Southwestern Uganda.

Methodology

The study employed a cross-section research design utilizing a quantitative approach. A sample size of 186 respondents was randomly selected from eight sub-counties of the Mbarara District in rural southwestern Uganda. These were subjected to a questionnaire survey method of data collection through interviews. Before field data collection, quality control of questionnaires was ensured through validity and reliability. By reliability, the tool was undertaken through pre-testing in the field and Cronbach Alpha was calculated. Validity was ensured through expert rating to ensure internal consistency. Data collected through these questionnaires was thoroughly checked for completeness, coded and entered into SPSS version 21 for analysis. Data analysis utilized descriptive such as frequencies, percent, mean and standard deviations and inferential statistics particularly Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The study was approved by Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Research Ethics Committee (MUST-2022-703) and Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (SS2293ES). In the field, authorization was obtained from the Mbarara District Chief Administrative Officer and each participant gave informed consent following an oral interaction with the research team. In this aspect, respondents were assured of confidentiality, their rights of participation as well as privacy.

Results

How gendered power relations have affected food production among female-headed households

To understand how gendered power relations have affected food production among female-headed households, participants were asked for opinions on how gendered power relations have affected food production among female-headed households. The elicited results in this section are presented in Table

Table 1: How gendered power relations have affected food production among female-headed households

Statements	Response rate (Frequency/Percent)					Mean	Std.
	SD (1)	D (2)	NS (3)	A (4)	SA (5)		
Females have access to land for food production	75 (40.3%)	42 (22.6%)	0 (0.0%)	50 (26.9%)	19 (10.2%)	2.80	.240
Females greatly mobilize resources like planting materials	10 (5.4%)	18 (9.7%)	0 (0.0%)	65 (34.9%)	93 (50%)	2.77	.287
My old male children are the ones who decide where/how I should use the land	8 (4.3%)	19 (10.2%)	0 (0.0%)	159 (85.5%)	0 (0.0%)	3.97	.930
Females have control over resources in food production	28 (15.1%)	115 (61.8%)	0 (0.0%)	43 (23.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2.57	.287
My in-laws are the ones who decide where crops should be grown and which crops to grow.	10 (5.4%)	29 (15.6%)	0 (0.0%)	64 (34.4%)	83 (44.6%)	3.90	.901
Females in this household collaborate with males in food production	57 (30.6%)	56 (30.1%)	0 (0.0%)	73 (39.2%)	0 (0.0%)	2.48	.287
Both females and males are actively involved in land preparation for food	28 (15.1%)	64 (34.4%)	0 (0.0%)	64 (34.4%)	30 (16.1%)	3.98	.795

production in our household.							
Females are more involved in all stages of food production than men	8 (4.3%)	37 (19.9%)	0 (0.0%)	85 (45.7%)	56 (30.1%)	1.77	.203
Crop growing is to females as animal husbandry is to males in our household	83 (44.6%)	75 (40.3%)	9 (4.8%)	10 (5.4%)	9 (4.8%)	1.03	.254
Females participate in land use planning more than males.	111 (59.7%)	47 (25.3%)	19 (10.2%)	9 (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)	2.25	.194
Females compared to their male counterparts determine food for sale and food for home consumption.	101 (54.3%)	37 (19.9%)	10 (5.4%)	9 (4.8%)	29 (15.6%)	3.86	.864
Females do not have a say on what crops to grow or what livestock to keep in the household.	9 (4.8%)	104 (55.9%)	10 (5.4%)	37 (19.9%)	26 (14%)	2.54	.278

Results in Table 1 indicate that most of the respondents 40.3% strongly disagreed with this view whereas the least 10.2% agreed with this viewpoint. This finding confirms the existence of barriers to land access among females in food production in the Mbarara District. And with such barriers, the pursuit of attaining socioeconomic livelihoods among these females headed households lies in the horns of dilemma.

It was established that most of the respondents 50% strongly agreed with the statement put to them that females mobilize resources for food production in their households whereas the least 5.4% disagreed with this argument. This implies that there is less collaboration between females and males in food production at the household level among the female-headed households in the Mbarara district.

We further found out that most of the respondents 85.5% agreed with the statement put to them that my old male children are the ones who decide where/how I should use the land whereas the least 4.3% strongly disagreed with this argument. This implies that gender roles in most households favour males as superior decision-makers in the household.

It was further established that the majority of the respondents 50% strongly disagreed with the statement put to them that my in-laws are the ones who decide where crops should be grown, and which crops to grow whereas the least 5.4% strongly agreed with this argument. This implies that the extended family system is no longer influential in decision-making at the household level in Mbarara District.

Results further show that the majority of the respondents 39.2% agreed with the statement put to them that females in this household collaborate with males in food production whereas the least 30.1% disagreed with this argument. This finding shows that there is some reasonable collaboration between females and males in food production at the household level among female-headed households. However, it is clear that this level of collaboration is significantly below the average as those who disagreed with this view were more than those who disagreed with it.

Concerning the involvement in all stages of food production by both genders at all stages of food production, the majority of the respondents 34.4% agreed with the statement that both females and males are actively involved in land preparation for food production in our household whereas the least 15.1% strongly disagreed with this argument. This is an indication that both genders are involved in food production though the level is still below the average as most of the respondents disagreed with this argument.

Again, respondents were asked whether females are more involved in all stages of food production more than men and the majority of the respondents 45.7% agreed with this view whereas the least 4.3% strongly disagreed with it. This implies that females have limited control over resources in food production at the household level in Mbarara District. With this limited control over these resources, limited control over resources will highly likely compromise the ability to succeed in areas of achieving sustainable livelihoods for the family.

On the point of land use planning, the majority of the respondents 39.2% agreed with the statement put to them that females participate in land use planning more than males. However, if you combine those of strongly disagree 30.6% and disagree 30.1%, most of the respondents disagreed with this whole argument. This finding is an indication that there are still barriers to women's participation in land use planning at the household level among female-headed households in Mbarara District.

About the statement that crop growing is to females as animal husbandry is to males in our household, we found out that the majority of the respondents 44.6% strongly agreed with this argument whereas the least 5.4% strongly disagreed with this view. This implies that there is some semblance of the division of labour regarding crop farming and animal husbandry rearing along gender lines at the household level in the Mbarara district.

We further found out that most of the respondents 55.9% disagreed with the statement put them that females compared to their male counterparts determine food for sale and food for home consumption whereas the least 4.8% strongly disagreed with this viewpoint. This is an indicator that whereas females participate highly in food production at the family level, male counterparts make important decisions on what to sell and what to consume, an indicator of inequality in decision-making at the household level.

Results further revealed that the majority of the respondents 68.8% agreed with the statement that Females do not have a say on what crops to grow or what livestock to keep in the household, whereas the least 4.3% disagreed with this argument. This implies that decision-making on what to farm is largely at the discretion of the male gender at the household level in the Mbarara district.

The relationship between gendered power relations and food production among female-headed households

To ascertain how gendered power relations affect food production among female-headed households, a Pearson Correlation product-moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between the two variables. Results from this are presented in Table 4.5.

Table 2: The relationship between gendered power relations and food production among female-headed households

Correlations			
		Gendered power relations	Food production
Gendered power relations	Pearson Correlation	1	.689**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	186	186
Food production	Pearson Correlation	.689**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	

N	186	186
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

Results from Table 2 indicate that there is a strong positive significance between gendered power relations and food production among female-headed households ($r= 0.689^{**}$, $p\leq .001$). This observation shows that gendered power relations influence food production at the household level among female-headed households, an indication that an improvement in gendered power relations predicts a positive improvement in food production among female-headed households. These findings confirm that any positive change in gendered power relations leads to a positive change in food production among female-headed households' level by 68.9% in the Mbarara district.

Discussion

It was established that there is a strong positive correlation between gender relations and food production among female-headed households in the Mbarara district. It was pointed out that women are more involved in food production than males and there is largely little collaboration among the two genders when it comes to food production at the household level. Findings further revealed that females are very instrumental when it comes to food production even when they have challenges relating to decision-making on land utilisation and other production inputs at the household level. They struggle with meagre resources to ensure food production in the home among female-headed households. The overall picture that gendered power relations have a strong link with food production was confirmed by views from the interviews i.e., qualitative findings that when there is peace and unity in the home anchored on positive gendered power relations, food production is guaranteed. This is attributed to the fact there is always no conflict over decision-making, planning and execution of farming activities in the home.

These findings are in agreement with a previous study by Icheria (2019) in a study on an investigation into food security among female-headed households in Kenya which found that there is a strong positive correlation between food production and food security among female-headed households. Whereas this study slightly differs from the current study as its focus was more on food security, its link to food production and food security gives a broader picture of how food production in female-headed households gives an assurance to food security. Relatedly, by Thobejane and Nyathi (2018) found that women face numerous obstacles to accessing productive inputs, assets to land and services required for rural livelihoods. These include access to fertilizers, livestock, mechanical equipment, improved seed varieties, extension services, agricultural education and credit. Women receive for example only five percent of agricultural extension services worldwide (Thobejane & Nyathi, 2018). As rural women often spend a large amount of their time on additional household obligations, they have less time to spend on food production or other income opportunities. This ultimately affects food production among female-headed households, hence a direct link to gender relations and food production among these households. Accordingly, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework explains that land is a fundamental resource for agricultural production (Tabares et al., 2022). However, in many regions, women face legal, cultural, and social barriers to owning or controlling land. Without secure land rights, women's ability to invest in and benefit from food production is limited (Rwangire & Kabeba Muriisa, 2021). A study by Rwangire and Kabeba Muriisa (2021) further highlights that even when women have access to land, their ability to make decisions about its use is often restricted. Patriarchal structures and norms may place decision-making authority in the hands of male family members or community leaders, reducing women's

influence over agricultural practices, resource allocation, and income distribution. This ultimately affects their willingness and motivation to fully and independently carry out agriculture as it should have been in the event that these barriers were not in place.

Findings further revealed that females face barriers in land use planning and having control over its use in food production. Both quantitative and qualitative findings agreed to this point that females face obstacles while utilizing land which is the main factor of production. This automatically compromises food production and this rhymes with a notion that gendered power relations influence food production among female-headed households. The findings are in agreement with Rwangire and Kabeba Muriisa (2021) in their study on the dynamics of women's secure land rights for sustainable rural household food security in the Isingiro district of Southwestern Uganda and found that there is a strong positive correlation between women secure land rights and household food security. In their study, they emphasized that women face barriers and obstacles while utilizing land for food security among households in the Isingiro district. In the same stance, Mpuuga et al. (2021) in their study on the gendered effects of land ownership on household food security and welfare in Limpopo add that women securing land ownership beyond mere user rights will enhance national food security. Whereas this study also focused largely on food security, it gives a glimpse, that when obstacles to land utilization among women are resolved, food production is enhanced which is the focus of the present study.

We further found out that women face challenges in mobilizing resources like finances to be used in food production. Women find it hard to borrow and or use land as a security to access credit from financial institutions, this has automatically locked them into subsistence farming hence compromising food production. These findings concur with findings from the study by Busingye et al. (2018) in their study on challenges facing female-headed households in accessing and utilizing microfinance lending among selected municipalities of southwest Uganda which found that women find it had to access credit from Microfinance Institutions owing to lack of rights on property to use as collateral, which is a main requirement. As a result, these women mainly female heads, have largely been locked into the vicious cycle of poverty. These views are corroborated by Doku, Obubuafo, and Hagan (2020) in their study on access to credit by smallholder female farmers in Ho Municipality, Ghana that listed lack of collateral, particularly land among the challenges facing women farmers in accessing credit from financial institutions. Both the current and previous research findings have put limited access to finance among female farmers at the centre of the challenges they face in food production at the household level. The situation is worse among female-headed households where gender power relations have affected their autonomy over land ownership and utilization.

Conclusion

This study presents findings from a cross-sectional survey conducted in the Mbarara district among female-headed households. The study found that there is a strong positive relationship between gendered power relations and food production in the Mbarara district. This indicates that gendered power relations have a significant influence on food production among female-headed households in the Mbarara district of southwestern Uganda.

The study found indications of food unavailability among female-headed households as a significant number of respondents indicated that they do not eat food they want due to food unavailability, eating some kind of food over a long period of time, access challenges and unhappiness due to food unavailability. It was further established that age and education level significantly influence the

socioeconomic livelihoods of female-headed households. This implies that socio-demographic variables of age and education have a strong bearing on how food production influences the socioeconomic livelihoods of female-headed households in the Mbarara district.

Recommendations

It was found out that females, though heads of the families have no absolute rights on land utilization and harvested produce in the home. This is an indication that there is an absence of equality and empowerment among women in the Mbarara district. This calls for advocacy and sensitization by civil society organizations and government agencies focused on improving community development at the family level.

There is a need to advocate for women's empowerment to improve their status in decision-making at the family level. For the last three decades, the Government of Uganda and its partners in development have invested a lot in gender mainstreaming but the gaps are still existing as have been revealed by the current study. This calls for new approaches to tackle this challenge that has persisted for so long.

There is a need to enhance the agency of women to participate in asset ownership and household economic decision-making, expand female literacy and education, and diversify income sources to include off-farm wage employment in Mbarara District.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Researchers' Contribution

CMG developed a proposal, collected data, analysed it and wrote the report. MT and CNM reviewed and made significant contributions throughout the entire study. SA collected data and proofread the final manuscript. All authors read and approved the manuscript.

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