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**SOCIETY OF
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Impact of Agricultural Development Project on Participating Women Farmers in Naari, Kenya

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Abstract

An agricultural development project with university and community partners from Kenya and Canada was implemented in Naari, Kenya. Development agencies such as non-governmental organizations design and implement projects that can enhance people's capacity and living conditions. Many studies have focused mainly on the direct and economic effects of development projects. There is a need to understand the diverse impacts of development projects, especially from those benefiting from such interventions. This paper evaluated the impact of an agricultural development project on participating women farmers' emotional and civic engagement status. Study objectives were to investigate the level of influence of the agricultural interventions on the emotional and civic engagement status of women participants and to examine the demographic factors influencing the emotional and civic engagement status of women participants. The study occurred in the Naari region of Kenya between 2015 and 2017 and included 40 randomly selected women participants and 3 purposively selected women leaders. Data were collected using focus group discussions (FGD; n=1 per group), one-on-one surveys (n=43), and in-depth interviews (n=5 per group) in the local native Kimeru language and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Findings revealed that women within the project experienced emotional empowerment and disempowerment, but that women's overall civic engagement increased over the project course. Also, age, income, education levels and belonging to community groups were found to predict various aspects of women's emotional and civic engagement status. In conclusion, our findings show that development projects can influence women's emotional and civic status; leaders need to assess and modify the delivery of their projects to enhance the positive effects and minimize harms. Our study may be helpful to managers implementing women-focused projects in two ways; (1) assessing outcomes beyond monetary gains; and (2) understanding challenges and opportunities to women's empowerment in rural Kenyan communities.

Keywords: *Community development; Dairy farming; Food security; Gender; International development; Impact evaluation; Kenya; Nutrition; Small-scale farming; Women empowerment.*

1. Introduction

Numerous development projects are implemented in Africa through various agencies, primarily non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Nikkhah & Redzuan 2010; Lewis & Kanji 2009). A more significant proportion of NGO financing is sourced externally. In 2015, development aid to Africa reached nearly USD 57 million. It was given mainly by multilateral donors such as the United States of America, European Union, International Development Associations, United Kingdom, and Germany (Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development 2017). Kenya received five per cent of the total official development assistance to Africa, making it one of the tops benefiting countries (OECD 2017). Development projects are shown to contribute to community empowerment and poverty alleviation, especially for the most vulnerable groups, such as women (Uwantege & Mbabazi 2015; Waller 2014).



Empowerment theory posits that certain activities or structures may strengthen people and group capacities (Zimmerman 1995). This theory refers to both processes and outcomes and may include socio-economic, political, and psychological empowerment domains (Swift & Levine 1987). Three key elements of empowerment theory are identified as participation, critical awareness, and control (Zimmerman 2000). Participation is a process of engaging people in addressing a problem they are affected by (Islam & Morgan 2012). Giving people a chance to get involved in things that matter to them shows their value and most likely motivates them to learn and move to a place of more control (Mandell 2010). When people are critically aware of social issues and participate in addressing them, they are likely to have the power to make the changes they want to see (Islam & Morgan 2012).

We conceptualized emotional empowerment (power within) as having higher positive feelings leading to more excellent capabilities while emotional disempowerment as experiencing more heightened negative emotions leading to failure and distress (Diener & Biswas-Diener 2008; Kessler 2002; Zimmerman 1995). Emotionally empowered people have high self-confidence and a great sense of rights and entitlement (Green, 2016). Such inner strength has been found to contribute to good health, better work, quality social relations, and civic engagement (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Social connection, gender, education, and income levels have been shown to influence people's emotional status. Having "someone to count on" was twice as important as "getting a 50% increase" in income (Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris & Huang 2009). Lower depression rates among large-sized rural Ghanaian households than small-sized ones due to expanded support systems were reported (Kyerematen, 2012). Higher levels of depression among adult females than males in Tanzania were reported (Theis, Lefore, Meinzen-Dick & Bryan 2017). Regarding finances, a South African study reported that adults who had stable incomes and better education standards showed higher emotional empowerment feelings (Hamad et al., 2008).

Our study focused on civic engagement (power with) as a form of social/collective empowerment. We defined civic engagement as the participation of individuals in community matters with the intent of solving problems (Ekman & Amna 2012; Green, 2016; Shortall 2008; Ombaka, 2013; Putnam 2000). Access to material and financial resources impacts how people engage in social and political matters (Zuniga & Valenzuela 2010). A study of Kenyan low-income earners found that they were highly involved in public projects to meet their many family needs (Kinyajui & Misaro 2013). They also observed that higher literacy rates did not translate into higher engagement in government projects in Central Kenya. Interestingly, in Mozambique, women with basic literacy skills had high involvement in rural organizations (Penrose-Buckley 2007). In the U.S. and Sub-Saharan Africa, men were more active in politics than women (Burns, Schlozman & Verba 2001; Coffe & Bolzendahl 2011). Researchers caution that this tendency could be due to cultural differences and access to resources (Zuniga & Valenzuela 2010). Structural organization strongly correlates with civic engagement; churches, schools and other social groups offer opportunities for members to develop effective leadership, communication, and organization skills necessary for civic engagement (Mehta and Sharma 2014; Kapucu 2008). Putnam (2001) found evidence of economic growth among American communities because of active and trusted social groups. Mandell (2010) showed how a community-based organization incorporated learning opportunities and increased members' civic engagement. Kenyan women have used religious and social groups to address HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence (Oino, Auya & Luvega 2014).

While many studies have assessed outcomes of development projects in Kenya, few have focused on long-term non-economic impacts. At the time of conducting this research, we found only one study that had examined young women's emotional quality using contraceptives in Western Kenya (Gust et al., 2017). Likewise, only one study was found showing low civic engagement levels of Kenyan men and women in public projects (Kinyajui & Misaro 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the long-term and non-economic impact of an agricultural development project on participating women farmers in Naari, Kenya. Specifically, we explored whether agricultural interventions influenced the emotional and civic engagement status of participating women and examined the demographic factors influencing the emotional and civic engagement status of women participants. Research findings are vital to understanding long-term development projects' effects on participants. Furthermore, this study adds the voices of Kenyan small-holder farmers to the literature base, a population that is underrepresented in the emotional and civic engagement status literature.

2. Research Methods

This study was part of a larger project where Canadian and Kenyan scholars and community practitioners worked together to design, implement, and evaluate interventions to improve smallholder farming ventures in Naari, a small



rural community near Meru, Kenya. The area has an approximate population of 27,000 people, with most of them practising agriculture, especially dairy farming (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2009). The project, primarily funded by the Canadian Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Programs, aimed at fostering a community of young global leaders <https://www.queenelizabethscholars.ca/>. Veterinarians, human nutritionists and educational researchers came from three universities, including the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi. Student researchers worked with community practitioners from Farmers Helping Farmers, Naari Dairy Farmers Co-operative Society (NDFCS) and two Naari Women's Groups to install critical agriculture infrastructure, facilitate agricultural training, and collect research data. Members of the Women's Groups received horticultural and human nutrition education sessions and resources (e.g., water tanks, drip irrigation, and vegetable grow bags). In contrast, the NDFCS members received education sessions on dairy cow health management and resources (e.g., seedlings and medicine).

This study used a mixed methods explorative research design. According to Elman, Gerring and Mahoney (2020), explorative research tries to study new or less known subjects. We found a lack of data on long-term and non-economic impacts of development projects in literature. The selection of 20 female participants from the Women's Groups and 20 female participants from the NDFCS group was random. Three leaders from the Women's Group were also purposively included in the study to examine the role of leadership in women empowerment, as was illustrated by Mehta and Sharma (2014). Two measurement tools were used for emotional empowerment assessments. The Growth Empowerment Measure (GEM) (Haswell et al. 2010) evaluates the processes and outcomes of social and emotional empowerment. The Kessler Distress Scale (K6) (Kessler & Mroczek 1992) is also included in the GEM to measure individuals' emotional distress/disempowerment. The authors developed the Civic Engagement Tool informed by prior research. Items were developed to evaluate overall participation in the community.

The UPEI Research Ethics Board approved the study. Participants gave written consent before taking part in the research. Data collection was carried out between May and July 2017 in Naari, Meru County, Kenya. It was done in 3 phases using a survey questionnaire (n=43), an in-depth interview (n=5 per group), and a focus group discussion (FGD; n=1 per group)). Consent was re-confirmed each time a participant was involved in another phase of data collection. Data was collected in the native Kiswahili and Kimeru languages with the help of a female translator. Statistical Analysis System was used to compute descriptive statistics, including averages and standard deviations for continuous variables, and frequencies and proportions for categorical variables while STATA was used to perform inferential statistics and modeling. p-value<0.05 was used to establish significant differences or associations. Thematic analysis was conducted as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) using NVivo software (QSR International, Melbourne-Australia) to code repetitive segments of data into pre-existing study themes. During data analysis, codes and emerging themes were validated by another researcher, who was part of the project.

3. Result

3.1 Socio-economic Status of Participants

Of the 43 women, participants over three-quarters (86%) had completed either a primary or secondary level education; only a tiny proportion of the women (9%) were without formal education. A high percentage of women (67%) were aged above forty-five years. Many of the women (74%) earned 10,000 Kenyan Shillings (KSH) (CAD 128) and below per month, while only 6% per cent earned above KSH 21,000 (CAD 270) per month. Of those women earning an income from selling milk, half had a lot of control over their dairy money. Only 9% of the women belonged to only one community group, with the remainder belonging to more than one group.

3.2 Description of Emotional Status of Participants

The Emotional Empowerment Scale (Table 1 below) provided an understanding of women feelings at most times in the past three-year project time. A high percentage of women reported having "never" or "slightly" felt able to voice an opinion (51%) or manage their anger (91%). More than half of the women indicated they have felt "slightly" or "somewhat" knowledgeable and have opportunities in life. Over 60% of the women stated they have felt "slightly", "somewhat" or "moderately" skilled and strong in their bodies, and 91% had felt at least "somewhat" happy. Over 70% of the women participants had felt "somewhat" or "moderate" senses of being valued, belonging and caring. Lastly, a high proportion of the women had felt "moderate" to "extreme" levels of hope (75%), worry (49%) and fear (78%).

The Emotional Depression Scale (Kessler-K6) showed negative feelings encountered by women participants on most occasions in the month before data collection. A high proportion of participants reported that they never felt restless



(40%), worthless (49%) and hopeless (53%). Over 40% of the women felt "slightly" sad and "struggling with their current life". Three-quarters of the participants reported that they had "never" or "slightly" felt nervous.

3.3 Comparing Emotional Status by Group and Demographic Factors

Feeling strong in one's body was statistically significantly different between the groups ($P=0.02$). Significantly more women in the Dairy Group (50%) felt somewhat strong in their bodies compared to (13%) of women in the Nutrition Group over the last three years. A significantly higher proportion of participants in the Dairy Group were never feeling hopeless (70%, $p=0.04$) or nervous (60%, $p=0.05$) compared to participants in the Nutrition Group who were never feeling hopeless (39%) or nervous (30%). Demographic factors, including age, education, monthly income, membership in community groups and control of dairy money, were not statistically significantly associated with observed outcomes of feeling body strength, hopelessness and nervousness.

There was a trend towards a significant proportion of participants (73%, $P=0.07$) belonging to multiple community groups feeling they have moderate or extreme levels of opportunities in life. Most participants seemed to encounter a challenge of accessing or owning productive assets in their homes; they were not permitted to acquire assets, or assets tended to be controlled by men. Having no control of a reliable form of livelihood at home likely pushed women to depend heavily on social networks for emotional and financial support. The following quotes highlight some of the findings:

"And then still on the issues of dairy [cows], in some of the families, it's the men who manage monies from the cow while women only feed and milk the cows. This situation makes them feel a bit low because they cannot decide without the man" (Interview participant #5)

"People have now known the importance of [community] groups, being taught how to farm and assisting to buy things in the house... For example, suppose a bereaved woman does not belong to any church or engage in community events or projects. In that case, it becomes difficult to get assistance from people within the community. She remains alone with no one to assist her" (Interview participant #3).

Women's emotional distress also seemed to be influenced by educational level. For example, there were fewer participants (8%, $p=0.01$) with a secondary level certificate that felt "moderately" and "extremely" sad in the last month compared to those who had a primary level education (46%). Our qualitative data showed that many women had received informal education through group seminars, mostly on topics associated with agri-business and family matters. Participants reported that they felt happy with the experience of getting to know and do new things and viewed this as a chance to improve their lives. For example, some participants expressed joy over the peer-led nutrition training undertaken by the project leaders (referred to as Champs) were first trained by students, and these leaders then trained their fellow group members. They viewed the experience as helpful in improving their self-confidence. A participant who was a Champ remarked:

"I felt very nice [being a champ] because on that day I got an opportunity to be a teacher. I got to be confident and am ready and willing to go teach other groups" (Interview participant #7).

Regardless of group status, a significantly higher percentage of participants (64%, $p=0.03$) felt "moderately" and "extremely" caring in the past three years if they had higher income (above KSH 10,000/CAD 136) compared to if they earned a less than KSH 10,000 (28%). Participants shared stories of how women, who were financially deprived, felt despised and unable to speak in front of others. Participants also reported that they had a greater responsibility for their families because many husbands were unavailable and unconcerned about their family's welfare, primarily due to alcohol abuse. The following quote speaks to these findings:

"It depends on your living standards – if you have lower living standards, [income] you are not valued ... You feel pain when you are down there [poor]" (Focus group discussion #1).

3.4 Civic Engagement Status of Women Participants

Table 2 highlights the civic engagement levels of participating women over the previous three years of the project. Computed levels of engagement in the Naari community in general show that a majority (70%) of participants had more involvement in 2017 than in 2014. The involvement of participants in particular sectors of the community was observed as follows: a higher proportion of participants reported they engaged more often in 2017 than in 2014 in money donation (58%), Naari Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society meetings (33%), leadership roles (33%), and



fundraising events (28%). Participants' voting practices seemed to remain largely the same over the three-year project timeline, and their attendance at community meetings was slightly lower in 2017 compared to 2014. Many women did not speak in community meetings (88%) or volunteer in school programs (60%) over the last three years. No woman indicated having volunteered in health programs within their community in both 2017 and 2014.

3.5 Comparing Civic Engagement by Group and Demographic Factors

Data between the Nutrition and Dairy Groups are compared with those indicating engagement "more than" three years ago after participants who indicated engaging "less than" or "same as" three years ago were combined. A smaller proportion of women in the Nutrition Group (57%) got involved more often in leadership roles than the Dairy Group women (75%) in 2017 compared to participants' involvement in 2014. Also, more women from the Nutrition Group (80%) attended Naari Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society meetings than there were from the Dairy Group (50%) in 2017 compared to the last three years. However, the differences observed in leadership roles and attendance at Naari Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society meetings between the intervention groups were not statistically significantly different.

Looking at results for voting in elections found a statistically significant difference between the intervention groups ($P=0.05$). More women in the Nutrition group (30%) voted more often in 2017 than in 2014 compared to women in the Dairy group (5%). Demographic factors including age, education, monthly income, membership in community groups and control of dairy money were not significantly associated with observed outcomes in voting between intervention groups.

In one of the in-depth interviews, a participant (#8) was recorded saying, "Getting involved in community projects mostly demands resources, especially money". Other participants indicated that lack of money inhibited their involvement in community projects or engagement with community members as money was required or requested during these activities. Belonging to community groups like churches and women groups seemed to affect civic action among Naari women. Community groups were seen to bring women together and organize their discussions around community problems. The community groups also seemed to offer resources that required addressing social issues. The following quote represents some of their ideas.

"I have been involved with a community project. We formed a group to pull resources together and meet the cost of connecting water from the forest where it comes from to the community members" (Interview participant #6).

The absence or lack of a channel for soliciting opinions and ideas was said to deter participant's advocacy on community issues. It is noted that most social and government organizations in Naari regularly used their structures as a way of distributing information to women in the community rather than consulting with them. Most participants stated that they did not feel comfortable questioning or contradicting their leaders, especially men, as it was considered rude. Some were afraid of consequences, such as arrest or scolding, if they spoke against individuals in authority. Probing this aspect revealed that traditionally, Naari women were viewed by men as being intellectually lower than them. For example, during a focus group discussion, it was said:

"Men in this community say women don't know anything and thus women see no point in standing up and speaking their mind" (Focus group discussion #2).

Women were not expected to think independently, make decisions freely, or have control over their lives. Instead, women were expected to depend on the male figures in their lives for guidance. This cultural perception significantly hindered participants from asserting their opinions in the presence of men. It was more difficult for participants to share their perspective before leaders who were men, as illustrated below.

"Men talk on our behalf most of the time. For example, they go and talk on our behalf on water matters, for they do not want the women to talk and beat them [to be better]. They want the women to remain down there [cannot do anything]" (Focus group discussion #3).

4. Discussion

This study found that participants experienced both emotional disempowerment and empowerment during the project's first three years. However, our data also revealed that women's overall civic engagement increased throughout the project. Although Zimmerman (1995) hypothesized that projects geared towards development and empowerment



could strengthen the capacities of people and groups, our study and that of Gust and colleagues (2017) show that empowerment projects, particularly those offering transferable knowledge and skills, may result in some emotional disempowerment. In our case, we think that the challenges women encountered while trying to put some of the project training into practice may have contributed to their emotional disempowerment in the short run. This scenario was observed in Tanzania, where women in an irrigation intervention became frustrated due to time shortages (Theis et al. 2017).

Furthermore, we speculate that the emotional empowerment experienced by the project women may result from eventual opportunities to apply some of the project information, knowledge, and skills to their daily problems. Waller (2014) borrowed this line of thinking. He found that agricultural learning increased participants' crop farming. Over three-quarters of Kenyan women enrolled in a health program felt moderate to high levels of emotional distress (Gust et al. 2017), whereas our results show that less than a quarter of project women felt moderate to extreme levels of emotional distress. The difference in findings may result from the different focus of the two projects. One focused on health issues and the other on agriculture and human nutrition, with the latter providing training and means for better income and better food. We note the lack of studies that examine the impact of development projects, specifically agricultural interventions, on women's emotional empowerment.

Suggestions that a modest increase in meagre income has a more significant impact on one's emotional status when compared to great wealth were shared by Tov and Diener (2008). Our finding that women who earned a slightly higher income felt more caring maybe because they were now able to meet additional family needs than the lowest income participants. This improved ability to meet different family needs may benefit from implementing training acquired through our development project. Also, strong affiliation with women's groups and church groups appeared to influence women's civic engagement. Community groups in Naari not only develop skills for civic action, as suggested by Mandell (2010) but may also serve as a platform for the mobilization of resources. Participants' engagement in the Naari community entailed heavy involvement with financial, charitable contributions. This finding raised the question - why would women who earned very little donate money? An answer may lie in Social Capital Theory, where norms and obligations dictate how people act within a social structure (Putnam 2000). It may be that Naari women do not want to encounter the negative social repercussions of not making financial contributions despite their limited disposable income. Another reason could be that women viewed social networks as resourceful by pulling together small grants and helping individual members when needed (Bourdieu 1986).

Women in our study were highly engaged in their Naari community compared to residents of the Ol-Kalou community in Kenya (Kinyajui & Misaro 2013). What is more notable is that while involvement in community health programs ranked second highest (with a 12% participation rate) in Ol-Kalou, no women in our study were engaged with community health programs. This difference could result from variations in study samples; both men and women were assessed in Ol-Kalou, while only women were evaluated in Naari. Our thinking that opportunities provided through this development project may have served as steppingstones whereby participants came to believe that they were well-informed on some community matters, leading to more community action. Similar results are reported in research where members of an American community organization learned about their society and became more involved in its affairs (Mandell 2010). Likewise, Waller (2014) reported that community-saving groups in Malawi increased members engagement in leadership roles as they learned how to express themselves and outgrew their shyness. Further research should examine the role that community members play in influencing health programs and policies and the current opportunities and challenges of such processes.

Cultural norms, belonging to community groups, and availability of resources were some of the factors influencing women's emotional status and civic engagement in our study. Data collected within this study and personal communication with participants demonstrated that the Naari community reflected traditional Kenyan norms and values as a patriarchal society. Women have fewer rights, especially regarding ownership and control of the property. Participants communicated their frustration in not pursuing their life aspirations without first securing consent or approval from male family members, such as their husband or father. A similar situation was reported in Tanzania when trained women were hindered in using irrigation technologies they had acquired, as men did own and control land use (Theis et al. 2017).

Additionally, some women are prevented from participating in community activities because; 1) their husbands did not allow them to; or 2) their husbands denied them money that they could have donated in social functions. Attendees of cultural events are expected to make a small financial contribution. Other researchers found these circumstances in



a rural community in Kenya (Kimani & Kombo 2011). A study in Malawi concluded that women's empowerment projects did not enhance the socio-economic conditions of women to a level where they would challenge their unequal position in the household. There are suggestions that men need to be part of the empowerment conversation to promote fair and respectful gender relations and practices (Waller 2014). Theis and colleagues (2017) also recommended that agricultural development projects targeting women consider approaches to secure support from their husbands.

Several factors will limit the generalizability of the results from this study. The small sample size of this study determined the representativeness and the use of specific statistical procedures; consequently, our research findings should be used with caution. Translation of the tools and interview questions between three different languages could potentially have resulted in less clear responses. Efforts were made to ensure accurate translations utilizing a local translator and a data entry person with the local language of Kimeru as their first language. Lastly, modifying the GEM assessment tools for our study population meant that we could not use similar data analyses as those done by the developers of the GEM tools, limiting the ability to make direct comparisons between studies.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, our findings show that development projects can contribute to women's emotional and civic empowerment and disempowerment and that existing socio-cultural conditions may influence women's emotional and civic status. Socialization, education, leadership roles, and control of productive resources are found to improve women's sense of self-esteem and decision-making ability. For example, we observed that having women in leadership positions might have encouraged other women to become involved in community activities to learn and build future leadership and activism skills. Likewise, poverty, illiteracy, and harmful cultural norms seemed to add stress and hinder the participation of women in social change. For instance, societal perceptions of women and the realities of land ownership and control by men likely made women feel downcast and unable to invest more in agricultural production. Knowledge of potential changes in the project recipients' emotional and civic engagement status are essential when delivering community development projects. Project leaders can modify the delivery of the project to enhance positive effects and minimize harm.

6. Recommendations

Our study has shown that development projects affect participants' emotional wellbeing (empowerment within) and civic engagement (empowerment with), two very crucial forms of power at play in achieving social change. Based on this conclusion, we make the following recommendation:

Development leaders need to account for ways they can enhance beneficiaries' emotional and civic engagement in their project designs & plans to contribute to long term community development.

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