

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2025: CELEBRATING WOMEN IN THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR IN UGANDA



Prepared by
AGROREF

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Introduction

AgroRef Uganda prides in focusing on key pillars of equity, equality, fairness, justice and rule of law in the agriculture sector and the cooperatives in particular. Our work is hinged on a Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) as both a call to action to the duty bearers but also a practice internally for our organisation and all other organisation we work with. It is our duty and responsibility to aspire but also inspire these principles in our daily work and generally all farmers and cooperators. That is why one of our key program areas focuses on Human Rights and Justice.

AGROREF Uganda therefore takes this opportunity to wish all women in Uganda and across the global but more especially women engaged in agriculture, our small-holder farmers, a happy Women's Day

This year 2025, we celebrate the International Women's Day under the theme, "For ALL Women and Girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment." The theme calls for action that can unlock equal rights, power and opportunities for all and a feminist future where no one is left behind.

Besides, the year 2025 is a pivotal moment as it marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This document is the most progressive and widely endorsed blueprint for women's and girls' rights worldwide that transformed the women's rights agenda in terms of legal protection, access to services, youth engagement, and change in social norms, stereotypes and ideas stuck in the past.

CONTEXT IN UGANDA IN RELATION TO WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

Agricultural production in Uganda is largely dominated by smallholder farmers, especially those with less than five hectares. Nonetheless, a wide range of research indicates that agriculture is still considered to be a powerful means in a bid to achieve inclusive development in Uganda. About 80 percent of Uganda's land is arable, but currently only 35 percent is being cultivated. The National Housing Census 2024 provides that 62.3% of households were engaged in agriculture; 80.2% agricultural households practiced agriculture mainly for home consumption; 60.7% agricultural households were engaged in crop growing; 36.7% of agricultural households were engaged in livestock keeping. The Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry, and Fisheries associate agriculture with employing 73% of the population, while contributing 23% to the gross domestic product of the nation.

In Uganda, women form a large proportion of the agricultural labor force and they play a significant role in the agricultural sector while ensuring that their families have food security. However, it is impossible to verify empirically the share produced by women because agriculture is usually a venture among household members and involves a range of resources and inputs that cannot be readily assigned by gender. Though women still do most of the agricultural work in their households, men are the ones who benefit or reap much from the final products. In this respect numerous studies find that agriculture and rural areas are becoming “feminized”. Women predominate in the agricultural sector or women are rapidly gaining a predominant position.

The agricultural sector in many developing countries is underperforming, in part because women, who represent a crucial resource in agriculture and the rural economy through their roles as farmers, labourers and entrepreneurs, almost everywhere face more severe constraints than men in access to productive resources. Many of these activities are not defined as “economically active employment” in national accounts but they are essential to the well being of rural households (Sofa Team and Cheryl Doss 2011).

It is also observed that in Uganda, men tend to be responsible for inter-organization business relationship development with non-family actors and mostly other men, while women support intra-organization relationships with family members. Noted is that gender stereotypes impede women from developing inter-organization relationships, which in turns limits their opportunities to be empowered and economically emancipated. Limited mobility, lack of trust by men, limited freedom to communicate as well as household duties and responsibilities for farming activities up until sales are the primary sources of impediments for female farmers in developing inter-organization business relationships.

It is observed that by forming small-scale cooperatives which may include men but are mostly dominated by women, women can go beyond their family network. They can themselves establish inter-organization relationships with men and other female farmers and more easily access financial resources. Such cooperatives and collective actions empower women and make them economically more independent. They offer women greater opportunities to contribute to their family business as well as to their communities’ well-being

In many rural areas where small-scale agriculture takes place, gender differences have been found to have as significant impact on resource allocation as well as productivity in agriculture. Given that women traditionally suffer from restricted access to formal education and capital in Uganda, informal sectors provide women with important avenues for income generation and accumulation of wealth.

Further research shows that small-scale or subsistence agriculture done by women in most parts of Uganda may not even provide enough food for their families. Food security is a problem, especially in most parts of Northern and Eastern regions of Uganda. Improving overall national income in Uganda requires policymakers to support women in agriculture, which could reduce poverty level.

On the same note, increasing productivity of women in the agriculture sector can increase agricultural output, which can lower the prices of food in the country. However, this can be done by identifying the core challenges limiting women to engage in agriculture such as funding constraints, limited access to land, and poor agricultural practices among others

In this case, improving small-scale farming and agriculture as a whole requires collective efforts to promote best farm practices, implementation of modern farming system among others.

The emergence of modern supply chains is profoundly changing the way food and high-value agricultural products are produced and traded in developing countries, with important effects for rural women. While export-oriented value chains offer important employment opportunities for women, female farmers are largely excluded from contracting with agro-industrial firms for the delivery of high-value produce. Women comprise a negligible proportion of the farmers involved in smallholder contract-farming schemes in Uganda. The exporting companies confirm that they strongly prefer contracting with men because women lack secure access to productive resources and so cannot guarantee delivery of a reliable flow of produce. For example, women lack statutory rights over land and have less authority over family labour compared to their husband and male siblings. High-value contract-farming has direct implications for the allocation of productive resources within the household. It has been argued that contract-farming with the modern agroindustry and the exclusion of women from contracts could give rise to intra-household conflicts over the allocation of land and labour resources between contract requirements and women's priorities with regard to food production.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

One of the core constraints in agricultural sector in rural areas is that the workforce, mostly youth and women lack the required training to engage in high-skill activities. In other words, most people involved in agriculture in Uganda do not have skills, and this continue to push them to the edge as their income remains low. Some of the reasons attributed to this are the low level of education and lack of strong government programs to improve skills among the youth.

It is further noted that although women play a significant role in Uganda's economic development, they hold limited control over household assets and over the division of responsibilities in the household and their community. Female workers in Uganda are usually unpaid family farm workers, and their level of empowerment directly depends on others in the household with whom they must negotiate when making decisions. Even in rare situations where households are headed by female farmers, women do not benefit from equivalent resource endowments for pursuing their strategies as men in male-headed households.

In Uganda, land-related customs and laws usually make transfer of land to women and young people challenging, and expensive at the same time. In this case, this makes it difficult for small-scale farmers to own land. Most of the land that used to be owned by clans or lineage and communities, especially in rural areas is individualized. As a result, this has limited many families to continue practicing their subsistence farming. In fact, previous findings provide interesting insight claiming that it is unrealistic to think that young people and women who are engaged in agriculture can acquire loans and secure land. In this case, it is very hard for most of these farmers to secure enough capital that can facilitate their small-scale farming.

The recently concluded census further noted that among the adult males, 36.7 percent owned land and among the adult females, 24.4 percent owned land. (NHPC 2024) More so, lack of understanding of property rights as well as unreliable security to attract investors remains the core problems as far as land use in Uganda is concerned. According to World Bank, widespread informal land tenure system has continuously limited Uganda's agriculture potential since many farmers cannot use their land as collateral to secure loans.

POLICY FRAMEWORK TOWARDS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN AGRICULTURE

The Ugandan government has made strides in recognizing the significance of women in agriculture. For example, Uganda's National Gender Policy (2007) highlights the importance of integrating gender concerns in development programs, including agriculture. The policy advocates for promoting women's access to resources, such as land, finance, and agricultural inputs, to enhance their productivity. The Uganda National Agricultural Policy (2013) also acknowledges the need for gender equity in agricultural development.

However, despite these frameworks, implementation remains a challenge due to limited resources, patriarchal societal norms, and a lack of gender-sensitive data to guide effective policy. The formal legal environment, such as the Land Act (1998), does support women's access to land, but customary practices often restrict women's land rights, which limits their capacity to invest in long-term agricultural improvements.

Programs like the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), Prosperity for All (PFA), and National Development Plan (NDP) to mention but a few as some of the other contributing frameworks shaping current agriculture policy framework. At agriculture level, Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries indicates that these frameworks aim at modernizing agricultural practices in the country. Currently, Uganda's Agriculture Sector Development Strategy and Investment Plan is responsible for ensuring that agricultural policies are implemented across the country. The Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) is also an initiative of the Government of Uganda that is aimed at improving access to financial services for women and equipping them with skills for enterprise growth, value addition and marketing of their products and services. UWEP, implemented as a Rolling Programme under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), is intended to empower Ugandan women for economic development.

The Generating Growth Opportunities and Productivity for Women Enterprises (GROW) Project is also another Government of Uganda Project, funded by the World Bank, implemented by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and the Private Sector Foundation Uganda in all districts, Municipalities and Cities. It aims at increasing access to Entrepreneurial Services that enable female Entrepreneurs to grow their Enterprises from micro to small and small to medium in targeted locations, including the Refugee host districts.

The equity strategy paper 2012 also arose from the recognition that despite the PEAP achievements, much remains to be done with regard to equitable distribution of growth, public expenditure and access to services, markets and opportunities for women, youth, orphans, the unemployed, prisoners, children, disabled persons, informal sector workers, the elderly to mention but a few

The NDP III prioritizes the acceleration of transformation of agriculture from subsistence to commercial production in particular by connecting smallholders with value-chains, Reduction in the percentage of household dependent on subsistence agriculture as a main source of livelihood from 68.9 percent to 55 percent; the NDP III also recognises that there is still a high proportion of the population dependant on subsistence agriculture majority of whom are rural women and youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INVEST IN RESEARCH

Accurate, current, regionally specific information and analysis is necessary for good gender-aware agricultural policy making. Data collection has improved substantially over the last decades, as has our understanding of the complexity of women's roles and the need to collect data not only on primary activities but on all women's activities. Data are needed to better understand gender roles in agriculture and how they change over time and in response to new opportunities. These roles cannot be understood properly, and interventions targeting cannot be designed effectively, without also understanding their differential access to land, capital, assets, human capital, and other productive resources.

2. EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION AND TRAINING

There are opportunities for increasing women's participation in agricultural development through targeted training and education programs. Empowering women with knowledge on agricultural best practices, entrepreneurship, and access to financial literacy programs can enhance their productivity and income.

3. IMPROVED POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Strengthening and enforcing gender-sensitive policies can help create a more equitable environment for women in agriculture. The adoption of gender-responsive budgeting, which ensures that funds are allocated for women-focused agricultural initiatives, can enhance women's access to resources.

4. ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Technological advancements, such as mobile farming apps, can help women access markets, information, and financial services more easily. Digital platforms can provide solutions to challenges women face, such as limited access to information and financial services, thus improving their economic situation.

5. SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S COOPERATIVES AND NETWORKS

Women's agricultural cooperatives and networks provide avenues for women to access collective resources, share knowledge, and enhance their bargaining power in markets. These networks can be pivotal in driving women's economic and social empowerment.

CONCLUSION

While women play a fundamental role in agriculture in Uganda, their contributions are often overshadowed by gender inequalities. However, with a more inclusive policy framework, access to resources, and targeted support for women, their potential in driving agricultural productivity and enhancing food security can be fully realized. Addressing challenges related to land access, financial inclusion, and gender norms will be key in unlocking the full potential of women in Uganda's agricultural sector.



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