

# Women Empowerment in Agricultural Value Chains: Voices from Onion Growers in Northern Tanzania

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## Abstract

Women empowerment is multifaceted concept; there are many definitions and perceptions that are used by programmes and projects espousing to empower women. This study, using qualitative data sought to assess women perception on empowerment among those involved in onion value chain development activities. The study adopted cross sectional research design where focus group discussions, key informant interviews and case studies were the main methods for data collection. Content analysis with constant comparison technique was used to analyse the data. The study found that women empowerment is linked to different achievement in their lives in their social and economic contexts such as increases in income, confidence to speak in public, awareness of their rights and participation in decision making at the household and community levels. Men's attitude and behaviours such as reluctantancy to accept changes suggested by women and control over income accrued from their activities are among the barrier for women empowerment. The study recommends for use of gender sensitive approaches in designing and implementing development programmes on women empowerment. Men and tribal leaders should be involved in women empowerment initiatives in order to change their mindset towards women empowerment.

**Key words:** Women empowerment, value chain, perception, content analysis

## 1.0 Introduction

Women play critical roles in agricultural value chain development in developing countries. However, their participation in value chain development activities does not always result into their empowerment. The conceptualization and analysis of women's empowerment is based on gender and empowerment theories which contend that gender relations are constructed and deconstructed as a result of behavior of men and women which is influenced by changes in economic, cultural and historic events in the society (Kabeer, 2001; SIDA 2001). Such changes might be a result of a development intervention such as value chain development activities. Therefore, women's empowerment is a process of change in which women are significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured (Malhotra *et al*, 2002). The change is about women regaining the ability to make decisions and affect outcome that is important to themselves and their families (Kabeer, 1999). Women empowerment considers women as agents of that change rather than merely as its recipients. Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. World Bank (2002) defines empowerment as: "the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life". Mosedale (2005) argues that in defining empowerment there are four central concepts: Firstly to be empowered one must have been disempowered, secondly empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party, there should be a sense of people making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out and finally empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. The author further argues that people are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or relative to themselves at a previous time.

Community development projects that include structured intervention such as value chain development have a potential to enable involved communities to have greater control over the conditions that affect their lives (Simvised *et al*, 2008; Rashidpour *et al*, 2010). However, some studies reports that the ineffectiveness of community development program or projects to improve the quality of life of indigenous communities is associated with the attitude of the planners who fail to understand the needs and the aspirations of the community from their own world view (Novel *et al*, 2011; Rashidpour *et al*, 2010; Samah *et al*, 2011). The participation of the programme recipients usually depend on personal experiences, needs and aspirations which are shaped by their own world view, thus it is important to understand the participant own perception of empowerment.

In Tanzania, as it is in many developing countries, efforts to empower women have been focused on improving women status through education, training, access to health, and family planning services as well as legal counselling and support. Many development programmes and projects espousing for women empowerment emphasize on increasing their access to income, participation in decision making and control over assets and resources. For example women economic empowerment through micro-finance and micro-credit services

programmes has become popular since 1990s (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002; Mayoux 2000). While some empowerment outcomes have been realized in economic empowerment among women involved in micro-credit projects (Hashemi *et al.*, 1996; Mayoux 2000, Kishor, 2000; Varghese, 2011), little is known on the empowerment outcome of those involved in agricultural based livelihoods which employ the majority. However, in recent year's government and non governmental organizations have started implementing and supporting projects and programmes that aim to empower women involved in agricultural related activities with a new focus on value chain approaches. The initiatives range from supply of government subsidized agricultural inputs, provision of soft loans to invest in income generating activities, and assist small scale producers to access markets and the formulation of producer and marketing groups under the farmer field schools approaches (URT, 2006). Under these initiatives, farmers have been facilitated to organise themselves in producer and marketing groups. They are also encouraged to form networks at village and ward levels for easier access to production inputs, credit and extension services.

Simanjiro District, farmers' especially women have been facilitated by government and nongovernmental organisation to select agricultural commodity which has potential to increase their income and reduce poverty; onion production for local and export market was selected based on this merit and several effort have been made to develop the onion value chain. In an effort to improve linkage to markets farmers have been also facilitated to form or join into producer and marketing groups and networks which have helped them to identify and work with other actors involved in the onion value chain. It is anticipated that women's participation in these value chain development activities will gradually generate reasonable incomes for the involved actors, hence bringing a range of benefits that lead to empowerment within families and societies in general. Coles and Mitchel (2011) argue that the transformation of the empowerment effects acquired in the value chain level into household level is determined by location specific socio-cultural contexts hence difficult to generalize.

This paper uses qualitative data collected using a combination of methods to explore women's perception of empowerment in relation to their involvement in onion value chain development activities. The next section of the paper describes the study in terms of location and methods used to collect data. This is followed by a result on women perceptions of empowerment and barriers to women's empowerment. The paper winds up with conclusion based on the study findings.

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **2.1 About the study area**

This study was conducted in Simanjiro District in Manyara Region where eight villages that are actively involved in onion production and marketing and onion value chain were purposefully selected from four wards: The wards selected are Msitu wa Tembo, Ngorika, Ruvu Remit and Loborsoit; the villages were Nyumba ya Mungu, Lemkuna, Gunge, Ngage A and B., Kiruani Msitu wa Tembo and Ruvu Remiti. All the four wards from which the eight villages were selected are traversed by the Ruvu River Basin (RRB) where irrigation farming especially onion production is an important economic activity. Apart from traditionally being pastoralists, the Maasai are now actively engaged in the crop production and are among the major actors in the onion value chain. The onions from the study area are sold in many local markets within the district and nearby regions. Other markets include Arusha, Moshi, Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam. Onions from Simanjiro are also traded across national border especially to Nairobi and Mombasa markets in Kenya. During onion harvesting periods many traders from outside Simanjiro District and from distant markets come to these villages to purchase the onion directly from farmers who usually receive low prices for their crops.

### **2.2 Research Design and Data Collection**

Qualitative data on women empowerment were collected from November 2011 to March 2012 using a combination of methods of data collection including focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews and case studies. FGDs involved women participating in onion production and marketing and other group activities like saving and credit groups in the village. The focus group discussion composed of between six and eleven people. In these FGDs issues on women participation and benefit accrued from onion value chains were discussed including: perception on changes in men and women roles in production and marketing of onion, ownership of assets, income and money accrued from onions. Others issues covered were: factors promoting or hindering women decision making, men's attitude towards women's voice and leadership, household decision making, women's freedom of movement, group networks and interactions, political activities and changes in livelihood. One additional focus group involving men's only was held where some responses and claims raised by women over men were clarified.

Key informant interviews were held with people who were believed to have in-depth understanding and knowledge on women empowerment in the area. They included, district agricultural and livestock development officer (DALDO), district community development officer (DCDO), and village and ward extension officers, village government leaders, tribal elders, and leaders of farmers groups as well as leaders of non governmental organizations (NGOs). The district, ward and village leaders helped in generating general information about

people and their livelihoods, recent changes and development due to different initiatives. Issues explored during key informant interviews included; main economic activities and sources of livelihood, NGOs and government activities in relation to women empowerment and onion value chain development activities in the area, women participation in local government activities and politics, resources' ownership and access to citizens rights.

The case study method was used to obtain information on women's personal experience on their empowerment and changes achieved due to the support and opportunities presented to them by value chain development activities. A semi structured interview checklist was prepared to document life histories addressing important aspects of empowerment and changes over time. This information was useful to understand how changes related to empowerment occur in the household and how such changes are viewed and valued by different members in the household or community.

Data were analyzed using content analysis technique with constant comparison; data from focus group discussions, key informants and transcripts from case studies were interpreted and organized into different themes based on the conceptual description of ideas and concepts. The resulting themes were then analyzed guided by research question for this study.

### 3.0 Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Women Empowerment: Voices From Women in the Study Area

Many respondents in FGDs related empowerment with some achievements in different aspects of their life and changes in the relationship with their husbands, partners and other male members of the family. Diverse opinion and perception was expressed throughout the discussions; most opinions were attached to their situation in life and how society views or treats them. Therefore, some women perceived empowerment as the increase in benefit accrued due to their involvement in different productive activities that contribute to their income and for the household. Increased participation and influence in household decision making and acquiring sense of self worth, recognition and respect in the household and in the community were also mentioned as important attribute of their empowerment. Women's perception over their empowerment covered a wider context ranging from realizing and using their own potential, increase in income, ability to meet some household expenditure and increased participation in development activities as well as in the household decision making. The majority of respondents also recognize the ability of individuals to gain more control in determining their lives and the ability to produce ideas that can be shared with project leaders, local government authorities in the community as important aspects of empowerment. The following quotes highlight important aspects perceived to be critical to aspects of their empowerment:-

*Before joining into these group activities I felt shy to speak in public, but now I can even speak in front of men or ask questions in a village meeting*" Woman FGD participant, Lemkuna Village

*"My husband never listened or asked for my opinion when deciding on household issues because I didn't have my own income to contribute, now we discuss and decide together because I have more voice to decide over the use of my money which I get from our group activities"* Woman FGD participant Ngage Village

*"My children are going to school because of my creativity" the loan I received from our onion production and marketing groups enabled me to pay for school fees of my kids. In the past I feared to ask the village government to force my husband to send our kids to school now I have more confidence to demand for the rights of my kids, my husband now treats me relatively fair.* Woman FGD Gunge village

*"I can get the production input that I need for onion production on my name, which was not possible in the past ; I have a say over the money I get from selling onions"* Woman FGD Loboisoit village

*"I have bought some asset with my own money (mobile phone, foam mattress, and diary cattle); I feel I have more power to do many things than I used to"* Woman FGD Lemkuna village

*"If you are married to a Maasai man it is like you've been bought, you can't do any independent income generating activity, only when I divorced I started my own small business that I happily live on"* FGD Woman Ngage village

The onion value chain apart from promoting production, productivity and marketing do also support and promote women to join into groups. These groups are used for trainings related to onion production and marketing as well as increasing women's knowledge in other important aspects of their livelihoods such as saving and credit acquisition, entrepreneurship, curving and creating and managing income generating activities. The efforts and support provided through developing onion value chain were anticipated to impact on women's empowerment. Most of the notable changes brought by onion value chain development activities are increased women involvement in production, marketing and credits and saving groups. During men focus group discussion it was found that men acknowledge that women as a result of their engagement in these value chain development activities have been enlightened, they feel more confident of doing even things that were used to be done by men only.

*"when women are allowed to make some decision over some family issues, they want to take control of everything; especially now that they get money from their group activities, they feel they can do all activities that*

*were meant for meant for men only*” Participant, Men FGD Ngage Village

Most men in Simanjoro District perceive changes in women empowerment as radical ones which in some aspects contradict their social norms and men’s position in the household and society. Men defined women empowerment as an increase in awareness and capabilities, which have increased women’s confidence in many aspects, for example they said some women have started to challenge men in many issues as well as decisions made by men that they were not able to do before.

*“Women especially those involved in group activities are now difficult to manage, they question many things and decision made by men in the household and even in village meetings; they can even ask questions in public meetings. They get some money in their group activities, and plan its use, it has become difficult to decide for them or use their money. I think these groups’ activities have corrupted their minds”.* Ngage village chairman

Considering women’s situation in the past men acknowledge that women have acquired many changes which are associated with group activities, initiated and supported by these development programmes for example Village Community Banks (VICOBA) groups which have been strengthened in the onion value chain development initiatives. Barham and Chitemi (2009) also found that smallholder farmer groups that link them to agricultural markets produce a range of benefits including income and food security. The authors further argue that gender composition of the groups may affect marketing performance.

### **3.2 Barriers to Women’s Empowerment**

Women identified men’s behaviours which do not allow women to have full control over resources, restrictions on movement and their rigidity to accept change as one of the barriers they face in their efforts to empower themselves. Women also reported that men usually withdraw their contribution to household expenditures when they see women income have increased, this increases the women’s workload. Men were also reported to interfere women’s decision over the use of money that women have made through their activities.

*“The benefit of our engagement in value chain development activities is undermined by our husbands/male partners, ownership of assets and income in our area usually falls within men’s hands they don’t allow us to decide on how to use our money and they want to appropriate our income”* Key informant, leaders of farmers group

*“.....my husband always tell me.....You get allot of money from your group activities, I can’t give you more money for buying household consumables because you have the money already”* Women FGD Lemkuna village

*“When we gain some more income we contribute to household expenditure e.g. buying food, but we face more burden because men divert their income from household activities, actually we benefit at our own increased workload and expenditures.....look we can’t starve our children to force men to contribute.... we also love our husband but they are not supportive especially when our income improves ....they need to be educated as well so that we enjoy the benefit of our effort”* Women FGD Lemkuna village

Similar trend have also been reported that when women’s contribution to household expenditure increases men tend to divert their attention from household expenditure and thereby increasing the expenditure burden to women (Malhotra *et al*, 2002). Evidence from the studies in micro-finances and women empowerment also inform that men usually control and or appropriate income or credits acquired by women (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996; Hunt and Kasynathan, 2002).

Voices of women onion farmers in Simanjoro District reveal that men and women have different perception over the benefit and contribution of women empowerment into household level. Women perceived that men would not like them to be empowered because of the benefit they rip out of their disempowerment. Men on the other hand perceived empowerment as a zero sum game; where one benefit on the expense of the other. They perceived that the efforts to empower women are done to their disadvantage and thought that if women are empowered they will lose many benefits that they are enjoying now. Men’s believe that they are the custodians of the traditional norms. A change that does not involve their permission is not usually accepted. Men were also concerned over the contribution of women income to the household because as women spend more time in group activities their labour force needed for household production is reduced, yet if they don’t spend some of their income to meet household needs then the wellbeing of the household is affected.

*“Women when enlightened about their rights they go beyond their basic rights that our traditions recognize, they don’t obey us, they may even start to come home late”.* Men FGD Ngage Village

*“When we allow then to go out to these group activities, the work force at the household is reduced, yet, the income they get there is for their own use and the husband is required to meet all the household requirements.... our control is important in order to set limits over what they can do and what they should not do”* Men FGD Ngage Village

*For an old person like me these changes being demanded by women are illogical, Iam used to our traditional way of living and do not accept these changes. After all, they didn’t come with anything when they were married; they got all the properties in our own compounds. Therefore, all the assets and property belong to the head of the household who is a man”* ... men FGD Ngage Village

Men also perceived that the empowerment initiatives by government and NGOs favour women: -

*“The government and non-governmental organizations, now days put more emphasis on women’s rights and issues as a result women are becoming so difficult to manage and discipline, when a woman takes you to court or the village government she is given high priority, even the decision by our elders are questioned!”* Men FGD member- Ngage

Apart from placing some restriction on women’s movement, the study also found that men believe that they have the right to set limits over what women can do within and outside the household. Therefore, women sometimes take radical changes such as divorce in order effect changes that they desire. Although many women saw divorce as a radical and unacceptable way to enforce desired changes; some women who live as singles or are divorced claimed that they enjoy a relatively higher level of empowerment than when they used to be in marital union. A story of Ms Asha is one of the examples that reveal how some women may progress and accumulate some income and assets after divorce.

#### **Case1. Asha Ramadhani: divorced and empowered**

Asha a woman aged 40 years with three kids said; she has been married for twelve years before she was divorced in 2007. She has lived in Ngage village for 10 years now her husband never allowed her to join the credit or farmer groups. They used to cultivate rice with her husband, but she never had a say over how the income accrued from the crops they produced should be used. Her husband used all the money on alcohol and she was frequently beaten by her husband. After several attempts to correct her husband’s behaviour failed and life became miserable; she decided to divorce her husband and continued to live on her own. She started managing her own life by selling buns to nearby school, then with support she got from VECO she joined farmer groups for onion production and she also joined the local saving and credit organisation. Now she owns a share in her credit union amounting to Tsh 500,000/=, she is able to rent a piece of land for onion production and she has even managed to buy a plot and build her house in which she lives with her young son. Although divorced she still acknowledges the value of being married: “I thank God to have been married and have children so that I can be respected as a woman; but for 12 years that I was married, I did not achieve progress in my life, only after divorce have things started to change”

This case reveals that, when women are free to decide on the use of the resources that they have access to they may prosper than when they are under the control of men. This is due to the fact that women have full control of the income and she can decide on how to use the income or invest in productive activities. Asha case also highlight that marital relationship is highly valued despite failures that may happen in the relationship; married women are relatively highly respected than the unmarried ones. As also argued by Powell (1990), despite many disadvantages, divorce can enhance women with social and interpersonal skills. Some women like Asha, divorce help them re-discover their self-esteem, goals and their sense of independence. It helps them realize how significant they are in changing their lives hence acquiring a higher level of empowerment.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

This study has found that women perception of empowerment in Simanjiro District is linked to different achievement in their life in their local contexts such as improvement in income levels, increased control of the productive resources and participation in decision making at the household and at the community levels. On the basis of the experiences articulated by women involved in the onion value chain development activities women empowerment is viewed as a process in which women income increases, become aware of their rights and increase their control over material assets and acquire knowledge, information and ideas to challenge beliefs, attitude and behaviour that contribute to their subordinate position in their families and societies. The study has found that women empowerment has improved in terms of increases in income, confidence to speak in public, awareness of their rights, increased appreciation by husbands and community on decision and ideas suggested by women. Men’s attitude towards women empowerment was reported to be a barrier to women empowerment, men are reluctant to accept changes suggested by women, and they are also rigid to allow women to have more control over income accrued from their activities and other household resources. Most men would like the current traditional set up of decision making and control of resources to continue where men have an upper hand in all decision making. Therefore there is a need to change the men’s mind set so that they understand and support women empowerment initiatives. Programmes interventions aiming at empowering women and improve their socioeconomic status are less likely to achieve this important objective if they do not address men’s attitude towards women empowerment. The local power structures and networks that command high respect e.g. tribal elders (*Laigwanani* - for the case of Maasai), men and women elders should be especially targeted with education for empowerment changes to be valued and accepted in the community. The findings of this study highlight the need to take into account local contexts values and meaning attached to women’s needs when

designing and implementing community/participatory women empowerment interventions.

Most development programmes intending to empower women tend to focus on increasing women's income and expand their capabilities. In order for such changes to transform into women empowerment it must impact on rules and norms that are socially constructed. This study found that changes acquired by women due to their involvement in onion value chain development activities have potential to alter gender roles and relations within households and communities. Men and women have different perception on empowerment which is linked to different achievement in life in their local context. Therefore, programmes addressing women empowerment should also focus on men in order to facilitate them to change their attitude in order to support women's effort to institute changes acquired in the value chain development activities into the household level.

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