

Rural women's empowerment and poverty reduction: the role of female producer organizations in West Africa

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Introduction

- As a result of limited access to assets and paid work, lower earnings and lack of social protection, there has been a **feminization of poverty** in the last decades in LDCs, also because of the increasing share of households headed by women. Women are more likely than men to live in poor households in 41 (including most of Sub-Saharan Africa) out of 75 countries with data (UN Women, 2015). In Burkina Faso 51 % of the extremely poor are women.

- Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty in rural areas, where gender inequalities in access to resources (education, training, health, land, credit, productive inputs and markets) and thus in earned income and control over household resources are higher.

Introduction

Furthermore, rural women are more affected by **discriminatory social norms & practices** (child marriage, genital mutilation, widows' property-grabbing), which prevent the achievement of “**substantive equality**”, even when laws establish equal rights for women and men. In West Africa, where social organization is patriarchal and patrilineal, customary norms and stereotypes establish a strict gender division of roles and place women under the protection/control of a man. Women do not inherit. Women and girls bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, including the collection of water and firewood. In SSA 25 countries, the time devoted to water collection is distributed as follows: 62% is spent by women, 23% by men, 9% girls, 6% boys.

Introduction

- The literature refers to women's triple work burden relating to the reproductive, productive and social sphere (funerals, weddings and other community-building activities).
- Women's "time poverty" is recognized as a critical gender dimension of poverty (FAO, 2015).
- Gender inequalities in time use have a negative impact on women's participation in the labour force and contribute to confine them in informal, low productivity, low-wage activities, often as home-based or contributing unpaid family workers.

Introduction

The elimination of gender disparities has positive effects on development: 1) reduction of fertility rate and population growth; 2) improvement of children's nutrition, health and education (correlation between mother's education and earnings and child welfare is stronger than father's). So positive effects across generations.

3) Increasing women's and girls' education enhances productivity. A rise in female labour force participation lowers poverty and results in higher GDP growth.

Introduction: women farmers

-In West Africa women represent about 50% of the agricultural labour force especially in small-scale, subsistence farming and produce most of the food for family consumption. However, their role in production is underestimated, they are often unpaid family labour, they are neglected by extension services and usually have no say on the utilization of family production.

-They are also more deeply affected than men in case of land grabbing: it is more difficult for women to acquire new land if they are expropriated.

They are less likely to be compensated and to benefit from possible new jobs created by the projects, due to gender inequalities in the local community.

Women farmers

Studies show that in sub-Saharan Africa, because of the disadvantages faced by women, yields per hectare are lower in women-managed plots compared to male-managed plots. The gaps range from 13% to 25% (World Bank 2014) due to: a) less use of inputs (such as fertilizers and improved seeds) and lower returns from them due to lower quality or incorrect use (because of less access to education and information: extension services do not consider their needs; they may not attend training activities due to housework and child care responsibilities or mobility constraints or cultural norms (most extension agents are male). So women farmers tend to receive second-hand information from husbands);

b) less and lower quality land; c) insecurity of tenure;

d) less access to markets and so less likelihood to cultivate high value cash crops.

Women farmers

Women's work in agriculture tends to be more manual, tedious and labour intensive than men's. They have less access to labour-saving technologies because of: low education, social norms (certain technologies are not considered suitable for women), financial constraints, lack of voice within the household (husbands see no need to invest in equipment when the work can be done manually by their wives at no cost), lack of technologies adapted for women's physiques, low incentive to adopt them because women might not control the benefits that would accrue from adopting such technologies, etc.

Women farmers

- If women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase production on their farms by 20-30 %. This could raise total agricultural output in Africa by 2.5-4% depending on how many women are engaged in agriculture and how wide a gender gap they face (FAO, 2011).
- Growth originating in the agricultural sector is 2-4 times more effective at directly reducing poverty than growth originating in other sectors (World Bank 2014), because agriculture is more labour intensive. So I in agric. will ↑ productivity and ↓ poverty.
- Women farmers' empowerment can not only enhance food security but also improve the nutrition of their children by making the diet more diversified thanks to vegetable gardening .

Introduction: Women and natural resources

Women play an essential role in managing natural resources. There is a strong relationship between women and natural resources. According to tradition and ancient religions, nature is associated with the feminine principle: mother nature. In the ecofeminist literature (see, for example Shiva, 1988), the patriarchal domination suffered by women is part of the same process of domination suffered by nature. Women, being often the guardians of traditional knowledge, have a great role to play in the preservation of the environment and biodiversity and in the promotion of sustainable development.

In sub-Saharan Africa rural women are highly dependent on natural resources: they gather, process and market the non-timber forest products (fruits, flowers, leaves, tubers), which are used in family cooking or for medical or commercial purposes. In Burkina Faso shea (karité) nuts and néré seeds, which are at the base of the local condiment soubala, have a considerable economic importance. Shea nuts and processed shea butter are Burkina Faso's 4th most important export and contribute to 1% of GDP.

Objectives of the research

- This paper refers to the evidence from field surveys I conducted in the last ten years in West Africa (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) on women's micro-enterprises and producer organizations. Specifically, I present the results of a survey I carried out in Burkina Faso on 138 women-only organizations to verify the hypothesis that **women's producer associations and groups** can be an important tool in the fight against poverty and gender inequality, especially in case of illiterate, poor rural women.
- Objectives : a) to estimate the main factors influencing the profit of the surveyed organizations' activities; b) analyze the difficulties of the activity; c) assess the impact of producer organizations at the community level and personal level of the members (social function & solidarity, tool for access to credit, women's psychological and ec. empowerment ?).

Methods

- The survey was conducted in 9 out of the 13 regions of the country, in 15 provinces and 20 departments. Rural areas represent 35.5% of the total sample (49 organizations).
- The construction of the sample used the method of stratified sampling: the strata are the different locations (region, department, town, village and quarter) and sectors of activity of the organizations.
- Semi-structured questionnaire divided into 5 sections.
- Group interviews attended by organizations' President, Secretary, Treasurer and a few members, 2 hours long on average

Methods

Empowerment is a complex multidimensional process, which is difficult to measure. There is a wide debate on its definitions and indicators.

In this study I have considered the following indicators: a) self-confidence;

b) mobility;

c) income from an economic activity;

d) control over income;

e) magnitude of women's economic contribution to family budget.

General characteristics of the organizations surveyed

- Almost all the organizations surveyed are registered.
- 14.6 % are associations and the rest (85.4%) groups (*groupements*).
- Mean number of members is 72 (43 in urban areas)
- Average duration: 10 years
- 41% of sample organizations are engaged in public good activities in favour of their community
- In 46% of the organizations women are engaged in a *tontine* (400 f CFA per week). They pay a weekly or monthly membership fee.
- 79.5% of org. are part of a union, network or federation
- 68.4% of organizations are involved in int. cooperation projects and so have access to grants
- 57.1% of the organizations have obtained loans by Caisse Populaire, Mutuelle, banks and 82% have an account

Reasons for establishing the organizations as perceived by members

Reasons	Responses
Mutual assistance, solidarity	21.3%
Source of income	20.4%
Work together	13.0%
Economic independence of women	13.0%
Income-generating activity	11.1%
Credit, aid	6.5%
Promotion of local products	5.6%
Training and awareness	3.7%
Exchange of ideas	2.8%
Other	2.8%
Total	100.0%

Sharing a common enterprise project is the main motivation.

Group solidarity ranked 2°. It helps women to overcome daily difficulties, diseases and meet the expenses for social ceremonies. They receive a grant from the group's common internal fund.

Socio-demographic characteristics of members

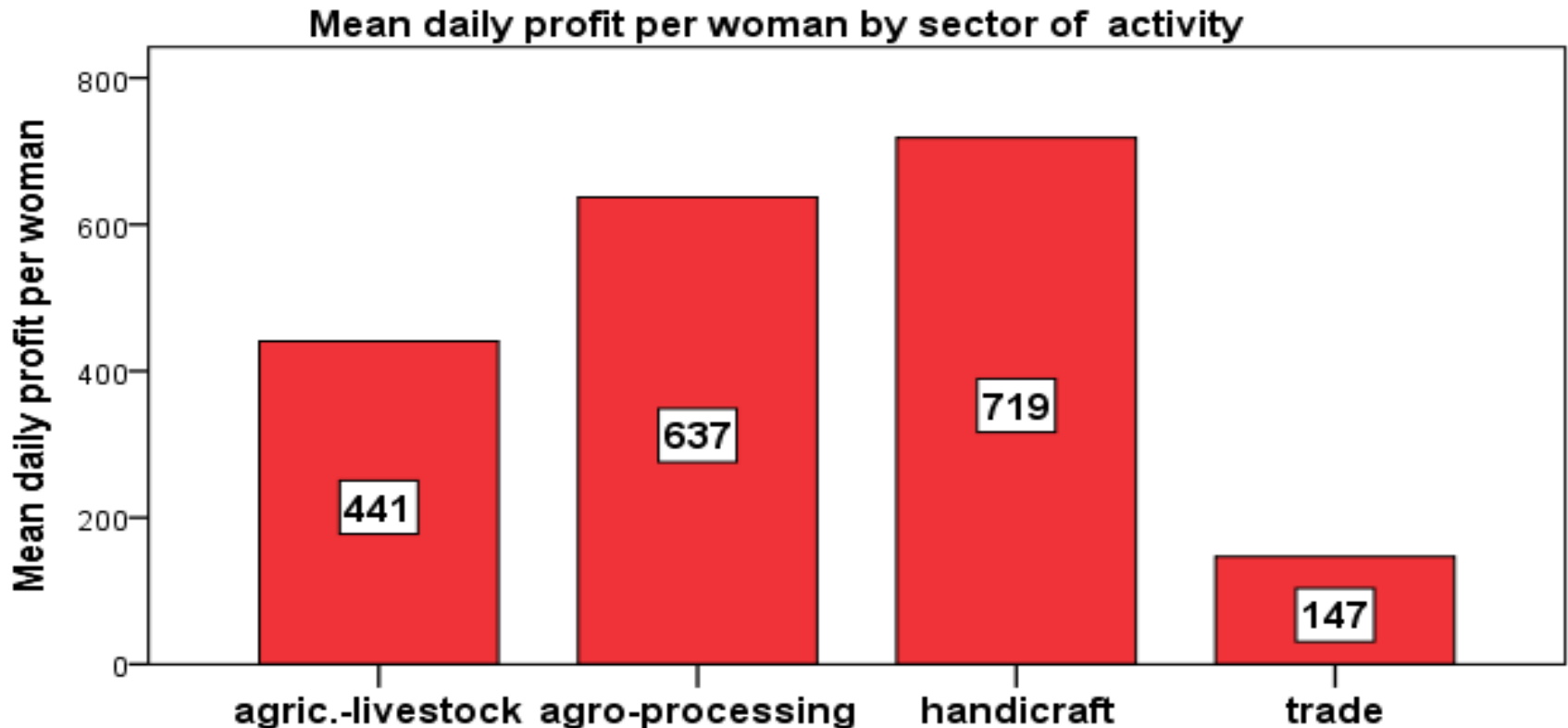
- 42.7% of women members are in the age group 31-55 years
25.7% in the age group 19-30 years, 10,8% 55 yrs. and more
- 77.6% of women are illiterate, but 35% are alphabétisées
- On the basis of an indicator developed to analyze education at the level of the organization, 72.3% of organizations can be classified into the low level of education (as against 26.1% in urban areas), 8.5% in the high level.
- 41.1% of women are married and polygamous, 28% are monogamous, 22.5% widows, and 6.6 % single.
- On average the surveyed women have 6 children
- There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the mean number of children and the mean years of education of the mother

Activities of organizations surveyed

- Each sample organization conducts on average 1.3 activities: 79.6% of organizations have 1 activity; 14.3% 2; 4.1% 3 activities; 2% 5.
- Main sector of activity is agriculture-livestock (41.3%), of which 27% is agriculture and horticulture, and 14.3% livestock (chicken, sheep, pigs) and animal fattening.
- The second sector by frequency is agro-processing (39.7%): preparation of shea butter (4.8%), of parboiled rice (étuvage), drying of fruits and veg and in general processing of cereals, peanut and other trees and plants.
- The third sector is handicrafts (11.1%): dyeing, weaving, pottery and production of soaps and body creams (7.9%).
- Followed by trade (7.9%), which includes stocking of cereals.

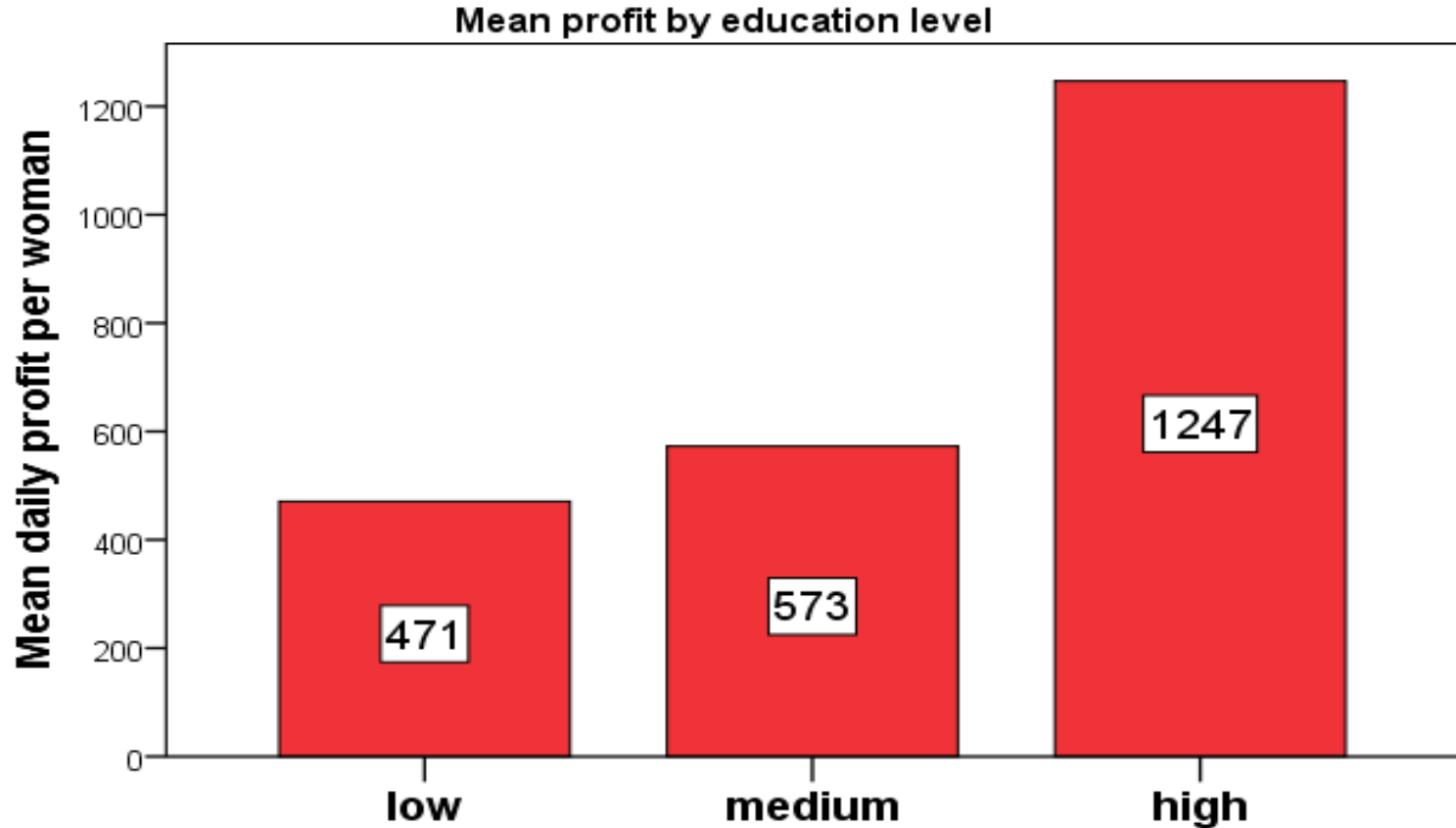
Economic profitability of the surveyed organizations' activities

Profit per day per woman is less than 150 f CFA in 30% of the cases, less than 400 f CFA in 51% of the cases. Average profit is 529 f CFA per day (against 816 in urban areas). The median is 389 f CFA. Average profit margin is 41%. Median 38%.



Relationship between education and profit

Average profit increases with the organization's education level.



There is a statistically significant difference in mean profit between low and high education levels (Anova: $F=3.7$, sig. level 0.032)

Main determinants of organizations' profit

From a multiple linear regression model it results that the log profit is dependent from these variables :

- the activity sector,
- the value of loans obtained,
- the members' average school years,
- the use of equipment and
- the participation in international cooperation projects.

Work organization, purchase of inputs, sale of output

Most activities of the organizations surveyed are collective:

members work all together (60.7% of activities) or in specialized subgroups (16.4%).

Individual work : 23% especially in agriculture-livestock and trade.

When the activity is collective it is the organization that buys the inputs trying to negotiate a lower price and deals with the commercialization of production.

63% of the organizations have a common space: seat, work center, shop, President's house etc.

Work organization, purchase of inputs, sale of output

- In agric-horticulture in some cases the field is collective and women work all together. In other cases the collective field is divided into plots assigned to indiv members who work and sell individually. In other cases women's agricultural activity is individual and the group is used for access to credit and inputs.
- In agric-livestock in 77% of cases commercialization of production is done by the association (33% in case of livestock) and in 94% of cases it's the association that buys the inputs (78% in livestock).

Distribution and use of the organizations' income

- On average, 50% of the profit of the activities of the organizations is placed in the organization's internal fund or bank account
- in 33% of cases (especially in agro-processing) the whole profit is set aside
- The profit which goes into the common fund is used for the purchase of raw materials, equipment or land, for a guarantee fund to have access to bank loans or int. cooperation projects and to finance exchange trips and celebrations (on 8 March, at the end of the year etc.). Two common uses are the small financial support, which must not be refunded, given to members in the event of difficulties, and the small credit to finance their ceremonies and especially their individual activities.

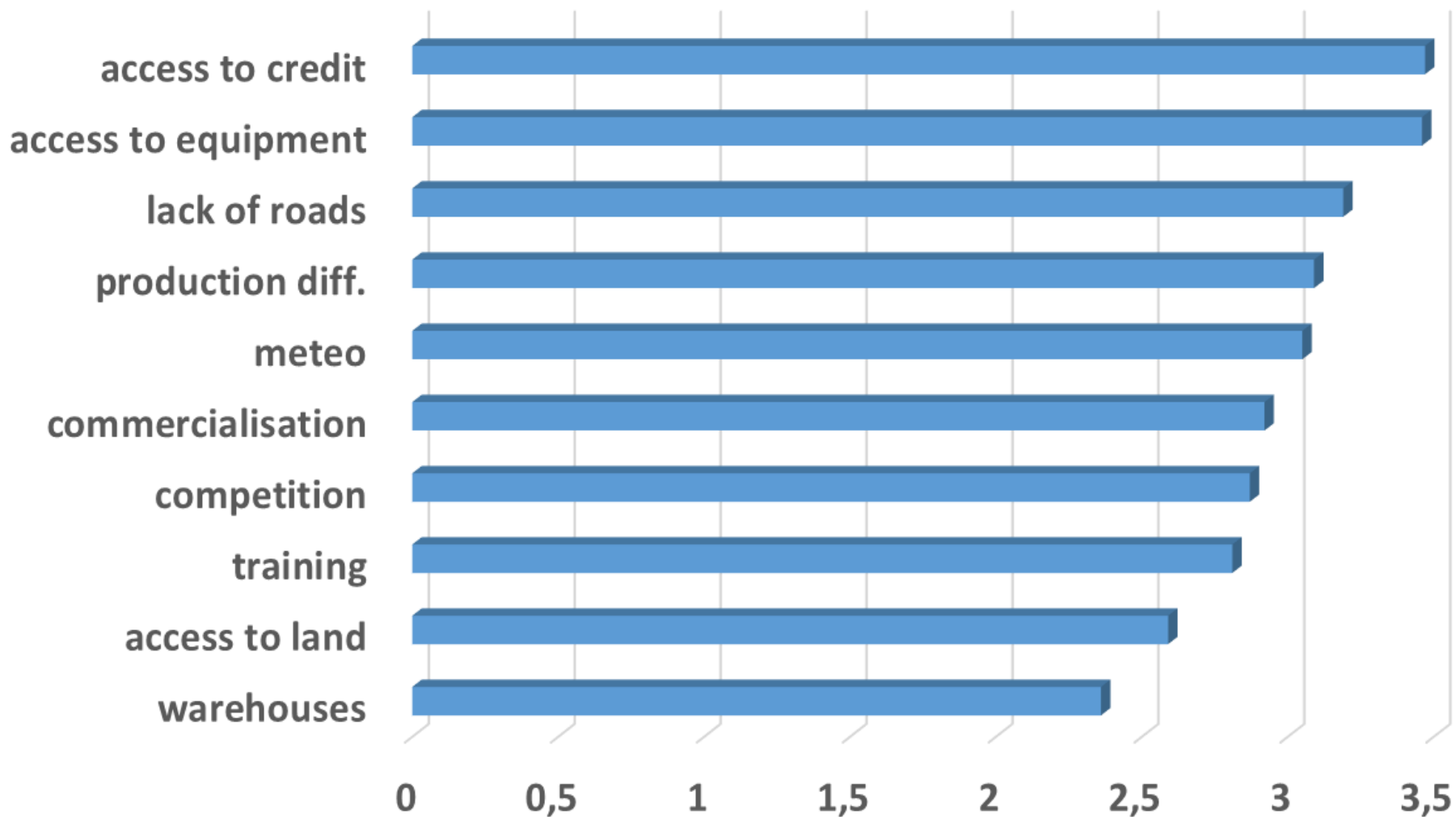
Income of the members

- Members of the organizations surveyed are remunerated in 15% of cases with a wage (especially in agro-processing such as the production of shea butter) and in 51% of cases with a share of profit. In the remaining cases, either the woman receives no remuneration (in 27.9% of cases) or her income is represented by the individual sale of production.

Type of income of the member	Average effective income per day	Hours per day	Days per month	Months per year
Wage	666 FCFA	8.0	20.0	7.0
% of the profit of the organisation	410 FCFA	6.7	11.0	7.7

Main difficulties in the organizations' activities as perceived by members

Main difficulties



Advantages of membership of an organization as reported by members

Advantages	Responses
Credit, grant	18.3%
Source of income	17.6%
Solidarity, mutual assistance	16.9%
Training	12.7%
Inputs purchase and sales by the organization	11.3%
Support for the individual activity	6.3%
Work together	6.3%
Exchange of ideas	4.2%
Empowerment	4.2%
Social life	2.1%
Total	100.0%

The benefits related to the exercise of an economic activity are appreciated more than those related to social relations (solidarity, exchange of ideas, group work, social life)

Gender impact

- The perception of the husband is positive in 78.3% of cases (96.2% in urban areas), negative in 21.7%.
- “husbands are happy of the activity of women since it brings money into the family”. But some husbands do not allow wives to have an ec. activity outside home.
- Most organizations interviewed (84.1% of the total) believe that, for women’s empowerment, a women-only organization is preferable to a mixed one.
- "men want to prevail, steal the money, are less responsible and reliable",
- “women better understand each other”, "women are shy, it is easier to discuss without men”.

A comparison between women members and non-members carrying out a specific economic activity

In a different survey in Burkina Faso in three important areas for rice parboiling (Dano, Banzon and Bama) on a sample of 120 women, I verified whether it was more profitable for women to exercise this activity individually or as members of a group. All women interviewed preferred to be members of a group and, as a consequence, of a Union.

Main advantages: a) access to the credit of the Caisse Populaire or of the group to buy the rice to be transformed. Non-member women cannot buy the rice on credit except from the husband.

b) possibility to sell to the Union the rice, which they parboil at home or with the group, at a price higher (on average by 20%) than the price they would get sitting all day in the local market. Only the women members of a group and of the Union can sell their product to the Union and this provides them with a safer market.

c) access to the equipment and training of the Union, which guarantees a product of better quality (in the organization's transformation centre there is quality control). d) group work.

A comparison between women members and non-members carrying out a specific economic activity

- Women members can work in the collective transformation centre only a few days in the year (44 days in Banzon and 17-18 days in Bama), due to its limited capacity (in terms of equipment and funds to buy the rice to be transformed) compared to the number of members.
- However, when they conduct at home their individual activity of transformation, they can obtain a profit much higher than the women who are not members.
- On average, the profit is from 6 to 4 times higher for women members interviewed than for non-members, depending on the area.

Conclusions

- In West Africa, since the 90's, there was an explosion of grass-root organizations and women's groups, encouraged by the adoption of a legal framework, national policies for the promotion of women and by the international community.
- Some organizations were created, often by State civil servants, to capture external funds, but they do not carry out any real activity. Others face weaknesses, as also our research has shown: low education level of the leaders and members, lack of efficient administrative and financial management and of organizational capacity, absence of internal transparency and democracy, leadership conflicts and insufficient capital and technology.
- Anyhow, notwithstanding some of these constraints, this survey's results reveal that many producer organizations play an important role for women's empowerment, especially in rural areas and if women-only.

Conclusions: impact at community level

- It results from my research that the majority of the surveyed organizations have a positive impact on those who are not members through the supply of public goods (cereal banks and nutrition centres in rural areas), activities of protection of the environment and of sanitation and training of poor girls.

Conclusions: impact at personal level

- Group membership contributes to the **psychological empowerment of women** : coming out of the house's isolation, exchanging experiences and knowledge with other women, having access to information on women's rights, to micro-credit and therefore to a working capital fund, attending literacy and training courses, travelling to town and other countries, speaking in public inside the group enable women to widen their vision, lose their shyness and raise their **self-esteem and self-confidence**. They can also begin to undo their "internalized oppression", i.e. the internalization of their own subordinate status in society (Kabeer, 1999).
- Inter-relation between increased individual self-confidence and increased economic independence.

Conclusions

Economic empowerment: Distinguish between:

- a) wage-earning, trained women, with a more stable and better paid job, working almost every day in groups engaged in a profitable collective activity that requires equipment and a common work-space;
- b) women members of groups, active in agriculture, livestock and trade, where the work is individual and income, often low, is represented by individual sales;
- c) women who work for a short time (1-6 days per month), with a remuneration equal to zero (27.9% of cases) or low (less than 200 F CFA per day in 22.5% of cases), who are members of groups where the collective activity is less profitable and working capital or equipment are too small to use women longer or the members are too many, so they work in turns.

Conclusions

c) When the organization's profit is not shared between the members, the work of women is a kind of forced saving from which they will benefit in the form of investment by the organization in its activities or in the form of microcredit from the internal common fund or a microfinance institution (thanks to the group's guarantee).

As the President of a large association said, "the small credit, this is the remuneration of the woman member", with which she can finance her individual activities (but she has the disadvantages of extra work, payment of interest on the credit and the risk of theft of the common fund by the President or the Treasurer).

Women's individual activities

- All rural women interviewed, beside the work in the group, have an individual activity.
- Main individual activities: petty trade, livestock and work on the field of the husband and of other farmers;
- often, women use the training received through the group to conduct at home the same activity of the group, but in a more traditional way, due to rudimentary equipment (for ex., production of soap, shea butter and soumbala, parboiling of rice, preparation of the dolo (beer), weaving, cooking.

Conclusions

The profit of women's ec. activities often is low:

- a) projects and NGOs continue to confine women to low-productivity, precarious, traditionally female activities (no diversification, but production is concentrated in a narrow range of goods with the risk of market saturation);
- b) due to the lack of training in marketing, there are groups, especially in agro-processing, which, despite having their own equipment and workspace, have a lot of difficulty finding a market.

Conclusions

- Before starting production, groups should identify innovative and profitable sectors, carry out market research and marketing training. The marketing phase is often neglected by projects.
- Since an excessive dependence from fair trade is risky, it is important to expand the domestic market through the organization of trade fairs, advertising, improved labelling and packaging and cultural awareness campaigns to convince the local rich people to consume good quality local craft & food products instead of imported ones. Rediscover lost traditional crops (fonio) and dishes, more sustainable and healthy , which provide new interesting markets.

Conclusions

To increase the productivity and profitability of women's economic activities, it is necessary to strengthen women's capacity (alphabetization courses, technical training, computer literacy courses, training in management and associative life), make available to them a substantial and even long term funding (often groups, due to insufficient working capital, must sell their production before buying the inputs necessary to continue to produce) and support them in marketing.

Conclusions

Specifically, to increase the productivity of women farmers it's necessary:

- to remove barriers to their access to: 1) land of good quality (individual titling, co-titling or community-owned land), 2) equipment and productive inputs, and 3) markets also through mobile phones (for ex. information about prices);
- to have extension services targeted to their needs, to increase female extension agents and to use women's social networks, associations to spread agricultural knowledge.
- Agroecology provides an alternative solution to increase food production in a sustainable way, much less dependent on external inputs. It is particularly appropriate to women, because it combines traditional knowledge and innovation, safeguarding biodiversity (Fao, 2016).

Incorporate gender analysis into agricultural programs.

Conclusions

- For genuine empowerment to occur, women should become owners of the programs, not passive recipients so that they can run it without the support of an outside agency.
- When an organization arises autonomously, as a result of endogenous dynamics, it is more likely to last in time and not to disappear at the end of the project: 71.4% of the interviewed organizations in rural areas were formed due to an internal impulse and 28.6% due to an exogenous one, related to external factors such as the offer of funding or training by national or international institutions.

Conclusions

Women's greater self-confidence and income can enhance women's bargaining power and they can have a greater role in decision-making (agency) within the household .

From the findings of this study as well as of others conducted in Mali and Niger on women's microenterprises, it results that almost all women interviewed control their own earnings and allocate the largest part of them to family expenses (meals' condiments, clothes, and especially children's education and health).

They contribute on average to 45-50% of household budget. This limits the reinvestment of their income in their economic activity. However they have no control over their husband's income (they often ignore how much he earns) and have no say on the utilization of production from the family farm, despite the unpaid work they provide in its cultivation.

Conclusions

- **Empowerment of women requires the behavior of men to change.** If a woman continues to carry full responsibility for domestic work and unpaid care, then the income-generating activity increases her burden. In some cases there is even the risk that her husband reduces his contribution to household budget. A redistribution of unpaid care and domestic work within the family requires a cultural transformation, social action and awareness campaigns towards men and young boys.
- An increase in the income of women is certainly a necessary condition for self-determination, but one should not forget the importance of the elimination of the socio-cultural barriers to gender equality: indeed, economic change and cultural change are mutually reinforcing.
- Socio-pol. collective empowerment