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Women and Power in the Market: A Case Study of Market Queens in Ghana

LILLI SCHEITERLE, JULIET KARIUKI, REGINA BIRNER

University of Hohenheim, Inst. of Agricultural Sciences in the Tropics (Hans-Ruthenberg-Institute), Germany

Abstract

Markets in Ghana are largely managed by women traders organised into groups according to commodity. These associations are headed by a leader called *ohemma* which can be translated into queen mothers or market queens (MQ). MQ therefore represent a relevant female-led institution. Although much emphasis has been placed on strengthening women-led agricultural institutions more broadly, little attention both in the literature and within local structures has been focused on MQ. The neglect of MQ is surprising despite their important and unique role in Ghana's agricultural value chain. The scant existing literature on MQ reflects a largely negative connotation associating MQ with characteristics akin to market-led cartels. Our study contributes to this limited body of knowledge by exploring the extent to which MQ access and utilise power within Ghana's agricultural markets. We applied a theoretical sampling technique through the use of in-depth interviews with MQ and traders of plantain, cassava and maize to empirically assess their source and use of power. Our findings show that MQ are nominated into power either by existing traditional leaders or market traders. Contrary to current literature, our results reveal that MQ do not leverage their power to set market prices, but instead to provide an important informal safety net for group members - especially rural women. These findings are important as they challenge the negative representation of MQ and highlight the need for systematic support of women-led organisations in rural areas of Ghana. We conclude therefore that failure to comprehensively account for the role of MQ will limit any efforts seeking to address the challenges faced by agriculturally-dependent women in Ghana.

Keywords: Ghana, institutions, market queens, power, women