

The role of agrifood entrepreneurs during ongoing war in Sudan: A gender perspective

Martina Cavicchioli, Monica Fisher, Sundus Alarabi,
Mudar Ahmed, Ali Omer Abdalla

International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT)



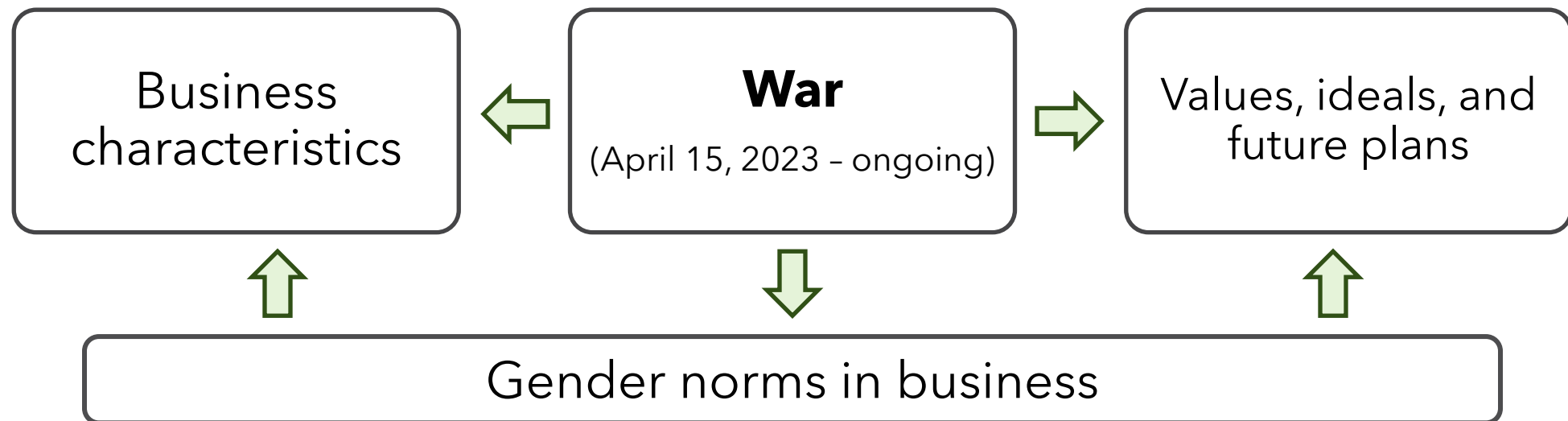
Panel: Multiple crises: political, institutional and economic structures and challenges

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Research objective & questions

Understanding the impact of war on women- and men-led agrifood MSMEs in Sudan and how business owners cope with these circumstances, specifically:

1. Which barriers affect women and men in their businesses? How do they differ?
2. How do women and men business owners adapt in a moment of crisis? With what implications for their private life and business?
3. Which gender norms inform participation in business? Have they changed during war?



Data collection & analysis

- **Data collection:** 16-31 May 2024
- **Target regions:** Kassala and Gedaref States (selection criteria: security, concentration of agrifood enterprises, differences in gender norms)
- **Sample:** Women and men entrepreneurs working in the agrifood sector (N=40)

State	Women	Men
Kassala	10	10
Gedaref	10	10
Total	20	20

- **Data collection method:** semi-structured in-person interviews
- **Data analysis:** Atlas.ti 24 (analysis of interview transcripts); MS Excel (analysis of participants' sociodemographic data)



Figure: Map of Sudan, adapted from mapchart.net

Gender norms in business

- Polarized views about what is considered to be an 'acceptable' business for women:
 - Women cannot work or are restricted to work close to their homes; activities requiring physical strength are for the men.
 - Women are capable to compete with men in any kind of business, if they have the possibility and the necessary support.
- The current economic situation has increased the acceptability of women's participation in business.
- Women in Kassala State hold more conservative views than women in Gedaref State, while perceptions among men are mixed.

The market has many things, good and bad people. Instead of meeting and dealing with these people, I prefer her to stay at home. As long as I can provide for all her needs, I do not let her work. ... If she needs and I cannot provide for her needs, if there is no solution, she can work.
(Man, Gedaref State, 29.5.2024)

... [M]en can enter markets easily, while women often face barriers in doing so. This makes market access a challenge for women but not for men. Additionally, women typically work within the village area, whereas men have greater mobility and can work outside the state or even country. There are also societal perceptions that certain tasks, such as food drying, are exclusively women's work, and men are not expected to engage in them.
(Woman, Kassala State, 20.5.2024)



Woman-led nursery,
Kassala State [Photo
credit: Sundus Alarabi]

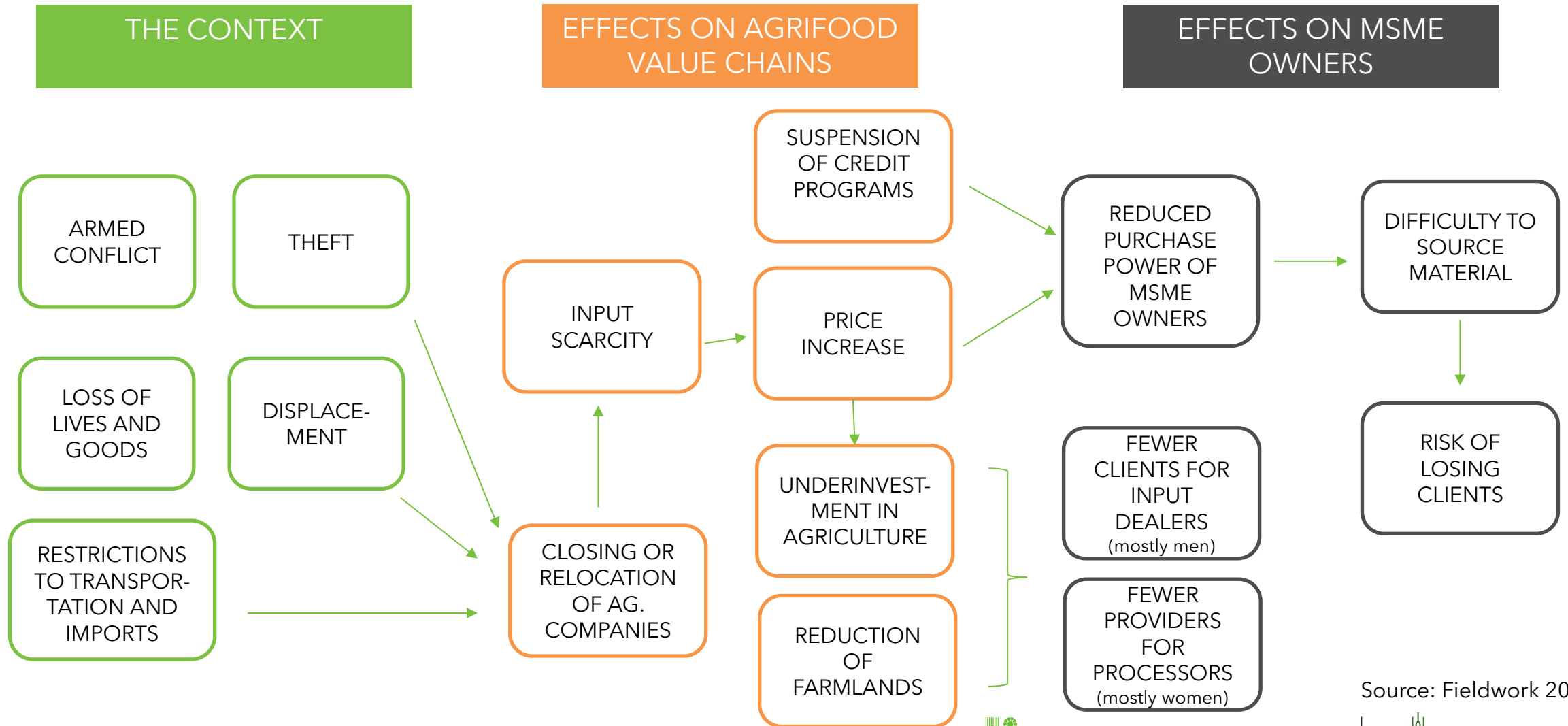
Participants' involvement in the agrifood sector

- Women and men in Kassala State diversify more across different types of agrifood activities compared to participants based in Gedaref State.
- Women diversify more across different agrifood activities compared to men.
- Men in Gedaref State engage more in the sales of agricultural and veterinary products compared to men in Kassala.
- Most of the women who work as processors in Gedaref State belong to an agricultural association.
- Nine women and one man are also involved in non-agrifood activities. Most common reasons:
 - Seasonality
 - Increase/secure income
 - Opportunity to start a new business
- Agrifood activities represent the primary source of income for most women and men respondents.

Agrifood activity type	Kassala State		Gedaref State		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Crop sales (processed and/or raw)	2	3	8	2	15
Livestock-related sales and services	1	1	4	5	11
Vegetable/legume sales (processed and/or raw)	8	1	1		10
Sales of agricultural inputs		3		7	10
Sales of prepared food and beverages	7		2		9
Agricultural advisory services		4		5	9
Orchard or nursery management	1	3			4
Energy generation for agriculture		2			2

Table: Inclusion of a type of activity in women's and men's business [Source: Fieldwork 2024]

War impact on business



Source: Fieldwork 2024

Dealing with war in private life & business

During war, business and private life are deeply entrenched.

Loss

My first and last supporter was my uncle. He died in the war. ... At first, I set up the shop and worked alone, and he paid the rent for the shop. After he was martyred, I was unable to pay the rent and entered into a partnership with the shop owner.
(Man, Gedaref, 29.5.2024)

Uncertainty

... Now, with these circumstances, I cannot do anything. Yet, as I stand here waiting for the winds of change, I feel the weight of uncertainty. Each decision must be made with care, as they ripple through the future like waves. I hold on to hope, knowing that with perseverance and the right conditions, we can transform these aspirations into reality. ...
(Man, Gedaref, 31.5.2024)

Solidarity towards IDPs

Because of life circumstances, nobody knows whether we might end up in their [i.e., IDPs'] situation one day. ... Because we are all Sudanese, we are like relatives. Any displaced person is welcome just like a family member, a mother, a brother, a sister. ...
(Woman, Kassala, 23.5.2024)

Unconditional support to families and people who are in need is present in peoples' life and business. The majority of MSME owners are hosting IDPs and cater for most of their needs, with important financial implications.

Coping strategies

Coping strategy	Gedaref		Kassala	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Reduce the amount of purchased items based on available capital		X		
Source inputs on a daily basis		X		
Sell/use inputs of lower quality			X	X
Diversify among different income sources			X	X
Lay off workers				X
Reduce operations			X	X
Rent an activity to someone else				X
Increase product price	X			
Switch from selling processed to raw products	X			
Secure money through investment	X			
Limited visits to the market to reduce transportation costs			X	
Borrowing from family or friends			X	
Work on two shifts			X	
Suspend business	X			X
Worship			X	

Table: Coping strategies mentioned by MSME owners [Source: Fieldwork 2024]



Agricultural inputs shop, Kassala State [Photo credit: Mudar Ahmed]

Making plans for the future

Right now, I need the war to stop so I can think. I cannot think about anything, and as long as the war continues, we can lose what we have. If there is no stability, there is no development.
(Man, Gedaref State, 30 May 2024)



Tractor at a centre for rural women capacity building, Gedaref State [Photo credit: Sundus Alarabi]

- Difficulty for MSME owners to plan: Only a few seem to be currently pursuing a plan, while most respondents express wishes for the future (e.g., “becoming the largest pesticide dealer in Gedaref”).
- Most of the respondents introduce their responses with “If the war stops, I aim to...”.
- Three main trends in responses:
 - Plan to expand the scale of their business (more frequent among men)
 - Plan to integrate a new activity into the current business (more frequent among women)
 - Wish to return to the old business routine (both genders)
- MSME owners’ needs to pursue business objectives:
 - Financial support (both genders)
 - Training in various aspects of operation management, marketing, etc. (both genders)
 - Support with sourcing inputs and materials critical for their business (more frequent among women).

Key insights & tentative recommendations

Women's participation in business has increased with the worsening of the economic situation, but remains limited to certain fields, which are usually low-remunerated. While some participants encourage women's participation into different fields, others hold on to this belief.

GENDER & BUSINESS

Recommendation 1:
Community engagement to discuss existing social norms

Recommendation 2:
Identify and boost community role models

SUPPORT TO MSME OWNERS DURING AND POST-CONFLICT

Recommendation 1:
Credit programs with affordable restitution policies

Recommendation 2:
Accessible training opportunities

Recommendation 3:
Equipment to maintain and expand business

Both women and men point at financial constraints as interconnected with multiple war-related challenges. Moreover, many participants wish to strengthen their skills through more training in business management or to specialize in new fields.

The study results and the recommendations will be discussed with participants during in-person meetings next week.