



Tropentag, September 10-12, 2025, hybrid conference

“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

Trading inequality: Gender-based differences in market returns for male and female staple crop farmers in Nigeria

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Abstract

Market access is touted as the pathway to empowerment for smallholder farmers but when market returns are the metric, deep inequalities are revealed. The study explored market returns with respect to the value of sales made among male and female staple crop farmers in Nigeria. Data was sourced from the Living Standard Surveys Measures/Integrated Survey on Agriculture (LSMS/ISA), wave 4 of the Nigerian General Household survey panel data set. The study uses a Recentered Influence Function (RIF) Oaxaca decomposition to decompose gender-based return differentials in three levels of market participation low, medium and high as delineated by actual sales value in Naira. Our findings reveal a paradox: Average returns for female farmers at low level sales value is greater than that of male farmers. This is reversed at higher levels of sales, where male farmers earn significantly more income. At the higher level, the mean return gap (0.102, $p < 0.01$) is dominated by endowment effects (0.182), such as household size and marital status, in favour of men. However, the negative unexplained component (-0.080, $p < 0.05$) reveals that women are actually more efficient but face structural disadvantages which keep their earnings back. Even where women are in the lead, as at the lower level, differential access to assets dictates outcomes (endowment effect = -0.124). These findings challenge the assumption that market participation alone guarantees equal outcomes from market access. In order to successfully trade inequality for opportunity, policy must reach beyond access and confront the systemic resource and institutional inequalities constraining women's ability to convert market access into benefits. Reforms in land ownership, access to credit, and labour availability are essential to ensure female farmers are not just in the market but sufficiently remunerated.

Keywords: Agricultural inequality, keywords: gender, market returns, nigeria, rif-oaxaca decomposition, sales value