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The role of cooperatives in strengthening the leadership and voice of women: Evidence from Zambia

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Abstract

Zambia is among the countries with the highest proportion of women in agricultural employment worldwide. However, structural gender disparities severely disadvantage female farmers, who face unequal access to agricultural inputs, mechanisation, and markets. Lacking decision-making power within the household and the burden of domestic and care work pose further constraints. Consequently, female farmers, especially single women, are less productive, affecting negatively their household income and food security.

The study takes a closer look at agricultural cooperatives which in recent years have gained increasing attention as powerful vehicles to bridge gender gaps and empower rural women. Specifically, it explores the interconnection between female cooperative leadership and the sustainable empowerment of women, understood as strengthening economic independence and substantial participation in decision-making at household and community levels.

Qualitative field research conducted in April 2025 included focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with 207 smallholder farmers of 14 cooperatives in Zambia’s Eastern Province. These were complemented by interviews with traditional authorities, government and private sector representatives, NGOs and subject matter experts.

Findings indicate that cooperative membership, particularly in leadership roles, is conducive to women’s self-confidence and self-efficacy, enabling them to reclaim greater influence within their family structures. Furthermore, the facilitation of women’s access to training in, for example, agroecological methods, financial management, and entrepreneurship by cooperatives can enhance women’s voices within the household as they become knowledge bearers whose guidance can contribute to improved agricultural productivity. Moreover, women in cooperative leadership positions are likely to be entrusted with leading roles in other community affairs bodies, reflecting increased recognition of their trustworthiness and competence. At the same time, cooperatives themselves benefit from strong female leadership, with women-led groups tending to be better organised, more efficient in their resource-use, and more proactive in seeking funding and investment opportunities. However, women’s participation and leadership in cooperatives remains constraint, among others, by social pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles and time constraints due to household chores.

Apart from presenting the case study’s findings, the contribution aims to formulate lessons learned for development cooperation, highlighting what is needed to unleash the cooperative potential for women empowerment.

Keywords: Agricultural cooperatives, gender equality, leadership roles, women's empowerment, Zambia