

## PROMISE AND CONTRADICTION: VALUE CHAIN PARTICIPATION AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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With the expansion of agricultural production for the global market, interest among research and development actors in developing more “inclusive” value chains has grown (Stoian et al. 2018a). While mainstream value chain development (VCD) has focused on enhancing the efficiency of processes along the chain, policies increasingly endeavor to address poverty, emphasizing the inclusion of poor and marginalized people in global markets (Bolwig et al. 2010). In recent decades, scholars and development agencies have directed attention toward the “gender gap in agriculture” (Huyer 2016), encompassing, among other things, women’s lesser access to market opportunities and to the benefits from cash crops (Pyburn et al. 2015). As a consequence, agricultural development initiatives increasingly aim to support the engagement of women in agricultural value chains (Sachs 2019). However, while promoting the engagement of women in markets and value chains is becoming entrenched in the global agenda for gender equality (Stoian et al. 2018a), systematic evidence demonstrating causal linkages or laying out a clear theory of change between participation and empowerment remains limited (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014, Johnson et al. 2018).

This chapter places empowerment at the core of our analysis, with the explicit aim of understanding *how and under what conditions participation in agricultural value chains can advance or constrain women’s empowerment*. Through examining empowerment as a potential outcome of participation, we aim to better understand the nature of empowerment processes in the context of value chains, as well as to discuss the extent to which such processes help catalyze broader structural change. Based on a critical review of the literature, we observe that, while value chain approaches are gaining currency within the global development and gender equality agenda, few studies adopt empowerment as the primary topic of inquiry. Moreover, there is considerable

inconsistency in conceptualizing and measuring empowerment in the context of value chains. Evidence linking value chain participation to different dimensions of empowerment is mixed at best. In addition, contextual factors, both within and beyond the value chain, have a strong influence on this link. The following section explains our conceptualization of empowerment and its relation to gender equality in the context of value chains.

The chapter has four sections. The first introduces our operationalization of empowerment and lays out the scope of the chapter. The second reviews the evidence on empowerment outcomes linked to participation in value chains. The third section assesses ways in which VCD efforts advance (or constrain) such outcomes. Here, in order to provide more a nuanced, in-depth insight into the complexity of gender relations, power relations, and empowerment in the context of agricultural value chains, we present two case studies: one on the dairy value chain in Kenya and one on the shea value chain in Burkina Faso. The fourth and concluding section outlines pertinent gaps and identifies priorities for future research on empowerment and value chain participation.

## **Operationalizing empowerment in value chains**

There is considerable discrepancy in the ways in which major development actors frame the relationship between empowerment and value chain participation. For instance, in describing its approach to inclusive market systems development, Oxfam views empowerment *as a necessary precondition*, arguing that “women’s empowerment and rights need to be prioritized for more equitable market systems to be achieved” (Kidder et al. 2017, 26). Through a partnership with CARE, Mars claims to empower women through *enhancing opportunities to participate* in the cocoa value chain by providing them with financial services and market access (Mars 2019). Going beyond mere participation, the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment stresses the importance of “supporting and enabling women to reach their *full potential at all levels of the value chain*” (Klugman and Tyson 2016, 6 [our emphasis]), while the International Labour Organization stresses *links between empowerment and decent work* (Mayoux and Mackie 2007). CARE International stresses *empowerment as a broader outcome*, viewing global value chains as a potentially “*powerful lever for empowering women*” (Boyle 2016, online [our emphasis]), while at the same time emphasizing women’s *empowerment as an instrument to achieve broader societal benefits*, such as food and nutrition security.

The emphasis in this chapter is on empowerment as an outcome of value chain participation. This framing holds empowerment as the dependent variable rather than as a potential ripple effect of other economic or development goals. It goes beyond treating participation or increased income as an “end goal.” In defining our scope, we refer to the framework, distinguishing between agricultural interventions aimed at **reaching, benefiting, or empowering** women (Johnson et al. 2018), as Chapter 1 introduced. Within the value chain context, gender equality has often been understood in terms of equal participation and benefits (for example FAO 2018, 13). Projects aiming to **empower women**, however, focus on measures including “... outcomes that are inherently empowering (for example women’s agency), inherently disempowering (for example gender-based violence, time burden) or indicators of women’s position relative to men (for example degree of control over income, participation in joint decision making, gender-asset gap)” (Johnson et al. 2018, 5).

Instead of merely discussing differences in women and men’s engagement, this chapter focuses on processes that change “... *gender* relations in order to enhance *women’s* ability to shape their lives” (Riisgaard et al. 2010, 7, emphasis in the original). It therefore includes studies focusing on dynamics of participation and benefits only insofar as they relate to empowering or disempowering processes and outcomes. In addition, while we consider that summarizing the literature on “reach” and “benefit” is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that there is a considerable body of research, within and outside CGIAR and across commodity sectors, on identifying and addressing the multiple economic, technological, sociocultural, and political barriers limiting women’s opportunities to equitably participate in and benefit from value chains (see reviews by, for example, Njuki et al. 2013, Mutua et al. 2014, Ingram et al. 2016, Gumucio et al. 2018, Kruijssen et al. 2018).

Given the multifaceted nature of empowerment, we avoid prescribing strict operationalizations and indicators. We are interested in understanding if and how participation in different segments or nodes of different agricultural value chains, or different direct benefits (for example income, training, social networks), influence women’s agency at individual (for example confidence), household (for example economic decision-making), and collective (for example participation in collective decision-making bodies) levels. We further explore if and how that agency can contribute to achieving changes in economic and social relations within the household (for example reproductive labor burden), value chain (for example job security), or society (for example norms around “women’s and men’s labor”).

Inspired by Naila Kabeer (2017, 651), our understanding of empowerment situates it within structures of inequality, and envisions a theory of change in which empowerment challenges those very structures to enhance gender equality. We view empowerment as an inherently political process and, as such, one that is impossible to disassociate from the structural context within which it is situated. While Kabeer’s analysis is multidimensional (that is, political, economic, and social), many contemporary guides to “gender-equitable value chain development” assume structural transformation through individual-level gains across various market-oriented indicators, such as skills, capacities, or participation in collective enterprises (Stoian et al. 2018a, 504). This neoliberal co-optation of empowerment, emphasizing the power of money in allowing women to realize their potential, has produced “... empowerment lite, a version of empowerment pared of any confrontation with the embedded social and power relations that produce societal and material inequities” (Cornwall 2018, 3). We argue that broader socioeconomic, institutional, technological, and environmental processes associated with the expanding reach of agricultural markets do not merely induce changes in women and men’s resources and agency but also introduce new structures and power relations. Hence, we assess the various outcomes discussed above in relation to a broader structural context.

We recognize that it is also possible to enhance gender equality, understood in terms of equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women and men (see discussion in Chapter 1) through top-down approaches, including legal reforms (see Chapter 6 on natural resource management, this volume). However, given the prominence of the bottom-up vision linking empowerment gains from value chains to a transformation of unequal structures, both within and beyond the value chain, this chapter has a two-fold objective:

1. To understand the *directionality and magnitude* of effects across individual and relational empowerment indicators (for example women’s agency, gender-based violence, time burden, degree of control over income, participation in joint decision-making, gender-asset gap) (Johnson et al. 2018); and,
2. To investigate the *theory of change* across these aspects, and broader structural transformation toward greater gender equality.

## Empowerment as an outcome of participation

This section reviews evidence across a number of agricultural value chains and considers the different *forms* of women's participation—for example as wage laborers, smallholder, or self-employed—as well as the *conditions* under which participation and women's empowerment occur.

### Within the value chain

Amid the reorganization of agricultural production into global production systems (Carr and Chen 2004), many value chains have witnessed a shift toward more casual employment practices. The expansion of commercial agriculture has, in many cases, opened up opportunities for women to engage in wage and salaried labor, but the situation is complex, fraught with tradeoffs.

Studies on export horticulture (Barrientos 2001, Barrientos et al. 2003), oil palm plantation work (Li 2015), gum processing (Shackleton et al. 2011), and wood furniture production (Nansereko 2010) have found that while women may comprise the majority of the casual workforce, men tend to occupy the permanent positions. Insecure contracts, long working hours, poor pay, and a lack of social protection characterize women's employment (see also Singh 2003, Tallontire et al. 2005). Evidence from the Kenyan horticultural export sector demonstrates how companies hedge against losses incurred by sudden changes in commodity orders by employing women on temporary terms and paying them less than they pay men (Dolan and Sutherland 2002). In some sectors, essentialist perceptions of women's patience (Shackleton et al. 2011), "nimble fingers" (Li 2015), obedience (Singh 2003), and lack of skills and strength (Nansereko 2010, Tallontire et al. 2005) are used to justify the relegation of women into low-skill, low-pay, and often hazardous activities (Dolan 2004, Chen 2009, Grace et al. 2015).

In the Senegalese groundnut sector, flexible work arrangements have allowed women to combine productive work with reproductive responsibilities; however, narratives presenting women's productive work as a "natural continuum of household activities" legitimize insecure and underpaid employment for women (Baglioni 2018, 127). Casual employment opportunities not only reinforce existing gender inequalities but also come with additional negative effects for women. In Kenya's cut flower sector, women identify job insecurity as a major obstacle to reporting sexual harassment (Jacobs et al. 2015). In Indonesia, aggressive land acquisition processes precipitated women's entry into casual labor on oil palm plantations, which eroded their traditional

livelihoods and left particularly land-poor households with few alternatives (Li 2015, Elmhirst et al. 2017).

For smallholders and self-employed women, value chains similarly offer opportunities and risks. As smallholder households participate in value chains, there is a risk that male-controlled cash crops will displace female-controlled, low-market value crops—reducing women’s access to independent income and/or increasing unpaid labor spent on subsistence production (for example Handschuch and Wollni 2016, Elmhirst et al. 2017). In some instances, women’s entry into conventionally male-dominated value chain activities, such as charcoal production in Mozambique, can owe to an absence or transformations of rigid gender norms (Jones et al. 2016). However, in the Malian charcoal and Guatemalan coffee value chains, it was economic distress following increased outmigration of men, rather than more inclusive social norms, that contributed to women’s entrance into the male-dominated sectors (Lyon et al. 2010, Djoudi and Brockhaus 2011).

As markets develop for historically female-dominated commodities—for example babassu<sup>1</sup>—there is potential for a shift in gender relations (Gumucio et al. 2018). Men have even taken on domestic responsibilities as a result of women’s involvement in babassu production. The creation of “women-centered value chains”—that is, supporting the commercialization of commodities and activities in which women have customarily occupied a central role—can effectively overcome gender-based constraints and enable women’s leadership within the value chain (Riisgaard et al. 2010).

However, outcomes are not only positive. Across a number of commodity sectors, including shea (Chen 2017, Kent 2018), bananas (Fisher and Qaim 2012), fisheries (O’Neill et al. 2018), non-timber forest products (Ingram et al. 2014), and small-scale oil palm (Sarku 2016), male involvement and/or appropriation of benefits has increased when the profitability of the value chain has gone up. In Malawi and Tanzania, efforts to promote orange-fleshed sweet potato as a means of alleviating malnutrition created high demand for sweet potato vines. This resulted in wealthier, well-connected men with the means to invest taking over the formerly female market segment of seed production and trade (Sindi et al. 2013, Mudege et al. 2018). Similarly, in Nigeria, the establishment of fish trading centers allowed male aquacultural farmers to bypass women traders and sell directly to consumers (Veliu et al. 2009).

In the Philippines, women in more remunerative nodes, such as trading and marketing, experience a stronger sense of empowerment, as they generally

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1 Babassu is an edible oil derived from the South American Babassu palm seeds.

have more autonomy and decision-making power over their work (Malapit et al. 2020). However, existing gender relations and norms often limit women's access to more profitable value chain segments.

For instance, in the Kenyan dairy value chain, men commonly make major financial decisions regarding commercially traded milk whereas women decide over milk that is consumed or traded locally on informal markets (Tavener and Crane 2018). In the Malaysian aquaculture value chain, women often perform "hidden labor", such as preparing the gear and food for men for their fishing trips (Krujssen et al. 2013). In Nepal's bay leaf value chain, women producers are more prone to exploitation by traders, because they often lack market information and bargaining power (Choudhary et al. 2010). Religious and social beliefs prevent women in the Burkinabe gum value chain from travelling to more lucrative markets and negotiating prices with men ("*Women should not interact with men*"; "*Women should not travel, women cannot ride bicycles*") (Shackleton et al. 2011). In northern Mali, women from a lower social class took up charcoal production as a means of adapting to increasing droughts and male outmigration (Djouidi and Brockhaus 2011).<sup>2</sup> They often lacked the political connections to access production permits and were hence relegated to producing informally and trading on less profitable local markets.

### **Beyond the value chain**

Women's participation in agricultural value chains can have empowering and disempowering outcomes beyond the value chain itself. To start, the income women's value chain participation generates can contribute to poverty reduction and well-being improvements (Dolan and Sutherland 2002, Shackleton et al. 2011, Butz 2013, Elias and Arora-Jonsson 2017, Smith et al. 2017, Mulema et al. 2017, Farnworth et al. 2018). In Kenya, many migrant women workers in the cut flower sector send remittances to their families. Despite poor employment, characterized by job insecurity, long hours, and arduous tasks, these earnings make a difference in their lives and those of their families, and this work is seen as a better alternative to unpaid domestic tasks in their ancestral homes (Dolan and Sutherland 2002). In several non-timber forest product value chains, wages for women are very low but the employment opportunities make it possible to avoid risky forms of work (including transactional sex), and the income allows some women to diversify their livelihood portfolio (Shackleton et al. 2011).

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2 Interestingly, although similar challenges faced them, women from a higher social class could not take up charcoal production as it conflicted with respectable femininity.

Generally, due to the gendered division of household labor and decision-making, women tend to use a greater share of their income on food whereas men spend more on assets (IFAD 2009, Oduol et al. 2017, Smith et al. 2017). Such pre-existing gender relations may limit the catalytic effect of income in their economic life, as spending is directed away from strengthening their position within the value chain. This is not always the case: in a number of studies women participating in value chains have reported increased human capital, in terms of knowledge and skills for better farm management, other technical aspects of production, and marketing, as well as leadership and negotiation skills (Kanji 2004, Verhart and Pyburn 2010, Shackleton et al. 2011, Quisumbing et al. 2014).

At the household level, women's participation in value chain activities can contribute to increased decision-making power over household finances (Verhart and Pyburn 2010, Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014) and more equal distribution of household expenditure (Quisumbing et al. 2013, 2014). For a number of female charcoal producers in Mozambique, financial autonomy is in fact a key motivation for participation (Jones et al. 2016). Increased decision-making power can, in turn, catalyze further livelihood enhancement—for example significantly higher productivity increments on plots where women control outputs (Elson 1995, in Agarwal 2003). In the dairy value chain in Mozambique, decision-making authority has remained with men, who have nevertheless begun to recognize the skills their wives have acquired and increasingly consult them on matters regarding dairy business (Quisumbing et al. 2013).

Other studies—on tea and fish value chains—find no correlation between women's participation and their control over generated income (Loconto 2015, Limuwa and Synnevåg 2018). In Kenya's poultry value chain, men tend to control the accruing benefits even though it is often women and children who rear the chickens (Maina et al. 2014). Control over assets is a key determinant of whether women control income (Quisumbing et al. 2013, 2015, Stoian et al. 2018b). In the Kenyan avocado value chain, sole-male decision-making tends to be more predominant in households producing export-quality avocados than in households producing lower-quality avocados for local markets (Oduol et al. 2017). Lacking control over the production process and outputs, women—particularly in male-headed households—in fact also opt out of participating in more profitable value chains, instead focusing on lower-value markets and commodities over which they enjoy more control (Turner et al. 1997, Oduol et al. 2017, Curry et al. 2019).

At community level, women's engagement in productive activities can support the transformation of norms that limit their mobility, or perceptions of certain activities as unfit for women (Shackleton et al. 2011, Quisumbing et al. 2015, Hunt and Samman 2016). As a consequence of gaining employment and income, women also report increased dignity and pride (Lyon et al. 2010, Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014).

In the Indonesian aquaculture sector, however, efforts to strengthen women's economic empowerment did not translate into expanded mobility, social freedoms, or reduced workloads (Sari et al. 2017). Similarly, in the coffee value chain in Mesoamerica, women's increased participation in the formerly male-dominated value chain has not translated into enhanced legal, political, and social status (Lyon et al. 2010). Moreover, in some cases, women—particularly those entering into male-dominated value chains—may lose social respect for engaging in activities portrayed as unsuitable for women (Fisher 2004, Ahmed et al. 2018). In Bangladesh, female entrepreneurs and wage workers are more susceptible to losing social respect than women in smallholder households, as working outside the home is seen as a deviation from social conventions (Ahmed et al. 2018).

Despite some exceptions (see for example Gumucio et al. 2018), women's engagement in economic activities rarely translates into a reduced domestic workload (for example Fröcklin et al. 2013, Quisumbing et al. 2013, 2015). This may force them to limit hours spent on economic activities (Arora et al. 2017). At the same time, value chains allowing for flexibility in labor, such as the acaba, swine, seaweed, and coconut value chains in the Philippines, can be more conducive to women's participation, by allowing women to better combine productive and reproductive work (Malapit et al. 2020). However, in some instances, women's increased incomes and/or reduced time available for reproductive work have led to—sometimes violent—resistance from husbands (Rahman 1999, Elias and Arora-Jonsson 2017). In the Philippines, for instance, the project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI) points to attitudes toward gender-based violence as a key source of disempowerment across all of the above-mentioned value chains (Malapit et al. 2020).

### **Discussion: empowerment as an outcome of participation?**

In sum, the relationship between women's participation in value chains and empowerment is anything but straightforward. Women often obtain multiple

and valuable economic and non-economic benefits from their engagement and consider themselves more empowered than before (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014). They gain professional confidence, self-efficacy, and social status, which in turn can help challenge restrictive gender norms that relegate women to subsistence and to the domestic sphere. Income earned through value chain activities can enhance women's household bargaining power and increase their livelihood options. However, women's greater engagement in increasingly commercialized and globalized agricultural production systems is by no means an automatic indication of empowerment.

Our review points to a wide range of both empowering and disempowering features and outcomes, mediated through factors operating at the household and community level and within the value chain. In particular, empowerment gains or losses are associated with the structure and nature of the value chain, including levels of competition, horizontal and vertical power relations, the location of markets, and the terms and conditions under which women participate. Many critical conditions, for example job security, employment quality, and the ability to organize collectively, are identified as prerequisites to women's empowerment *within* global value chains. These sit uneasily with the prevailing trend of increased flexibilization and casualization of the workforce (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014)—a trend that ironically is also a major enabling factor of women's entry into many value chains (for example Loconto 2015).

A second critical factor mediating empowerment gains or losses are gender relations and norms within the household, community, and society. Women's control over resources, decision-making power, and freedom of movement, among others, is in many cases a critical precondition of equitable and empowering participation. Representations of women's labor as low skilled or merely an extension of the domestic sphere may legitimize gender inequalities within value chains. Also, notions of masculinity, constructed around certain commodities or activities, can prompt backlashes against women engaging in "unfeminine" activities or taking on male-coded responsibilities.

Importantly, processes of empowerment and disempowerment can run concurrently, sometimes at different levels. Independent income earned through casual labor may enhance women's standing within the household while the precarious nature of the employment may constrain their ability to improve their working conditions. Also, gains in one dimension of empowerment do not necessarily translate into gains in another dimension—nor does empowerment gained in the economic sphere automatically follow into the household. Earning money may extend women's options while also

intensifying their workload and responsibilities without increasing their autonomy (Pearson 2007). Even worse, women may face social repercussions for challenging predominant gender norms.

Our findings not only caution against assuming an automatic, linear relationship between enhancing women's (economic) resources and agency and achieving broader transformational change. They also call on initiatives that aim to enhance women's empowerment through VCD to acknowledge how broader social, political, economic, environmental, and gender inequalities and transformations affect potential empowerment gains from increasingly commercializing value chains. These systems and relationships in which value chains are embedded can both constrain and expand the range of options available for women's (and men's) strategic life choices. This is especially critical as more intensive engagement in value chains can also expose particularly poorer participants to increased competition and risk, while commercial agriculture may displace or erode women's traditional livelihoods (Elmhirst et al. 2017).

Box 4.1 provides an example of applying a gender analysis to ongoing and socially embedded systems of market relations in the Kenyan dairy value chain.

#### **BOX 4.1 Intensifying inequality? Gendered power dynamics and market participation in Kenyan dairy**

Private and public sector stakeholders in Kenya widely promote dairy intensification as a means to improve rural livelihoods through increased cash income. However, recent studies suggest that the direct economic benefit of participating in milk markets tends to be skewed toward men. This owes to existing gender inequalities in labor, ownership, and decision-making in dairy production: women tend to be the primary dairy laborers, responsible for the arduous daily tasks of milking, feeding, and caring for cows, yet are marginalized in ownership and decision-making. The question of how women can achieve a commensurate income from the sale of milk is perhaps the most pressing gender issue in Kenyan dairy intensification—one complicated by social norms that ascribe masculinized meaning to cattle, milk, and commercial production in Kenya and that mediate women's and men's engagement with both formal and informal milk markets.

In intensified dairy production, farmers usually milk their cows twice daily. Formal markets collect the first milking (morning milk) from farmers associated with dairy cooperative societies. The members and leaders of

these societies are often men, who may inadvertently promote men's control over milk income. Most cooperatives deposit payments with members on a monthly basis to a single account, usually in the name of the "household head". While women can open accounts in their own name, most married women with accounts report the income to their husband and receive an agreed-upon proportion of the total proceeds. In some cases, they turn over all earnings to their husband. Despite their lack of control over proceeds, participation in formal markets can offer tangible benefits for women: cooperatives provide access to loans and veterinary services through "check-off" systems, whereby farmers can purchase dairy inputs and supplies using delivered milk as collateral. By not requiring cash up front, women are able to use the check-off system with minimal spousal negotiations or conflict.

Informal market transactions are those that involve selling milk to neighbors or local shops, or through intermediary salespeople known locally as "hawkers". Women customarily have the discretion to sell informally or consume the second milking of the day (evening milk), with the husband not monitoring the proceeds. In this way, women engaging in informal transactions are often able to exert more control over dairy income. However, the effects of increased milk yields and associated profits under intensification, and the focus on the sale of milk to the formal sector (a space that men customarily dominate), mean women are at risk of losing control over the evening milk sales. Furthermore, although women working as hawkers may be able to circumvent patriarchal constraints to production and marketing, including mobility constraints and issues related to cattle and land ownership, they also face physical security risks by operating outside the law. Hawking is often considered a dangerous and "unfeminine" practice and this therefore endangers their social standing in their family and community.

In Kenya, the process of dairy intensification appears to be generating both potentially empowering and disempowering outcomes for women via their participation in formal and informal milk markets. Greater milk yields lead to higher incomes for evening milk, resulting in heightened risk of intra-household contestation and conflict. While informal market outlets may facilitate the deflection of certain patriarchal norms, the dynamics of intensification accelerate the pushing of the boundaries of "acceptable" femininity, creating opportunities for gendered conflict and exacerbated inequality. The potential benefits of income-generating opportunities available via intensification and formal market participation must be weighed within the contested context of these socially embedded markets.

## Value chain development for empowerment

The past few years have witnessed an increased emphasis on “inclusive” value chain efforts, which often encompass the provisioning of effective services and strengthening of links between value chain actors to enhance outcomes for less powerful chain actors (Stoian et al. 2018a). Various forms of VCD efforts can improve value chain outcomes and lead to women’s empowerment (Coles and Mitchell 2011). This section reviews empirical evidence on VCD with the explicit aim of understanding if and how such efforts support or constrain women’s empowerment. We assess how some of the most prominent VCD trends—namely, process upgrading, horizontal coordination, and vertical coordination—relate to the processes of empowerment and disempowerment discussed in the previous section.

Our review does not capture the full spectrum of value chain upgrading options<sup>3</sup> (for example Gereffi and Kaplinsky 2001, Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark 2011), because our literature search aimed predominantly to solicit studies that provide information on empowerment outcomes. That evidence tends to be restricted mainly to **process upgrading** (including mechanization) as well as various forms of vertical and horizontal coordination (Riisgaard et al. 2010). Further, there is a paucity of literature on gender and chain or **functional upgrading** strategies (Coles and Mitchell 2011). As a point of clarification, while certifications and standards are sometimes described in terms of product upgrading, channel upgrading, or chain governance, we discuss them as a form of vertical coordination. We also recognize that our review does not cover broader efforts aimed at enhancing women’s rights, which in turn might enhance empowerment-related outcomes in value chains. Finally, most of the discussed interventions focus predominantly on farmers within the production node. This may be because of the increased emphasis on VCD for poverty reduction and rural development.

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3 Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark (2011, 13) identify four types of upgrading within the global value chain framework: “process upgrading, which transforms inputs into outputs more efficiently by reorganizing the production system or introducing superior technology; product upgrading, or moving into more sophisticated product lines; functional upgrading, which entails acquiring new functions (or abandoning existing functions) to increase the overall skill content of the activities; and chain or inter-sectoral upgrading, where firms move into new but often related industries.” Riisgaard et al. (2010, 14) also include “improved horizontal coordination (the types, systems and levels of cooperation between the same type of value chain actors)... [and]... vertical coordination (the links between actors in different value chain positions).” (Emphasis added.)

### Process upgrading

Process upgrading is generally understood to encompass a range of strategies aimed at transforming inputs into outputs in a more efficient manner (Gereffi and Kaplinsky 2001). Empowerment-related outcomes have been discussed predominantly in the context of mechanization and capacity-building. We look at both in this section.

The introduction of various technologies and machinery—**mechanization**—along value chains can contribute toward empowerment through increasing women's assets (Theis et al. 2018) and freeing up women's time from agricultural work (Amare and Endalew 2016). Furthermore, mechanization has the potential to facilitate women's entry into new value chains, as demonstrated in Zambia, where access to protective clothing and modern, more easily accessible beehives has encouraged more women to participate in beekeeping (Shackleton et al. 2011). Yet mechanization can also have the converse effect. In historically female-dominated value chains, new technologies have often displaced female producers and small-scale processors, when machinery replaces their labor (Shackleton et al. 2011, Turner 2014, Sarku 2016).

Moreover, restrictive norms, limited investment capital, and lack of training often limit women's opportunities for technological upgrading (see for example Farnworth 2011, O'Neill and Crona 2017). For instance, in the same Zambian case, the introduction of modern honey presses undermined the role of women in processing because they lacked the skills to operate the presses (Shackleton et al. 2011). In a Mozambican cashew nut processing factory, women were relegated to labor-intensive peeling activities as it was perceived that they could not operate cutting machines (Kanji 2004). In Malawi and Zambia, the introduction of groundnut shelling machinery helped reduce women's drudgery but also resulted in increasing competition from men (Tsusaka et al. 2016). In Benin, the introduction of machinery to process cassava into *gari* displaced manual processing tasks that women usually performed while the processing units created employment opportunities for both women and men (Forsythe et al. 2016, Adégbola et al. 2013). Meanwhile, the wages paid to employees are often minimal, while some tasks—particularly feeding cassava into the mechanical grater—are associated with significant health risks (Andersson et al. 2016).

Across these studies, the gender consequences of mechanization depend on the types and scale of mechanization, rather than on mechanization per se. Mechanization and technological upgrading can facilitate more equitable participation when technologies are culturally appropriate, when they address

gender-specific barriers or constraints, and when women have sufficient skills. Technological innovations can help transform restrictive gender divisions of labor through facilitating women's entry into male-dominated value chains (for example Shackleton et al. 2011). However, in many instances, displacing women's traditional labor can have far-reaching consequences where women's traditional labor activities are constitutive of identity (for example Elias 2010 on women shea butter producers). As women in many contexts face considerable financial and social barriers to adopting production-enhancing machinery, there is little evidence linking mechanization to empowerment.

The second set of empowerment-related outcomes is discussed in the context of **capacity-building**. It should be noted that various forms of capacity-building can be embedded in other types of VCD initiatives and hence—perhaps—discussed less frequently as the main independent variable. However, a few of the reviewed studies provide important insights into the relationship between capacity-building and empowerment. While lesser access to trainings and information often hampers women's abilities to apply process upgrading (Riisgaard et al. 2010), capacity-building efforts aimed at skills development can lead to empowerment gains. In Nepal, women who participated in trainings on honey and bay leaf production gained leadership skills and confidence; these in turn allowed them to take on non-traditional gender roles, such as negotiating with traders and buyers or participating in household decision-making (Gurung et al. 2016). In Malaysia, participatory learning tools aimed at exploring market opportunities similarly enhanced women's confidence in negotiating with buyers, by increasing their knowledge of the quality of their products and improving their marketing skills (Faridah Aini et al. 2017).

However, gender-blind capacity-building can exclude women and contribute to disempowerment. For instance, in Kenya's export horticulture sector, men took over representational activities (including trainings, decision-making, sales), leaving women increasingly dependent on their husbands for market information (Velte and Danneberg 2014).

In Malawi, participatory household methodologies—such as the Gender Action Learning System (GALS)—hold potential with regard to enhancing women's participation in household decision-making and challenging rigid gender divisions of labor through involving women and men as well as emphasizing the benefits of “jointness” in household decision-making. However, these outcomes are counteracted if prevailing social norms do not support joint decision-making (Farnworth et al. 2018). An assessment of a

number of VCD interventions did not find an automatic positive connection between participation in trainings and changes in household decision-making (Riisgaard et al. 2010).

### **Value chain coordination**

**Horizontal coordination**—that is, enhanced cooperation between similar types of value chain actors at the same node—is increasingly being promoted to enhance the inclusiveness and equity of agricultural value chains (Turner 2014). Particularly from an empowerment perspective, it has been argued that horizontal coordination increases women’s bargaining power vis-à-vis other chain actors (Coles and Mitchell 2011); improves women’s access to resources and services (Riisgaard et al. 2010, Coles and Mitchell 2011); enhances women’s participation in decision-making at different levels (FAO 2012); and increases women’s confidence in demanding change through facilitating a forum for sharing experiences (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014).

In many instances, such gains are mediated through improved **vertical coordination**—that is, improved coordination between actors at different nodes of the value chain—particularly in the context of “women-centered” value chains (Riisgaard et al. 2010). At the same time, horizontal coordination (for example producer organizations) is often a key feature of vertical coordination efforts, such as socially conscious certification schemes and standards (for example Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014).

While recognizing the overlaps and synergies between horizontal and vertical coordination efforts, we discuss the related empowerment outcomes in two distinct sections for conceptual clarity.

#### **HORIZONTAL COORDINATION**

Despite compelling theories of change that lay out multiple forms of empowerment gains associated with improved horizontal coordination, these connections prove complex. For instance, when cooperatives or producer organizations enforce a “one member per household” rule, they tend to be biased toward male household heads (Oduol et al. 2017, Stoian et al. 2018b, Wijers 2019). The exclusion of women from such groups limits their access to various membership benefits and services, including more remunerative export markets (Oduol et al. 2017), credit (McCarthy and Moon 2018), technologies, and trainings (Fischer and Qaim 2012). In certain certification schemes, women producers struggle to claim premiums disbursed through male-dominated cooperatives (for example Kasente 2012). In Kenyan households that join banana farmer groups through representation by male heads of household,

women tend to lose control over banana production and revenue; women's control over outputs can increase as they themselves join the banana farmer groups (Fischer and Qaim 2012).

While cooperatives are often promoted as businesses, they commonly rely heavily on the unpaid organizational labor of members (Lyon et al. 2017). Women's relative time poverty resulting from compounded triple labor burdens can significantly limit their ability to engage meaningfully in various groups (for example Lyon et al. 2017, Gumucio et al. 2018, Stoian et al. 2018b). In Kenya's poultry value chain, men were more likely to participate in producer and marketing groups, whereas women mainly participated in kin-based social groups, such as religious groups. Compared with heterogeneous producer networks, these kin-based, socially homogeneous groups are often associated with "poor business prospects and self-policing in communities that require women to uphold strict moral codes of conduct" (Maina et al. 2014, 3). Male-dominated cooperatives with limited female representation not only limit women's access to benefits but also are less likely to develop policies and programs to address gender inequities (Lyon et al. 2017).

It is possible to enhance women's meaningful participation in collective bodies when interventions require female participation (Mulema et al. 2017) or participation of individuals, rather than households, in the value chain (Fischer and Qaim 2012); when gender quotas are implemented (Agarwal 2010, Woldu et al. 2015); when women occupy leadership positions (Coleman and Mwangi 2013, Bhalla 2016); and when meeting schedules take women's reproductive responsibilities into account (Stoian et al. 2018b). Ethiopian women are more likely to join cooperatives with members from the same community, educated leaders who can read and write, and trainings and input services. Here, women from more educated households are more likely to participate (Woldu et al. 2015). Women may be more comfortable voicing their needs and opinions in all-women groups as opposed to mixed groups. However, mixed groups may have greater access to financial and social resources. Participation in women's groups can be more socially acceptable—but women-only groups may also prompt resentment among men (Riisgaard et al. 2010). In Tanzania, such groups in the mud crab value chain created male resentment, leading to acts of sabotage and strained relationships with male fishers upon whom the women were reliant (Coles and Mitchell 2011).

Strengthening women's collective action, such as that derived from cooperatives and producer groups, can strengthen positive interactions between women's social, human, and financial capital (Mayoux 2012). After training, a women's fish retailer committee in Egypt successfully proposed

the establishing of a marketplace, where women subsequently engaged with local government officials and conveyed their needs to them. This resulted in a dialogue on the need for water supply, which the council finally provided (Dickson et al. 2016). Women's increased participation and leadership in Village Savings and Loans Associations in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Tanzania has led to more men paying attention to women's decisions and a gradual shift toward more equal household decision-making. The inclusion of men in gender-awareness trainings was a key success factor (FAO and CARE 2019).

In Burkina Faso, members of the women's union and producer groups in the shea value chain cite not only income generation opportunities but also social benefits: forging friendships through union assemblies, working together and supporting each other's production, and reducing isolation (Elias and Arora-Jonsson 2017). In addition to their improved financial situation, many women expressed particular appreciation of increased opportunities to collaborate with other women (Chen 2017). Similarly, in Kenya's tea sector, women formed various informal groups, such as rotating savings and credit associations, even though the union was viewed as largely ineffective in terms of improving employment quality. In this case, stable employment was identified as a critical prerequisite to enabling women to form associations. Having earned greater confidence in their individual and collective abilities, some groups also used their collective agency to campaign for the election of a woman supervisor. A supportive female leader was a key success factor in women's collective achievements (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014). Elsewhere, women leaders are also found to help enhance women's social networks and their access to information (Loconto 2015, Lyon et al. 2017).

Whereas most of the studies above emphasize the importance of women's collective agency and voice vis-à-vis men and powerful chain actors, they pay little attention to heterogeneity among women and to intersecting social power relations. In the shea value chain in Burkina Faso (Box 4.2), women experience exclusion along socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and age. Women's groups may in themselves be sites of contestation and power struggles, despite providing multiple benefits to their members.

#### **VERTICAL COORDINATION**

Vertical coordination efforts that forge stronger inter-nodal relationships can enhance women and men's financial resources and social status (Coles and Mitchell 2011). Such efforts can strengthen women's position within value chains and encourage them to take on new roles (Riisgaard et al. 2010). Many vertical coordination efforts reviewed here are geared toward accessing more

### **BOX 4.2 Shea in Burkina Faso**

In the “shea belt,” stretching across the savanna south of the Sahara, women have long collected shea nuts and processed them into an edible butter that has a central role in local diets, trade, and cultures. Internationally, shea butter is better known for its skin healing and moisturizing properties. Growing demand for shea butter in specialty cosmetics and pharmaceutical markets, coupled with global consumer concerns for social justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, has led to new prospects for rural shea producers (Elias and Saussey 2013). As one of the few economic opportunities in the hands of women in West African countries such as Burkina Faso, the shea value chain has garnered the interest of private sector, non-governmental, governmental, and multilateral actors with regard to promoting rural development and women's economic empowerment (Laube 2015). This has resulted in efforts to organize associations of women's producer groups; strengthen their capacities to produce to international quality standards; reduce the intense labor requirements of butter processing through technologies; and connect producer associations to certified fair trade and organic markets to enhance incomes.

Shea producer associations have offered innumerable benefits to their members. In central-south Burkina Faso, members of the women-only *Fédération Nununa* consider that working with other producers has given them much-needed economic, physical, and moral support. The ability to collectively negotiate high-volume contracts with international buyers, rather than selling individually on the local market, has translated into improved prices for their product. Moreover, when orders are placed with the association, women come together to produce shea butter, sharing equipment and using mutual aid arrangements to relieve some of the physical constraints of production.

The association has fostered closer ties and collaboration among women within and, importantly, across villages, as well as with other actors in the shea value chain (for example non-governmental organizations, local and international buyers, other producer associations). Women also feel less isolated: *Fédération Nununa* members describe how, at production sites, they laugh, talk, and enjoy each other's company instead of working alone in their homestead. As the president of one women's group explains, “When you're alone at home, you have too much time to think of your problems, but when you're surrounded by other people, you feel better because you see that they also suffer, maybe even more than you do, and with their husbands as well” (Léo, February 5, 2007, in Elias 2010). The association strengthens the sense of identity, common culture, and community among producers. In fact, producers consider the enhancement of social capital as a primary benefit of

the association, equally if not more important than improved incomes (Elias 2010).

Yet not all shea producers benefit equally from the association, and collectives are not necessarily emancipatory (Arora-Jonsson 2013). In south-central Burkina Faso, benefits from the association are unevenly distributed, and have created generated exclusions based on producers' location of residence, age, ethnicity, or interpersonal relationships with leaders (Elias and Arora-Jonsson 2017). For instance, town-based producers have access to equipment that enables them to produce large quantities of butter and gain lucrative contracts, unlike rural producers (Pouliot and Elias 2013). Spatial divides also create cleavages: some rural members distrust the association's town-based leaders.

Meanwhile, as competition for shea nuts has increased with market demand, older women can no longer compete with young women, who race to common collection areas (such as woodlands) to gather prized shea nuts before dawn. Women's groups are formed along ethnic lines, with autochthonous women capturing the most promising opportunities arising within the association. Moreover, in some areas, access rights to shea nuts have been renegotiated along ethnic lines, resulting in lower production capacities of "strangers" (non-autochthonous women who have migrated into the area), and their partial or total exclusion from more remunerative contracts.

Spaces within the association, and the shea butter value chain, are thus both collaborative and intensely negotiated among socially differentiated producers. As Elias and Arora-Jonsson (2017, 122) argue, "Rather than mere inclusion of women in value chains, this calls for an acknowledgment of power relations throughout the value chains' vertical but also horizontal links to bring about more equitable relations."

profitable markets and linked to certification schemes or standards. Factors enhancing or constraining empowerment in such schemes may be associated more with specific governance aspects than with a specific vertical relation. We therefore discuss empowerment outcomes in a broader manner in relation to various schemes promoting vertical coordination.

Women's limited resources and heavy reproductive burdens can hinder their participation in export-oriented contract farming, in which it can be hard to match the stringent quality and compliance standards (Oduol et al. 2017; see also Chen 2017, Amare et al. 2019). Further, outgrower or contract farming schemes have increased the marginalization of women and contributed to the invisibilization of their labor where it is male household heads who

sign contracts despite women's and other family members' significant labor contributions (Dolan 2001, Eaton and Shepherd 2001, Singh 2003, Lyon 2008, Maertens and Swinnen 2012, Li 2015). In Papua New Guinea, women working with their husbands in oil palm used to receive very low remuneration for their labor. A vertical coordination scheme that paid women and men into their separate bank accounts resulted in a significant increase in women's share of the household income and a reduction in economically motivated household conflict and violence (Koczberski 2007).

Fair trade certification has achieved little change in household decision-making dynamics in Peru (Ruben and Fort 2012). The opposite is true in Uganda, where women in certified households enjoy significantly more control over production activities and income than do those in non-certified households. Over time, men in certified households have agreed to joint control over coffee production and revenues (Chiputwa and Qaim 2016). Certification schemes can increase women's labor burden, for instance with schemes oriented at enhancing environmental sustainability that entail adoption of new, often labor-intensive, farming practices (Bolwig and Odeke 2007, Kasente 2012, McArdle and Thomas 2012, Loconto 2015). In certified coffee-producing households in Uganda, post-harvest labor demands increased greatly and women bore the brunt, even though organic certification resulted in increased household income associated with higher yields. As a result, women had less time to spend on their micro-enterprises, hence earned less own income compared with men (Chiputwa and Qaim 2016).

In Ethiopia, women participating in a Rainforest Alliance certification scheme reported gaining social relations and knowledge through interacting with other women farmers during meetings. However, the certification did little to increase their active participation in collective decision-making bodies (Riisgaard et al. 2009). In a woman-only coffee certificate and label developed in Guatemala, *Café de Mujer*, positive changes occurred in women's access to new knowledge, management of production processes, and participation in capacity-building (Verhart and Pyburn 2010). This scheme required that each farm be managed or owned by women, and salaries be paid directly to the women farmers. In order to comply, a major cooperative adjusted its statutes to enhance women's representation in its governing bodies. For certified women farmers, the most notable change was the sense of dignity and pride as their family and community recognized their work and roles. In a similar coffee scheme in 17 countries, operated by the non-governmental organization Twin, women's membership and decision-making within mixed cooperatives increased. It also provided producers with a premium that is reinvested in

gender justice projects, such as developing a gender policy at producer organization level or GALS training at the household level (Jennings et al. 2018).

In Guatemala, certification schemes requiring women producers to be present at sales provided women with access to market channels while altering norms that perceived women handling cash as socially unacceptable (Lyon et al. 2010). In Kenya's horticulture sector, working conditions have improved as a result of the widespread adoption of certification schemes. In addition, the establishment of gender committees—as required by the Kenya Flower Council standard—have helped decrease sexual harassment in the workplace, improve the dissemination of information to workers, and address issues such as credit or family planning that have proved important to women (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014). However, while codes set by the United Kingdom Ethical Trading Initiative address a number of pertinent gender issues, including maternity leave and equal pay, they are generally weak at addressing poor labor standards—thereby excluding women in precarious jobs from the above benefits (Barrientos and Smith 2007).

### **Discussion: VCD for empowerment?**

VCD efforts can contribute to women's empowerment within value chains through enhancing their social, physical, and human capital as well as improving market linkages. This in turn can enhance women's status within the household and community and provide avenues for challenging inequitable gender norms. However, the direction and magnitude of "empowerment effects" turn out to be influenced by the specific features of the interventions in combination with a number of contextual factors. Effects can differ from case to case or even run concurrently. For instance, the introduction of labor-saving technologies may help reduce women's labor burden while increased mechanization also risks disenfranchising women for whom financial, social, or cultural factors constrain access to technologies. Producer organizations and unions can enhance women's social capital as well as their access to credit, labor, and more lucrative markets while the groups themselves may be subject to elite capture and exclusionary practices. Certification schemes and standards may similarly contribute to recognizing women's work and improving market access while male-biased benefit-sharing mechanisms and the financial and labor costs associated with compliance may disproportionately disenfranchise women.

An important conclusion is that most interventions associated with empowering outcomes adopt a deliberate and often exclusive focus on women and gender relations. In practice, this often entails identifying gendered

constraints, such as in women's access to technologies and cooperatives or control over income; and deploying deliberate responses to these, such as gender-responsive technologies, more inclusive membership rules or women-only cooperatives, or individual payment schemes. Women-only interventions can be suitable for addressing certain gender-based constraints, such as lack of mobility and access to assets and markets (Riisgaard et al. 2010). However, "even women-only focused interventions require specific gender strategies that seek to counter the special constraints of operating in 'gender conservative' areas" (ibid., 52). Indeed, addressing unequal norms and relations at multiple levels and engaging a broad range of stakeholders—including community leaders, policymakers and employers—in the process are of key importance.

Interventions with a women-only focus risk limiting their aim to enhancing women's agency without addressing underlying power structures, rather than seeking to challenge unequal structures in favor of more equitable and enabling institutions and mindsets (Cornwall and Edwards 2010; see also Chapter 10 on gender transformative approaches, this volume). Without meaningfully engaging both men and women in processes of social change, interventions with a single-minded focus on women risk placing unrealistic expectations on women to transform structures that are rigged against them. They can generate backlash through sparking resentment among excluded men or mask social divisions among women. Approaches meaningfully engaging men can facilitate women's empowerment while enhancing the well-being of the entire household.

Gender-intentional VCD efforts can create spaces for women to come together to access mutual financial, social, and technical support, to collectively market their products for better prices, and to gain increased confidence and social status. Such approaches demonstrate how VCD efforts can facilitate multidimensional empowerment within and beyond the value chain through concertedly building women's social capital while addressing financial and capacity needs. At the same time, our review finds little evidence of enhanced collective agency resulting in women successfully challenging poor working conditions or exploitative labor practices. Instead, changes in labor practices stem mainly from third-party schemes or guidelines, providing companies with economic incentives for putting in place certain policies. While many certification schemes and standards have been found to perform rather poorly on gender issues (Lyon et al. 2010), these findings speak to the importance of embedding gender provisions in such schemes.

At the same time, while collective organization certainly generates multiple benefits for women, this also raises questions about the extent to which

one can expect women's collective agency to effectively challenge, resist, or transform some of the stronger power imbalances and exploitative relations that currently characterize many global value chains. Further, as successes in challenging exploitative and gender-insensitive labor practices appear to be contingent on consumer-driven pressure and premised on the viability of a niche market, we need to ask questions about the potential they hold in terms of achieving transformative change at scale in global value chains, which to date "rely on the utilization (some would say exploitation) of cheap labour" (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014, 17). Indeed, analyses and interventions should not decouple women's intrinsic and collective agency—or *power to, with and within* (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014)—from more powerful actors' *power over* women's labor in agricultural value chains, or the market relations, institutional arrangements, regulatory frameworks, and societal norms that permit or incentivize exploitative practices.

## Concluding remarks

This chapter has aimed at answering the question: *How and under what conditions can participation in agricultural value chains advance or constrain women's empowerment?* Regarding the directionality and magnitude of empowerment effects, we identify a range of potential economic and non-economic gains. Within the value chain, positive empowerment outcomes pertain especially to women's enhanced positioning, social capital, confidence, skills, and leadership. Beyond the value chain, outcomes include enhanced status, increased agency in household economic decision-making, and—often indirectly and to a lesser extent—the challenging of norms around the gender division of labor.

However, we also observe that women's participation in value chains as well as VCD efforts can have disempowering effects, including loss of control over production processes, loss of social status, exploitative labor conditions, marginalization, and time poverty. These outcomes are often contingent on the nature of pre-existing gender relations and inequalities within the household, community, and value chain. Importantly, processes of empowerment and disempowerment can run concurrently and produce contradicting effects within and beyond the value chain as well as between different dimensions of empowerment. This underscores the need to situate outcomes from value chain participation in a broader conceptualization of empowerment, rather than reducing empowerment to whatever the market can deliver.

While gender-blind VCD efforts can exacerbate disempowering processes, our review also illustrates ways in which gender-responsive efforts can enhance women's empowerment, through:

- Strengthening women's positioning and bargaining power within the value chain;
- Enhancing professional confidence;
- Facilitating spaces for sharing information and building collective agency; and,
- Enhancing household bargaining power through increasing skills, knowledge, and access to independent income.

Our review suggests that it is possible to enhance such outcomes by combining regulatory interventions (for example gender quotas in producer organizations) with services and interventions targeted at addressing gender-specific barriers and building women's social, financial, and human capital. In addition to value chain interventions, efforts aimed at engaging both men and women and fostering jointness and more equitable gender relations can be critical to facilitating empowerment beyond the value chain.

Regarding the relationship between individual empowerment and broader structural transformations toward gender equality, however, we do not find conclusive support that empowerment gains at the individual level allow women to effectively challenge broader inequalities (for example the devaluation of women's labor) that agricultural value chain processes can exploit. Our review hence finds little support for theories of change assuming structural transformation through individual, market-oriented gains, particularly when taking into account 1) the social and political dimensions of empowerment and 2) women's ability to effect broader structural change.

Indeed, it is worth questioning the extent to which we can realistically expect women's incorporation into commercial markets to address broader societal inequalities or power imbalances, particularly when addressing them may run counter to the prevailing market logic or risk a tradeoff with other objectives (for example Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014). Overloading agricultural value chains with expectations of enhanced empowerment may water down the concept of empowerment to merely market access and financial decision-making. In order to place empowerment and gender equality at the core, we propose the devotion of more effort to understanding how gender-transformative change happens in different contexts—and then assessing

whether, when, and how various forms of value chain engagement can support these processes. Instead of considering women's empowerment as a ripple effect of agricultural commercialization, placing empowerment at the core allows for a much more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the empowering and disempowering features of value chain engagement and VCD efforts. This constitutes a more honest assessment of potential synergies and contradictions between empowerment and other value chain priorities.

### **Directions for future research**

Future research should seek to fill some of the pertinent gaps in the literature on value chains and women's empowerment. First, while gender dynamics have been studied across a wide range of value chains, evidence remains patchy and biased toward certain geographies, nodes, and specific value chains. For instance, a majority of studies—spanning a number of commodities—have taken place in Africa, possibly as a result of the increasing emphasis on value chains in international development (Chan 2010, Stoian et al. 2018a). Interestingly, studies in Asia tend to focus on forestry and aquaculture whereas coffee is a focus in Latin American studies. At the same time, studies on certification and empowerment in Latin America are likely to focus on coffee (for example Lyon et al 2010, Verhart and Pyburn 2010, Jennings et al. 2018), which may contribute to the overrepresentation in this chapter.

Second, despite recent attention to various processing nodes, the majority of studies assessing empowerment outcomes focus on the production node. Few papers provide any information on traders and retailers, particularly in urban and peri-urban settings. Across commodity sectors, more attention is given to nodes and value chains where women have historically played an active role. Furthermore, despite the complex ways in which households engage with multiple commercial and non-commercial activities (for example Stoian et al. 2012), empowerment outcomes are assessed exclusively in relation to a single value chain. More analysis utilizing integrated household livelihood approaches is critical to understanding the ways in which changes in engagement with commercial value chains affect various economic and non-economic activities and responsibilities, including, for instance, women's time poverty.

Third, empowerment is often measured solely among women, and few studies disaggregate by other social categories or discuss the effects of intersecting power relations. However, accounting both qualitatively and quantitatively for multiple axes of social divisions and power relations can

be key to identifying heterogeneous outcomes and understanding multiple, concurrent processes of empowerment and disempowerment. Relatedly, a narrow emphasis on women risks missing ways in which masculinities (and femininities) are intertwined with various economic assets and activities (Stoian et al. 2018a). Resistance at household and/or community level can arise in response to transgressions of conventional gender roles in labor and decision-making. Understanding the relationships between locally constructed notions of masculinity and femininity, labor, and decision-making is thus vital to identifying points of contestation, anticipating social reactions, and uncovering potential entry points for promoting jointness across productive and reproductive domains.

Lastly, and perhaps most critically, while women's empowerment increasingly features as a key objective for VCD interventions, few studies adopt empowerment as the primary topic of inquiry. While many studies provide some information on some dimensions of empowerment at some levels, there is considerable heterogeneity in the ways in which studies operationalize and measure empowerment. In the absence of comparable conceptualizations and methodologies, as well as clear and transparent interrogations of impact pathways linking participation to empowerment, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the role of context factors and the scalability of results.

The literature shows a somewhat dichotomous relationship between studies examining gender relations and empowerment within the value chain and those addressing the impact of participation on household and community dynamics (see also Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014). While the former focus on empowerment in terms of labor conditions, collective agency, human capital, etc., the latter assess empowerment as household bargaining power, control over income, and shifting gender roles. In addition, the increasing attention to market-led empowerment indicators such as assets, income decision-making, or professional skills and confidence risks depoliticizing empowerment by removing it from the broader material and sociopolitical context (Cornwall 2018). The following six points are critical in future gender and value chain studies:

1. Enhance conceptual clarity and develop more transparent operationalizations of “empowerment”—particularly in relation to value chains—in order to enable cross-case comparisons;<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Ahmed et al. (2018) and Malapit et al. (2020) for efforts to amend the WEAI to value chain research. For a broader discussion on the WEAI as a measure for assessing empowerment, see Chapter 9 on measuring women's empowerment, this volume.

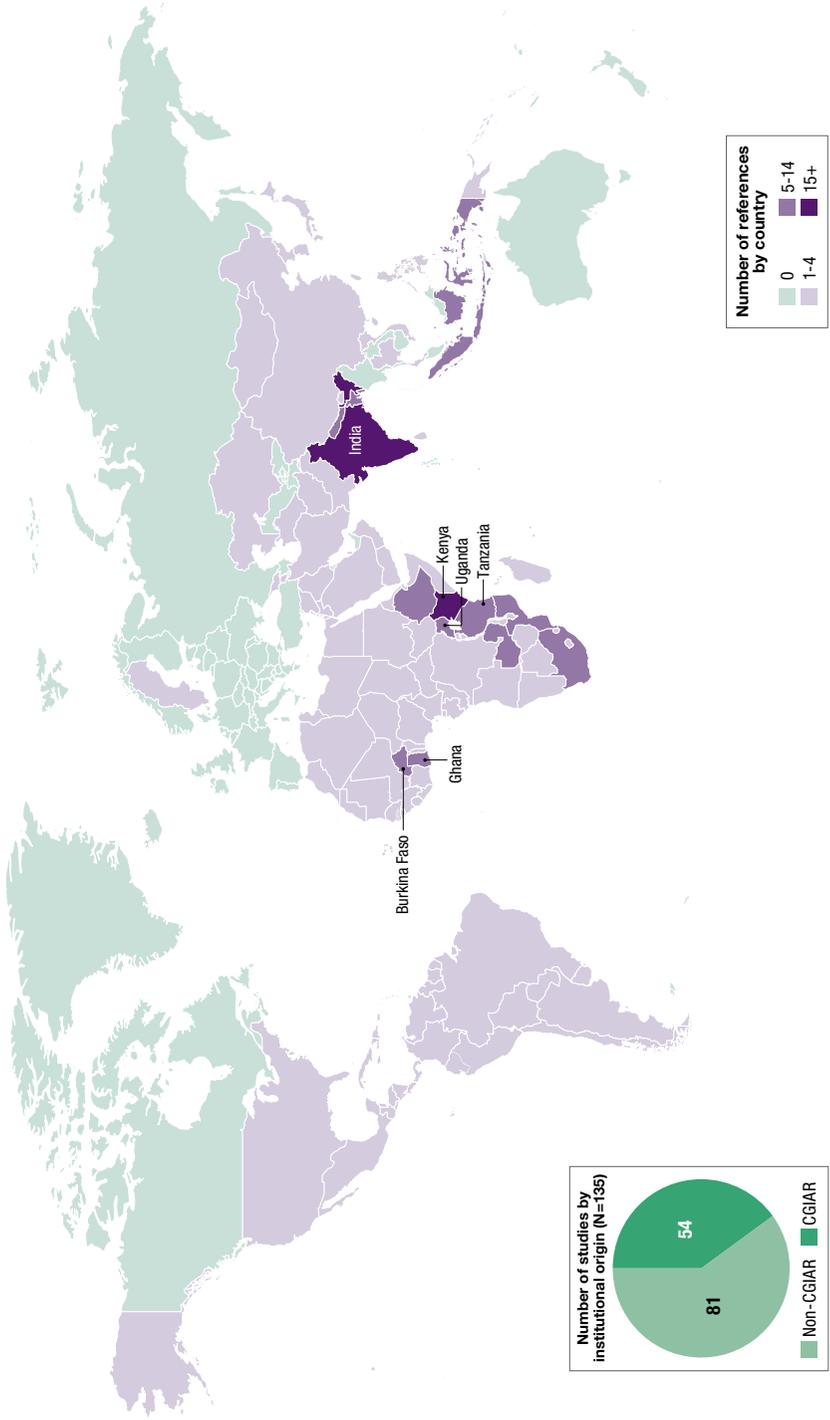
2. Develop a clear theory of change laying out various pathways from participation to empowerment across multiple dimensions, spheres, and levels;
3. Build approaches that can link processes within the value chain and processes in the broader systems within which women and men are embedded (Bolwig et al. 2010);
4. Critically assess ways in which economic, institutional, and environmental processes and transformations shaped by the expansion of commercial value chains influence the choices and options available to women and men;
5. Invest in methodologies that can account for intersectionality<sup>5</sup> and engage with notions of masculinity and femininity in the context of value chain-related processes; and,
6. Collect quantitative and qualitative baseline data across multiple dimensions of empowerment in order to make it possible to assess change over time.

In addition to contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced body of research on value chains and empowerment, these points are critical to deliver research that allows policymakers and practitioners to design more effective and appropriate interventions as well as to monitor impacts along a more refined and empirically grounded theory of change.

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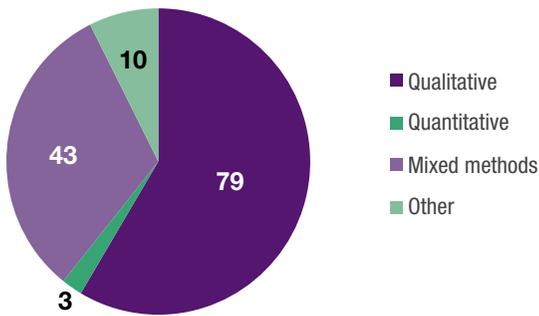
5 See for example Sugden et al. (2014), Ravera et al. (2016) and Colfer et al. (2018) for approaches to operationalizing and applying intersectionality in CGIAR (and other agricultural) research.

**Geography of study sites for publications cited in Chapter 4**



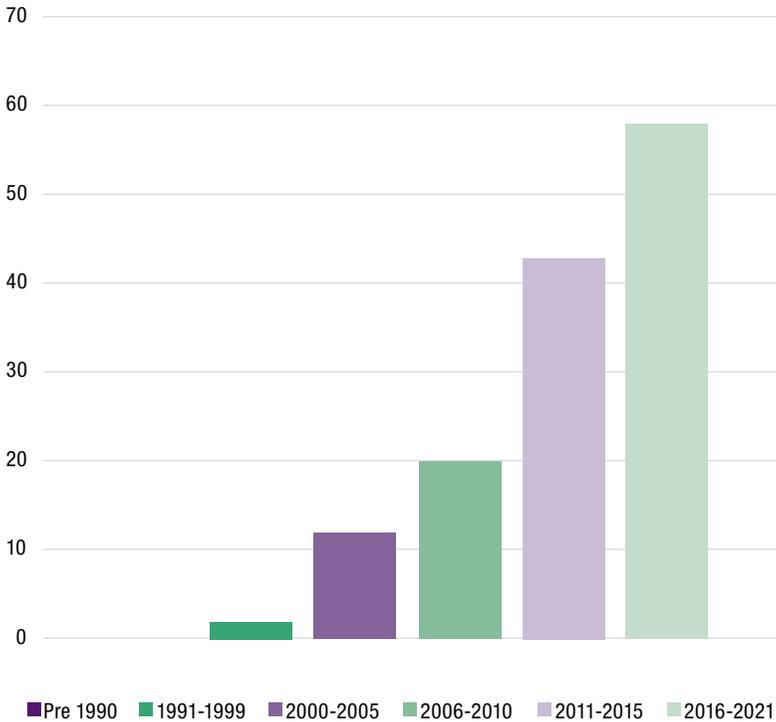
### Number of cited studies by research methodology (N=135)

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