

## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Less noise in the household: the impact of Farmer Field Schools on Gender Relations**

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**The study examines the impact of collective action in Kenyan Farmer Field School groups on household gender equity. Qualitative fieldwork reveal significant changes in household division of labour and decision-making; in gendered customs and traditions, and in men's work ethics and their view of women. To understand how the participatory education experience in collective action groups impacts spousal relations, two theoretical frameworks were used; collective action and gender relations and transformative learning theory. The study concludes that Farmer Field Schools generate gender impacts not only because it empowers women but because it also provides opportunities for the men, the agent of oppression in this case, to change their view on women. This suggests that equity in household gender relations may be improved through the active engagement of both women and men in non-formal adult education within mixed collective organizations. This approach provides an alternative to the widespread strategies of aid agencies that seek to enhance standing of women by targeting them as individuals.**

**Keywords:** Gender equality, farmer field schools, agricultural extension.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Most agree that gender equity, particularly within the household, is an important element in rural development (World Bank 2001; Razavi and Tsikata, 2003; Cornwall, 2000). Since the turn of the century, efforts to enhance household gender equity have been widely accepted by international donor agencies and mainstreamed into a variety of development interventions (O'Laughlin, 2007). Yet, gender inequality has persisted in rural Africa, and most development interventions seem to have little lasting impact on improving gender relations, especially within the household. This article focuses on the dynamics of household gender relations in rural Africa with the aim of improving our understanding of whether and how participation in non-formal educational development efforts leads to changes in gender dynamics.

Gender equity and relations have gained an increased

focus lately through the growing recognition that processes involved in alleviating poverty are more complex than simply developing ways (e.g., nonformal education programs) to give women control of productive resources (Kristjanson, Place et al., 2002). When the poor themselves are asked what poverty means to them, income is only one of a range of the aspects they highlight. Power and control over their lives seems equally important to most community members (Chambers, 1989; Narayan et al., 2000), aspects often strongly determined by gender roles and relations. Power and knowledge are, however, inseparable from each other, and, particularly in the case of gender relations, power produces knowledge and knowledge produces power (Flyvbjerg 2001; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001). Freedom is thus 'the capacity to participate effectively in shaping the social limits that define what is possible' (Hayward, 1989). As Ingram points out (1987), we learn so that we have more control over our world, and learning frees us from dependence on others. In this view, knowledge can thus be regarded as one instrument in the battle for power (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001), and thus in promoting gender equity.

Gender relations are socially determined ideas and

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practices of what it is to be female or male (Reeves and Baden, 2000), sanctioned and reinforced by cultural and socio-economic institutions and traditions. A unitary view of gender roles in Africa, characterized usually from a patriarchal perspective, where women are seen as being preoccupied with reproduction, often restricting them to household duties or subsistence farming while men are typically involved with remunerative public activities and responsible for supplying the material needs of their families (Moser 1993; Sen, 2000). Men also traditionally represent the household in formal community organizations, while women tend to have less of a public presence. However, while men's and women's spaces are separated, their roles and responsibilities are traditionally seen as complementing each other.

Social science gender studies in Africa have challenged this unitary view by pointing out inequalities in the gender relationship (Boserup, 1970). As inequalities in household gender relations and conservative community norms restrict women's spaces and spheres of activity, opportunities to enhance their human, social, natural and financial capital are limited. However, while gender inequity characterizes the patriarchal household in rural Africa, it is also a source of the identity, survival and well-being of individuals who depend on their ability to benefit from a variety of income sources generated by members of the household. Women's choices, for example, are often constrained by structures of cooperation as well as conflict in conjugal relations (O'Laughlin, 2007).

The main argument behind policy efforts to mainstream gender in development is that household gender inequity causes inefficient resource allocation, as women withdraw their labor from more profitable agricultural activities the outcomes of which they do not control. This point of view was put forward in the World Bank report, *'Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice'* (IBRD 2001), which became a reference for reducing poverty by targeting resources at women, a call to which development agencies responded positively. The report concluded that agricultural productivity and in turn poverty reduction would be higher if women had greater control over productive resources.

While acknowledging the importance of addressing household gender inequalities, some academics are questioning the direct link between establishing a gender balance in the control of productive resources and poverty reduction. The world bank study is based on an a-historic gender-disaggregated analysis of crops and inputs and thereby remove focus from 'inequalities in social relations of gender that are shaped by broader economic and political processes' (Razavi, 2009). In a reanalysis of two academic case studies on which the IBRD 2001 report was based, it was concluded that the academic foundation was weak (O'Laughlin, 2007) and the policy claims that are made in their name misleading

(Razavi, 2009). For example, a recent study of Kenya (part of a World Bank book series on Gender and Economic Growth) argued that gender differences in education, employment, access to assets, and time burdens have significant adverse impacts on economic growth (Ellis et al., 2007: 102). The findings estimate that increasing female access to agricultural inputs to the same level as male access would increase yields by 22 %, thus almost doubling in Kenya's growth rate from 4.3 percent (in 2004) to 8.3 percent (Ellis et al., 2007: 1).

Furthermore, targeting support at individual women, which often happens, is criticized for taking a simplistic neoclassical economic view of the dynamics of rural households that fails to take into account relations of power and the elision between individual and collective agency (O'Laughlin, 2007: 11). The rationale for supporting the enhancement of individual, household and community agency through collective action is that farming among poor rural landholders in sub-Saharan Africa is taking place under rapidly changing conditions, such that neither male or female farmers can rely any longer on their local knowledge and associate gender roles to the extent they have in the past (Percy, 2005). Farmers are required to be innovative, able to make informed decisions and rapidly adjust to changing situations. The strengthening of human capital by enhancing household equity and through the production of knowledge for a framework of action is thus a precondition for agricultural development (Haug, 1998). However, this requires a level of agency that is difficult to achieve given existing conservative norms and the patriarchal gender division of labor in society that largely separates the spaces in which men and women carry out their daily tasks and communicate with each other.

Individualizing support by targeting women often overlooks the negative consequences (Moore and Vaughan, 1994). For example, this support can jeopardize women's relations with their spouses and the extended families on which they depend (Shipton, 1988). Many participatory development programs that specifically target women fail to meet their efficiency or empowerment goals, as the design does not adequately address aspects of collective action, including community power relations and how farmer groups are structured and managed (Pandolfelli, Meinzen-Dick, and Dohrn 2008, Baden 1999, Mayoux 1995). Case studies from Africa show that individual women who seek to reconfigure gender relations by challenging social conventions and patriarchal authorities by pushing back the boundaries of what is deemed to be acceptable behavior for women can lead to high personal costs, as they are stigmatized by the local community (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001). An alternative approach is to engage with men and women not separately but collectively, in 'mixed male and female organizations that allow for women's full participation, particularly where men and women share joint interests or are both users of

a resource' (Pandolfelli, Meinzen-Dick and Dohrn 2007: 42). Such collective action may involve either formal organizations (e.g. cooperatives or water associations) or informal farmer groups and amorphous social networks. As a consequence of this approach, there are indications from recently published literature that some of these mixed farmer groups improve intra-household gender equity, women empowerment and overall well being (Pandolfelli, Meinzen-Dick and Dohrn 2007). An example of nonformal collective action is participatory extension through Farmer Field Schools (FFS) in Kenya.

Even though the primary emphasis of collective action in mixed farmer groups is on enhancing the agency and capacity of the participants, one possible side effect is potentially greater gender equity in the household. Recent studies demonstrate the 'embeddedness of collective action in gender relations, the positive value of women's active participation in collective action and a range of possible means of incorporating women' (Pandolfelli, Meinzen-Dick and Dohrn 2008: 2). However, despite a strong conceptual argument that mixed groups have an impact on gender inequality, little is known empirically of their effects on daily lives of individual members. Thus there is a need for better understanding of how the complex interaction within collective action institutions impacts on gender equity, and how best to stimulate gender-equitable processes of change (Pandolfelli et al., 2008: 9). More specifically, what happens when men and women from a patriarchal society spend time working collaboratively in non-hierarchical mixed groups? What is the nature of the relationships that develop among nonspousal partners and how do these impact on spousal relationships? What is it about the collective experience that fosters or inhibits the development of relations with nonspousal partners? In response to these questions and others, the purpose of this study is twofold: a) to explore the impact of FFS on the everyday lives of participants, especially in terms of their spousal relations and gendered roles in society; and b) to examine the relationship between collective processes and gender relations.

To address these aims, this article investigates Farmer Field Schools (FFS) and their effects on household gender equity from the perspective of the participants (men and women). First background context information about FFS in Kenya is provided, followed by a discussion of the fieldwork methodology and the study area of Kakameka, Kenya, in terms of its socio-economic and cultural setting. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that inform the purpose of the research, leading into the study findings, and finally the conclusions and future perspectives.

### Farmer field schools

FFS represents a community-based, farmer-generated

and facilitated non-formal approach to adult education that provides a collective institutional platform where farmers meet regularly in mixed groups to study the 'how and why' of farming. FFS uses a learner-centered, problem-based approach to teaching involving field observations, relating observations to the ecosystem, and combining previous experience through group discussion with new information to make informed crop or livestock management decisions (Friis-Hansen and Duveskog 2008). The learning takes place under the guidance of a trained facilitator, who helps promote active participation, group dialogue and reflection. Critical reflection is enhanced through field experimentation and discovery-based activities which stimulate participants to question preconceived beliefs and norms about farming. Apart from the technical farming-related issues, non-agricultural issues (e.g., HIV/Aids, domestic violence) are also integrated into the FFS curriculum. Discussion and sharing of beliefs and practices among participants forms the main source of information. The manner in which all activities are carried out – practically 'hands-on' in the field in combination with a reflective questioning of beliefs – provides a new way for women and men to work together. As all participants in FFS are expected to be actively engaged in all field activities and rotate roles such as discussion leaders, presenters, hosts etc., traditional gender roles are downplayed, leaving space for individualistic expressions.

Currently there are about 3000 FFS groups in East Africa. Published research indicates substantial impacts of FFS in terms of increases in farm productivity, reducing farmers' use of pesticides and improved farming knowledge (Rola et al., 2002; Praneetvatakul and Waibel, 2003; Mwagi et al., 2003; Friis-Hansen, 2008). Developmental benefits in terms of empowerment and collective action are also reported (Friis-Hansen et al., 2004; Duveskog et al., 2011). A recent study by carried out by IFPRI in East Africa demonstrated significant impacts of FFS on the lives, productivity and incomes of especially women-headed households and people with low levels of literacy (Davies et al., 2010). However, outside the agrarian implications of FFS, little is still known about the effects of FFS on participants' lives, especially gender roles and relations within the household.

### METHODOLOGY AND SETTING OF STUDY

The study site, Kakamega District, is located in western Kenya. Poverty levels in this district are among the highest in the country, with an estimated 50% living in *absolute* poverty (Republic of Kenya 1997), and the economy is largely subsistence driven. It was chosen based on the presence of a large and well-functioning FFS programme and the important role that agriculture play in the region, small-holder farming being the main

economic activity in the area and providing important social functions by constituting the rural base for food security. The Luhya ethnic group is the main one in the District, with traditionally the extended family and the clan at the centre of the culture. While the culture is rapidly changing with modernisation, there are still strong traditional beliefs and taboos connected to rural life, and especially to agriculture and gender roles. Polygamy is also still practiced in the area. Respondents of the study were between 30 and 55 years of age and all involved in subsistence farming, with varying degrees of commercialization and production for the market, with an average land-holding of 1-4 acres.

The study involved interviews with 22 current or graduate FFS participants and eight group interviews (10-25 participants). Individuals and groups were purposely sampled with assistance from local FFS network leaders living in the community who were familiar with the life stories of most FFS members since before they joined the groups. Respondents were sampled as (a) informative examples of personal changes resulting from involvement in FFS, (b) representing typical FFS graduates in terms of social and economic characteristics and (c) ensuring gender balance among respondents. The in-depth interviews followed an interview guide developed to ensure that certain questions were covered. The approach permitted flexibility to explore and probe topics of interest to each respondent (Patton 1990). A cross-cultural team conducted the research, embodying both African and Western values, and two researchers had extensive experience of the local culture.

Interpreters were used during the interviews, apart from in a few cases where the interview was carried out in English. Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and were audio-recorded for transcription and supplemented by handwritten notes. In addition to the interviews, direct observations were made during regular meetings of the FFS groups that the interviewees belonged to. These meetings included group discussions, theatrical replay, various group activities, performance of songs and dances and visits to group experimental fields. Along with individual and group interviews, key informants were also interviewed, such as FFS facilitators and FFS network officials, to provide background information on the FFS programme. All the interviews were transcribed and analysed using a constant comparative approach. The data were separated from the original transcript using NVIVO-QSR (version 8) in order to identify their essential elements. Codings of responses (Miles and Huberman, 1994) were made in an inductive manner, where themes were developed based on emerging similarities of expression. As a result, common themes were identified and grouped into main and sub-themes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In order to safeguard the anonymity of respondents, pseudonyms have been used in the article.

## Theoretical framework

To understand the change in gender relations among FFS participants, particularly how the participatory education experience impacts on spousal relations, two theoretical frameworks were used; collective action and gender relations and transformative learning theory.

### Gender relations in collective action

Reflections on gender in relation to collective action formed a framework for interpreting this study. The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) conceptual framework (Ostrom, 1991) defines the action arena (e.g., Farmer Field Schools), shaped by initial conditions, including asset endowments, vulnerabilities and governance systems, and shows how this can influence a range of outcomes. Pandolfelli, Meinzen-Dick and Dohrn (2007) add a gender aspect to IAD, emphasizing that men and women experience initial conditions differently and have different motivations and capacities for engaging in the action arena. Institutions together with rules and actors create gendered patterns of interaction, which again affect the effectiveness of collective action. The outcome of collective action in groups can in turn change household gender relations shaped by these initial conditions.

Collective action can be defined by voluntary action taken by a group of people to achieve a common interest. It refers both to the process by which voluntary institutions are created and maintained and to groups deciding to work collaboratively together (Pandolfelli et al., 2007). Factors that influence men's and women's engagement in collective action in groups include group size, shared norms, previous successful experiences, strong leadership and interdependence among group members (Agrawal, 2001). Institutions themselves are gendered in that they can either challenge or reinforce existing social roles, including gender norms and habits.

There is increased recognition that mixed-sex groups (FFS) that respond to both women's and men's needs and aspirations may lead to transformative changes in gender roles within the group, gradually transmitted to the spousal unit and the wider community. This can be transformative in that it changes the way participants view themselves (e.g., greater self-efficacy) and their relations with others (e.g., more open to various points of view) in the world. More of this is discussed in the next section of the article (Mezriow, 2000). Using the IAD framework, changes in gender relations resulting from collective action by mixed-sex groups may feed back into the action arena and influence the initial conditions. As an example, Pandolfelli et al. (2008) points out how women have increased confidence and emancipation (gained in

the action arena) may decrease alcoholism among men (initial condition).

Gender may be conceptualized as both a source of power asymmetry and as an organizing principle for community action. Collective action groups, such as FFS, may foster gender equity by providing opportunities for men and women to develop healthy relations within the action area. It cannot be assumed that gender equity will be the automatic outcome of collective action in gender mixed farmer groups (German and Hailemichael, 2008). However, traditional rules and norms that hinder women's ability to translate their strengths into resources are much less present when mixed gender groups work in the more cooperative, non-hierarchical settings associated with FFS. As a result of working collaboratively over an extended period in farmer groups, women gain confidence and men learn to work with and have greater respect for women's contribution to their livelihoods. Gender studies in Africa identify four stages of changes in gender equity: (i) encouraging women to come out of isolation; (ii) their empowerment through acquired ideas, knowledge, skills and resources; (iii) the enhancement of their lives in households and communities; and (iv) their emergence into public sphere (James-Sebro 2005).

Studies have found that collaboration, solidarity and conflict resolution increase when farmer groups are mixed and include a substantial proportion of women (Westermann et al. 2005). 'Mixed groups can also have higher payoffs because they can tap into the differential strengths of men and women and also because they can get higher compliance with NRM, especially if men and women are both using the resource or have resources that are needed' (Pandolfelli et al. 2007: 41). The impact on gender relations goes beyond the immediate purpose of collective action groups. Whether or not collective action groups regard gender equity as an end in itself, they can be instrumental in changing gender relations by providing opportunities to foster the emancipation of women. Theoretically, it can be suggested that, within the context of collective action by mixed groups that are working collaboratively (sharing of responsibilities and decision-making) between gender groups, relationships will develop that have the potential to set the stage for transformative learning experiences. This transformation is both a product of the relationships and the social recognition and support of those relationships among the collective.

There may be inherent trade-offs between the goals of gender equity and group effectiveness (German and Hailemichael, 2008). The gendered nature of collective action organization will vary for different types of collective action. For example, attempts to foster gender equity in a collective form of natural resource management are limited by men monopolizing access to benefits. However, in participatory agricultural extension programs such as FFS, there is likely to be greater shared equity between men and women, due the empha-

sis on cooperation and equal gender representation among the members of the group.

### **Transformative learning**

Transformative learning is the most established theory of adult learning and has been used in a variety of other disciplines (health and medical education, intercultural relations, psychology, environmental sciences, higher education, religious studies, instructional technology, English as a second language, archaeology, human resource development, workplace learning) to help make sense of the learning process regarding significant personal change (Taylor, 2000, 2007). Transformative learning offers a psycho-cultural view of learning that 'is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action' (Mezirow, 1996: 162). It is based on several assumptions about learning and adulthood. First, adults are active, not passive, participants in their lives and are instinctively driven to make meaning of their world. Secondly, rooted in the tenets of constructivism (Loveinsohn et al., 2002), adults have significant life experience, which provides the basis for an established belief system through which they can construct meaning of what happens in their lives. Thirdly, since there are no enduring truths and since change is continuous, adults cannot always be confident of what they know or believe. Instead they continually struggle to gain control over their lives to be able to negotiate and act upon their own meanings and not meanings uncritically assimilated from others.

Meanings or assumptions are often tacit and operate outside the awareness of the individual, reflecting collectively held, unintentionally or assimilated shared cultural values and beliefs. Collectively, assumptions form a structure as a frame of reference, which both limits and shapes an individuals' perception and provides a context that filters those experiences that individuals choose to give meaning to and how they construct that meaning. Furthermore, most learning reinforces and elaborates existing frames of references. For example, male farmers in Kenya have a host of beliefs about the nature of their relationships with women in farming and daily life (e.g., men make the family decisions and women plant, weed, and collect firewood etc.). Likewise, women share similar beliefs about their relationships with men.

Transformative learning offers an understanding of how learners, such as men and women in the FFS, develop more reliable beliefs (e.g., gender relations), explore and validate their integrity, and make more informed decisions. As result of a significant experience such as participation in the FFS, it has been found that participants are emotionally provoked to question deeply

held assumptions about the way they look at the world. They find their frame of reference (collection of assumptions) inadequate in providing understanding about their present relational experience. Through an epistemological process of how adults learn to reason and assess for themselves and others for the purposes of making judgments, they begin to reflect upon deeply held and often unquestioned conceptions of gender-relationships. A transformed worldview involves the development of new meaning structures, a transformation in perspective, which is seen as the development of a more inclusive, discriminating, differentiating, permeable, integrative, and critical worldview (Mezirow, 2000). It is through transformations in perspective that men and women are able to act on their world in a more informed, critical, and equitable manner.

Two areas in the study of transformative learning – relationships and gender – further substantiate it as a theory that offers an understanding of the changes in gender relationships among FFS participants. For example, through extensive research, relationships as a way of knowing (through open and trusting relationships) have been found to be central to the transformative process. It is through trustful relationships – for example, among men and women in FFS – that questioning discussions, sharing information openly and achieving greater mutual and consensual understanding can potentially leads to transformative learning (Taylor, 1998, 2007). Research has shown that this is particularly the case of for women (English and Irving in press). Furthermore, recent research has shown that relationships writ large, as in a collective or group, potentially provide the ‘social recognition’ (Nohls, 2009) and support necessary for relationships to transform themselves.

## FINDINGS

The analysis of the data revealed seven definitive categories about how men and women related to one another in FFS, how their views were impacted by the collective experience, and the impact this had on the household and their daily lives. Each category is discussed inclusive of rich and descriptive data from interviews and observations.

### Gender relations in FFS groups

Secondary data indicated that FFS groups in the study site were made up of about 60% women and 40% men of varying ages, but with a majority of members between 25 and 45 years of age. While membership was dominated by women, elected leadership positions tended to be held by men, apart from the post of group treasurer, which often was held by a woman. Participatory observations

revealed a dynamic and positive atmosphere in the groups where men and women seemed to be at ease and interact with each other in a more relaxed and freer manner than is normally the case among adult individuals of the opposite sex. The structure of FFS that dictates all participants should be involved equally in all activities seemed to make it possible for individuals to explore roles outside culturally accepted norms. For example, from field notes it was recorded: ‘Women would be discussion leaders and sometimes interrupt or question opinions of their fellow male group members in a way normally not accepted.’ In all visited FFS groups men and women would collaborate in carrying out field practices, such as weeding, planting etc., tasks highly gendered in normal daily farming operations. Facilitation techniques observed in group sessions included doing a round where each member has his or her chance to talk. This ensured that all members expressed themselves equally and that sessions were not dominated by a few. As explained by a facilitator, particularly for some of the shy women this was an effective way of getting them to overcome their reluctance to speak in front of others. Sensitive topics such as HIV, domestic abuse, alcoholism etc. were in a few cases addressed through humorous theatrical expressions by members where the action and laughter involved helped in lifting the taboos connected to the topic.

### Changing roles and habits in the household

Participants stated that gendered roles and habits, based on perceptions of who should be doing what kinds of duties in the community or household, are gradually starting to change, and FFS seemed to have contributed to this. Many of these changes relate to household or farming chores or workload. For example Simon, 32 years old with a wife and three children, explained that he is now able to do farming activities that are normally seen as a woman’s job, such as planting and weeding. In a later part of the interview, he also mentioned that now he occasionally does the cooking and looks after the children, something he never used to do before, since this was not allowed culturally. About job-sharing in the house with his wife, he said, ‘Now after FFS we share the work at home; I can even fetch water and firewood’.

Similarly, Consolata, a 54-year-old nurse, proudly explained how she had gone alone to Kapsabet, a nearby town, in the company of a veterinary doctor to buy a cow, something her husband would never have allowed her to do earlier. She said: ‘Oh, yes, it would not have been possible before, it would be bad, you would be sent away with that animal: “How can you bring it here, who has told you” (the husband would say). It’s a big change.’

Many respondents reported an increase in women being breadwinners in the household and contributing economically to the upkeep of the family. For example,

Titus's wife Jenipha, 32 years old, with three children and six years of schooling, and one of the few women in the community who rides a bicycle, explained that before, 'It was assumed that women do not have any mind to organize themselves along economic lines'. She also explained that she used to accept that a woman must just sit and wait for everything to be provided by her husband. In relation to her own changed role following FFS participation, she explained how she now thought of herself playing the role of a man as well as a woman, instead of just waiting. This increased responsibility for the household economy taken up by many women seemed not to be taken as a threat by men but rather seen as a relief. In fact many men stated it was a burden that was often too heavy to carry, being the one that the family depends on for its survival, this being a reason why many men turned to alcohol for stress relief.

The study results also showed a trend towards increased acceptance of friendships across gender lines, where married men and women could interact more freely with fellow farmers regardless of which gender they were, something earlier not accepted due to restrictions in talking to wife's of other men. This had made it easier to exchange advice among neighboring farmers. For example, Gideon commented: '...but previously this could not happen. The husband could have asked her, why were you found in that man's farm, what were you going to do there then, and she is beaten up'.

### **Change in gendered customs and traditions**

The study showed that, despite the recent move towards the modernization of lifestyles, farming practices in Kakamega are still very closely connected to traditional beliefs and taboos, many of which are gender-based. Among traditional beliefs mentioned by participants were that men should not grow vegetables, women cannot plant trees or bananas, sweet potato should be planted by women only, and women should not eat eggs or chicken meat. The breaking of some of these taboos was connected with a high level of fear that kept people from challenging these practices. For example, Sarah, a 47-year-old single mother of six children, stated: 'Death. People fear death. When do you something that is a taboo – automatically death.' By being able to experiment with 'forbidden' practices in the safe space that the FFS provides, participants' beliefs are changing because of a lack of such consequences. For example, Herbert, a former FFS group chairman who became a network leader, said: 'OK, culturally there are some things women are not supposed to do, but when we were in the FFS we did them together and none of them has died.'

On the question of what would happen if he were seen planting vegetables, Samson stated: 'According to tradition they see you not as a man, they can even call a disciplinary committee for you'.

### **Increased work ethic among men**

FFS graduates expressed a stronger work ethic, as well as a commitment to farming and their work. This was especially the case among men. In a number of cases, men or their wives mentioned reduced drinking and loitering by men following re-engagement in farming activities, and increase motivation in developing their farm enterprises. For example, Stephen, a 50-year-old man with no schooling and eight children, stated; 'Through the FFS I learned that pleasure and leisure are a waste of time, so I've cut all those and concentrate on my farming activities because that has economic value'. When asked about changes in personality noticed among FFS members, he further stated; 'Most of them have changed because they have become very committed to their work as compared to before they joined FFS'.

As a consequence, men would typically tend to spend less time in the bar with other men and more time at home on the farm. For example, Fedelis, a retired schoolteacher in one of the better off families of the village, mentioned having noticed that her husband had changed and was spending more time at home on the farm. The reason she stated for this was:

'The activities we have...now he has to be around.... He has to see how to collect eggs instead of going out to loiter, thinking of drinking or other things. It brings him to realize that he has a duty to perform.'

### **Changed view of women among men**

Through the interviews, it became apparent that a general belief among men is that women are not capable of thinking and reasoning in the same way as men. This belief had started to change through the relationships developed among men and women in FFS.

For example, Titus, a 38-year-old with eight years of schooling, explained how the FFS sessions had induced him to see women differently:

'In the African culture a woman is to be a housewife sitting there, eating what the man is bringing to her and doing as the man has said. But after being in the FFS session we realized that women have the potential to learn, women can also make decisions, women can also implement decisions, and this changed me to leave other roles to my wife and I am also taking other roles to myself, so we are co-equals in the household setting.'

Similarly, during an interview with FFS Network, one of the officials stated:

'Normally it has been believed in most of this community that woman are not wise people, they are

just confused, who are supposed to be led, that's the belief. When we have been going through the FFS training...most of us have come to discover that a woman is just as much a person as a man. [And further] We have discovered that most of the economic losses are caused by men rather than women.'

It seemed it was not only the men who started seeing women as more equal; women also shared the feeling of overlooking or giving little attention to the differences across gender. One woman explained how she relaxed during the learning sessions through dynamics and dancing exercises in a way that was normally not possible with men around and how this relaxed mindset stayed with her when she returned home to her husband.

### **Spousal collaboration and shared decision-making**

FFS members refer to how the collaborative learning in FFS has induced relationship changes in the spousal unit in terms of increased collaboration and joint decision-making between husband and wife. This is also often referred to as something new and a change from a culture in which the man takes the most decisions. Consolata stated:

'Yes, we sit down and discuss. At that time (i.e. before FFS) it was a bit difficult because in our culture, if a man says he wants to do this and that, he is the one to do it, but after learning he changed, he said we do this so that we improve on our farm; if we plant together, if we work together to benefit; it has helped us as a family.'

Similarly, Jafeth, a 53-year-old man with two wives and seven children and one of the few respondents with a secondary education, stated:

'FFS brings the two gender together to share our ideas, and once we reach a solution we now implement it as our own, now we own it together. But before, with a family that has not gone through this process, a man has his own plan and a woman has her own plan.'

The group discussion in FFS is likely to be a place where participants learn how to engage in more discussion at the household level. Here is Jafeth again:

'The group discussion tool is not only used at a group level, but is also used at a domestic level where when there are aspects of schools fees, children. We come together and share, we look for the avenues and finally we make a decision before we implement.'

Also, Consolata mentioned that women are more used to dialogue and a collective learning mode than men and

expressed this when talking about group discussions as a process and how the women had been coaching the men to take a greater role in discussion in her FFS group or, as she expressed it: 'We were pulling them in, training them to change.'

Participants refer to how 'noise' (arguments and quarrels between man and wife) in the household has declined following FFS participation, and how there now is more peace in the home. Many members say there is less stress and noise at home due to the increase in incomes, but also because of the more equal balance of power that is created when both partners contribute to the upkeep of the family. A woman in one of the group interviews stated:

'Before I joined FFS there was a lot of domestic conflict between me and my husband in the house, as a result of low income. And I was almost asking every aspect from my husband. But since I joined FFS I have been having my own ways of getting income, and there is a lot of happiness in the house. I can buy books, pay school fees and do other domestic things in the house. My roles in the house, besides being a housewife, I can address some household aspects.'

Much of the noise mentioned seems to be consequence of financial stress and of conflicting priorities in the household. By both parties contributing to the household economy, there is less criticism from women that their husbands are not living up to their responsibilities and not carrying their weight in the household.

Japhet and his wife Katarina further explained how the increased peaceful co-existence between the two made the community look differently at them, and how community leaders no longer needed to come to their home to settle disputes.

### **DISCUSSION**

Transformative learning theory offers a theoretical understanding of how relations between men and women change as an effect of their involvement in collective organization, such as FFS. The implication of this is that it is possible to frame the pedagogy of gender change theoretically in across different contexts.

This study seems to indicate that men and women who participated in FFS experienced a change in a frame of reference, particularly concerning how they view and relate to each other. This shift seems to be emblematic of what Mezirow would refer to as a perspective transformation.

There are also several indicators of the nature of this shift, both epistemologically and ontologically. Epistemologically, there is a shift by men and women in their way of knowing and their view of what knowledge is



in the world. For women, with ever-greater confidence, they are beginning to recognize themselves as a viable source of knowledge, particularly for issues outside the maintenance of the household (e.g., farming). This is most likely to have occurred through a growing self-awareness by learning new farming practices and contributing to the learning of others in collaboration with both men and women.. This shift is further promoted by the probable encouragement and positive regard expressed by others (men and women) concerning their contribution to the farmer group. Men demonstrate a similar epistemological shift, such that they too are recognizing women as a viable source of knowledge. This has probably occurred by learning alongside women and observing their competence within FFS (e.g., listening to them presenting). The shift is further demonstrated by the increased engagement in shared decision-making by men and women within the household.

An ontological shift in transformative learning is a 'process where participants experience a change in their being in the world including their forms of relatedness' (Lange, 2004: 137). It is a shift that is taking place for both men and women. Men are learning to relate to women differently (e.g., shared spousal decision-making; possible friendship with other females) where women move metaphorically from the periphery of men's lives towards a more shared and central position. Women also are shifting ontologically, this being reflected both in an increased sense of agency (e.g., empowerment) and in how they relate to men. Women who participate in FFS seem increasingly to view men as collaborators and partners.

As this transformation occurs among individuals, there is likely to be a ripple effect within the wider community. Although we can only speculate at the time since this was not the focus of the study, FFS members are (formally or informally) modeling to others healthier relations between men and women (shared decision-making, collaboration of spousal units). This suggests that FFS potentially provides an important entry point for introducing new ideas, practices and forms of behavior (fostering more equitable gender relations) beyond the technical aspects often associated with development interventions. Furthermore, the more equitable spousal units (female empowerment, a stronger work ethic by men) could be economically more productive and offer an explanation for the increase in well-being and household income found among FFS participants.

In addition, the theoretical analysis of the findings raises a number of other discussion points, which reveal that participation in FFS has, beyond instrumental gains such as farming skills, induced changes among members on more personal level, including self perception and relationships in their spousal unit and the community at large. Among the most significant findings were the changes observed in terms of the household division of

labor. Backed by many qualitative statements, it seems that female FFS members have increasingly taken on a stronger role in contributing to the household income, an aspect earlier dominated by their husbands. Through this change, women have become more engaged in the commercialization of agriculture and in relating to market actors outside the household. Overall, there seems to have been a shift in the balance of power between men and women within the household, with more overlapping roles and responsibilities as consequence, allowing women to step more into the commercial domain. As a response to the immediate need for improved food security, this has in practical terms led to a diversification of household sources of income and a generally improved stability of family economy and level of well-being.

Related to the fact that women are taking on new roles in life and especially agriculture is the shift observed in terms of belief in taboos and gendered cultural restrictions. FFS appear to have led both sexes to question local traditions that dictate what men and women can and cannot do. The direct implications seem most profound for women, as many taboos were restricting women from engaging in commercial agriculture. In general the study found these kinds of gendered restrictions to be much more limiting for agricultural activity in this setting than is normally assumed, as well as being connected to a high level of superstition and fear.

It is interesting to note that men in the study did not seem to feel threatened by the shift in roles and responsibilities', including women's increased economic contribution to the household, but rather welcomed it, although this requires further investigation. Several of the respondents expressed a feeling of relief at no longer having to carry the burden of being the sole breadwinner in the household. This supports the notion of the 'power to transform capacity' rather than 'power as domination' (Giddens, 1976). This means that an increase of power among women to make changes in their lives does not necessarily mean a zero-sum relationship where men automatically lose. On the contrary, power in this sense might even have synergistic elements, since action by some may enable more action among others (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001).

Gender equity and relations have gained an increased focus lately through the growing recognition that processes involved in alleviating poverty are more complex than simply developing ways (e.g., nonformal education programs) for women to have control over productive resources (Kristjanson, Place et al. 2002). When the poor themselves are asked what poverty means to them, income is only one of a range of the aspects they highlight. Others include, for example: a sense of insecurity and vulnerability, the lack of sense of voice vis-à-vis other members of their household, community or government, a lack of literacy, education

and access to assets, and the inability to influence decision-taking (Chambers, 1989; Narayan et al., 2000), aspects often strongly determined by gender roles and relations.

Related to this were the observed changes in work ethics among men. Many of the interviews confirmed changes in how men spend their time. Male FFS participants who previously had been living, as some expressed it, 'a wasteful' life tended now to spend less time drinking and being idle and more time working with the spouse in the field. While some of this increased interest in farming can be assumed to be related to the added income associated with expanding commercial farming activities, some of it also seem to be related to a new understanding of the value of working together as a family. Men previously often felt that they were failing to provide adequate material support for their family, and this burden was what sometimes motivated them to drink or engage in wasteful forms of behavior as a way to escape the stress.

While the study clearly showed women taking on traditional male roles following FFS, there was also some indication of the opposite scenario, with men taking on labor tasks associated with social reproduction, e.g. fetching water and firewood, cooking food and tending small children. Particularly it seemed that men had become more flexible and willing to take on such tasks in situations where women were occupied with other activities that were important for the well-being of the household. However, it should be noted that in the African setting, women do not necessarily welcome men taking on household chores, as the former place much pride and satisfaction in being the person who takes care of the household.

The findings indicate that a crucial aspect contributing to changes within household gender relations is the shift in how men perceive women. The realization by some men that women are not only capable of logical thinking and reasoning, but are also effective resource managers seems to have increased their respect for women and sometimes triggered the men to allow women to take on new roles. This means that personal change has become a joint undertaking by both men and women, and not just by women alone. The increase in household production does not come about merely by women being better at utilizing resources, but because of the shift towards collaborative gender relations that is releasing agency at the individual and household levels. It appears that it was the collaborative and reflective learning tools applied in FFS that exposed men to seeing capacities in women that are normally not expressed in daily lives across genders.

In the introduction to this article, it was suggested that equity in household gender relations may be improved through the active engagement of both women and men in non-formal adult education within mixed collective organizations. For FFS in particular, there are several

possible characteristics of this collective organization that seem to create conditions for the evolution of more equitable gender relations. This is not an explicit part of the curriculum, but implicit in the way it is manifested through the pedagogical orientation of the program. For example, the FFS experience forms a 'safe space' where men and women can engage and practice new roles and relationships outside the confines of the traditional community. A consequence of this safe space is the development of friendships between men and women who are not related by family ties, something normally not allowed within a community where the spheres of women and men are largely separate. Activities in FFS groups not only allow interaction across gender, but also systematically encourage such interaction. Embedded in these activities is an implicit expectation that women and men are treated equally and with an expectation that everyone is to participate in the program in the same way. FFS thus allow participants a non-patriarchal and non-hierarchical space where they can safely test and act out new roles without fear of repercussions from the wider community.

Also, the findings indicate that men start to appreciate and engage in collaborative learning processes after exposure to this manner of working in FFS. This is new to most men, for whom individual learning is traditionally the norm. Collaborative learning, however, is not new to the sphere of women, since they traditionally engage collectively in most of their daily activities. Furthermore, the safe space provided by the FFS group enables participants to test out new behaviors and questions traditional norms that provide constraints for taking full advantage of economic opportunities.

The collectiveness of the change, that is, the fact that changes are taking place among group members simultaneously, seems to sanction and give support to participants to live out their new behaviors in their daily lives too. FFS, which is usually considered a high-status organization in the community, also assists in sanctioning individuals to express new forms of behavior. In most cases, if such forms of behavior were expressed by individuals without such a support structure behind them, they would most likely face discrimination and be reprimanded by village and clan leaders, as well as family members. This brings to light the importance in African settings of collective processes of change and could put in question the mainstream, individualistic perception of human empowerment.

The results of this study strongly support the notion that women should not be targeted in isolation, but that real change in gender dynamics can only come about when both men and women change together. Targeting women separately may be valuable in certain scenarios such as in relation to land tenure, asset endowment etc. However, when talking about the well-being and household economic development of the rural poor, men and women need to move ahead as a team, and target-

ting women in isolation may just reinforce oppressive barriers in the society. FFS seem to generate gender impacts not only because they empower women, but also because they also provide opportunities for the men, the agents of oppression in this case, to change as well.

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