Gendered experiences of small-scale farming West of Mount Kenya

Abstract

The present case study analyzes the livelihoods of Kenyan small-scale farmers West of Mount Kenya, with the aim being to highlight the different roles of women and men. In this rural area, livelihoods are undergoing a process of transformation which is at the same time changing traditional values and livelihood strategies. The ‘Sustainable Livelihood Model’ (DFID 1999), the structural model of an actor-orientated perspective on regional development (Wiesmann 1998) and the ‘Gender Planning Framework’ (Moser 1993) provide the theoretical framework. The data used in the analysis was gathered during field surveys in the form of 61 semi-structured interviews with small-scale farmers in two different ecozones\textsuperscript{1}. The major focus of the study is to describe the smallholder livelihood with a gender perspective. In traditional African peasant societies gender roles are clearly defined. Women are mainly responsible for care and housework as well as subsistence crops whereas generating an income is a male responsibility. Access to cash is limited for women because the sale of crops and livestock is conducted by men.

This paper is divided into five major parts. The first section begins with an introduction in the study area. The second section moves to the conceptual and theoretical background of the study. The third section deals with the study’s methodology. Section four goes on to a short comparison of the smallholder’s livelihoods between the two study regions. Finally in section five, the livelihoods of women and men in the studied rural Kenyan area are outlined.

1. Introduction to the study area

The geographical focus of this study is the north-western, sub-humid to semi-arid zone of Mount Kenya (Nyeri and Laikipia district). Generally speaking, the whole region west of Mount Kenya is characterized by rapidly decreasing rainfall according to increasing distance from the mountain. The data collection is made in two smallholder settlements, in Mwichuiri and Kihato. Mwichuiri’s climate is sub-humid. In this wetter area the small-scale farmers are

\textsuperscript{1}Ecozone: A broad geographic region in which there are distinctive climate patterns, types of landscapes and species of flora and fauna (Eionet 2012).
highly involved in market production. Kihato lies in the drier semi-arid region to Mwichuiri’s West further away from the mountain. Most of the farmers are involved in subsistence production and off-farm activities. This whole area has undergone rapid and profound transformation in the past 50 years. The main driving forces behind these processes have been political and economic in nature with the addition of an environmental factor in recent years: climate change. The socio-political change in the 1960s, the decade that brought independence to large parts of Africa, has largely shaped the development of Laikipia and the surrounding districts. One of the major effects of Kenya’s independence in 1963 was land redistribution, which resulted in large-scale internal migration. The regions northwest of Mount Kenya were particularly affected by this process (Kiteme et al. 2008).

Regarding gender, rural areas in Kenya are still predominantly governed by traditional norms and values which influence the definition of roles for both women and men. Men are still the breadwinners and women the homemakers. Women are mostly responsible for the home and for child care. Men are more involved in off-farm activities than women, so they have more access to cash income (Speranza 2006). But these norms are in a process of constant transformation. Kenya’s new constitution, peacefully put in place in August 2010, reflects these changes. The new constitution devolves power from the president to 47 elected county governments. The most important changes regarding the empowerment of women are: female land ownership by law, equitable distribution of resources and the authorization of abortion if the mother’s health is at risk. The new constitution was fiercely but peacefully disputed by certain parts of the Kenyan population and eventually approved by 2/3 of the Kenyan population.

2. Conceptual and theoretical background of the livelihood analysis

Very many publications can be found addressing small-scale farmers in sub-Saharan Africa also with a gender perspective, so rather than having to review the findings for this large area I was able to concentrate on the key findings from the significant body of research done around Mount Kenya and with a focus on the Laikipia district.

The geographical region of the present study has been a focus of research for the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) at the University of Berne since the 1980s. Of

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2 Off-farm activities: Permanent or casual paid work not related to agricultural activities for own production (Bigler 2011).
relevance for this study is the work of Kohler (1990) ‘Farming in two different ecozones on
the Western slopes of Mount Kenya’. Wiesmann (1998) focused on peasant household strategies in the sense of actions and reactions to dynamic conditions in the semi-arid Laikipia district. Speranzas (2006) work ‘Gender-based analysis of vulnerability to drought among agro-pastoral households in semi-arid Makueni District, Kenya’ is important for the gender analysis, especially for the gender roles in the study area. Three theoretical frameworks are used in the present study, namely the sustainable livelihood framework by DfID (1999), the ‘actor-oriented perspective on regional development by Wiesmann (1998) and Mosers Gender Planning Framework (1993). This three complement each other and provide important conceptual considerations on livelihoods and gender relations.

Gender is one of the key analytical categories in this study and gives the opportunity to interpret existing data with a different focus. In every society the roles, norms, identities and behaviour of women and men are gendered. In contrast to the biological category of sex, gender is socially constructed. Gender influences the idea of how women or men have to be, how they have to behave, act, dress, speak and what roles they take on in society and within the family. Not only are the roles of men and women gendered, this category penetrates the whole of society including laws and policies. Property rights, access to resources and family matters are deeply embedded in a prevalent value system (Speranza 2006). Gender affects all of us and female-headed households (fh-HH) are generally regarded as the poorest and most vulnerable group of society. For these reasons it is therefore also necessary to analyze scientific results with a gender focus.

3. Interviews in each ecozones with equal number of women and men
The present study uses a mix of quantitative data and qualitative methods to analyse rural Kenyan livelihoods. It uses data collected in a survey in smallholder households in two settlements west of Mount Kenya, data from participation in field days, interviews and discussion with experts. Data is also collected through analysis of secondary literature, especially recent reports on livelihood capitals and strategies, publications on gender and poverty, and findings from the Laikipia Research Programme in the 1990ies. Using the household as a unit of analysis, a survey focusing on 61 randomly selected respondents in two settlements on the Western slopes of Mount Kenya was carried out between June and

The household is the unit of analysis used in this study. A household is a group of people who share common resources and contribute to the welfare of the group inhabiting a plot of land (Speranza 2006).
August 2010. 30 semi-structured interviews were carried out in semi-arid Kihato with equal representation of men and women. In sub-humid Mwichuiri 31 farmers were interviewed with 16 female and 15 male respondents. Additionally interviews with a gender specialist, a chairman of a water project, a development cooperation training manager and an agricultural expert helped to broaden the author’s knowledge and put the results from the interviews into context. Owing to the small sample size the study has pilot character and therefore the findings are preliminary.

4. Differences and similarities between Mwichuiri and Kihato
The comparison between the two ecozones, which lie within a distance of 20 km and with a similar immigration background, may point to the process of peasants’ ecological adaptation and the indigenous potential for solving development and environmental problems in a regional context.

The two study regions show great similarity with regards to household size and household composition. The areas used for cropland and total livestock numbers are identical. The discussion on the amount of land used as cropland and the number of livestock owned in the two regions respectively confirms Wiesmann’s (1998) conclusion that the different apportionment of land use in the two ecozones is primarily a result of settlement densities. The average investment in education is the same in both regions. Divergence is observed in the level of education. Mwichuiri families are much better educated. In primary school the enrollment figure for girls and boys is still nearly the same. Conversely, Kihato households have access to larger land holdings. Food crops are the focus of farmers in Kihato while farmers in Mwichuiri evenly plant food and cash crops. The most striking differences between the regions are observed regarding the reliability in crop output and thus the income from the sale of crops. Despite Kihato’s lack of rain and water access to irrigation is worse than in Mwichuiri. In Kihato non-farm revenues and remittances can make up for some of the lacking income from the sale of crops. However, income opportunities are mainly limited to insecure casual jobs.

These results confirm Wiesmann’s (1998) finding that smallholders tend to have a minimum involvement in all spheres of action in the sense of a basic risk-minimizing strategy.
5. Differences and similarities between roles of women and men

“Don’t be gender blind! In every project gender issues should be considered.” (Nyaruai Wambugu Grace 2010)

A major breakthrough for female rights is the implementation of Kenya’s new constitution in 2010 which ensures elementary rights and freedom to the whole society regardless of race, ethnic group or sex. However, in a traditional peasant household the roles and division of labour continue to be socially constructed and consolidated. In a traditional peasant household the roles and division of labour are socially constructed and consolidated in community values. In both study regions the head of the household is usually a man (82%). This reflects the patriarchal system of the Kenya society, where women are only the head of household if for one reason or another the husband, partner and or father of children is not present (Speranza 2006).

Table 1: Female-headed households in Mwichuiri and Kihato (Bigler 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female-headed households</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother with grandchildren</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single mothers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother with adult children which live off-plot</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother with daughter and grandchildren</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the research area 11 households are single-headed female ones whereby they are mostly elderly women with an average age of around 64 years, but a range of 45 to 82 years. The composition of these eleven households differs greatly, as Table 6 shows. The three household types which are mostly encountered are: grandmother with grandchildren, single mothers and mother with adult children who live off-plot. There is one household with a grandmother, her daughter and grandchildren and only one household with an unmarried woman. For the male-headed household, four single male-headed household are found and all these men are over 60 years old. Three of them live alone on their plots and one farmer lives with his son. The hierarchy in families is not only gendered, also the age and the social status play a role (Wangila 2007). Men own the majority of properties whereas women only
have access to land through marriage. If the husband dies, the land tenure rights traditionally go over to the sons (Speranza 2006). Women’s access to resources depends more on successful social relationship with her husband and the other male members of the family. Through the limited access to finances and natural resources females are more vulnerable to poverty (Kemble 2003). Also the division of labour is traditionally gender-based and in order to secure the livelihoods, women are responsible for all chores in and around the plot. Women are the care-givers for children and elderly household members and they are in charge of domestic work, such as cleaning, fetching firewood and water. They also milk the livestock. With regards to crop production, women are responsible for cultivating subsistence crops. Men are responsible for marketing farm produce and selling livestock, and they are also more involved in off-farm activities. Generally they are mostly involved in productive and monetary work (Speranza 2006).

“A lot of rural households are women managed but headed by men.” (Nyaruai Wambugu Grace 2010)

In most cases men have more access to cash income due to the division of labour and it is the man who supervises and distributes the income. Often only a small amount of money comes back to his wife. There are small opportunities for women to earn some cash, for example by selling poultry or fruits, but the women have to secure the agreement of their husbands before they can sell it (Speranza 2006). The described gender roles are reflected in the following work profiles, for which the interviewed persons were asked what they would normally do on a work day. The work table shows how many men and women are involved in the different activities and reveals that their daily lives differ to a great deal. As shown before, women in Kihato and Mwichuiri are responsible for all care work and most of the housework including preparation of most meals. No men mentioned taking part in any care work – caring for children (and the elderly and sick) is still fully in women’s hands. Furthermore, the women are completely responsible for fetching water and firewood. On average, women and children spend three hours a day fetching water and firewood. On average, women and children spend three hours a day fetching water (Speranza 2006). Women also look more after livestock, but men - when present - work more in the fields. On average, a man works 5.03 hours and a woman works 4.35 hours in the fields per day. Men
in Mwichuiri work on average one hour more per day in the field than men in Kihato. Women in Kihato and Mwichuiri spent equal amounts in productive field work.

“Now all the burden of the house- and field work is on women. Only in areas with technical aspects like irrigation and where money is involved men do more work in the farm.” (Nyaruai Wambugu Grace 2010)

Today the Kenyan enrolment figure for primary school is 80% (UNICEF 2011). This undoubtedly improves children’s possibilities to find higher rewarding jobs but for the household it means that children have no more spare time to help their mothers in the fields or in the house. This, together with other work burdens has led to an increase in women’s work loads in the last year.

Table 2: Work profile for women and men divide in different activities (Bigler 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work profile for women and men divided into different activities</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meals preparation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing meals</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making tea am</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Care work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding the family</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>House work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetching firewood</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetching water</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning/ Sweeping</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting fire</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Livestock</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milking cows am</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle grazing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding/watering cows</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding sheep/ poultry</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking cows to shed/ Looking after them</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Field work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field work am</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field work pm</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We have seen that men are expected to live up to the role of the bread-winner and they are responsible for cash income whereas women are the homemakers. Together they pursue the goal of the household’s welfare and well-being. In the last 20 years securing a livelihood has become increasingly difficult (UN Research Institute for Social Development 2011) which has led to a blur of embedded genders, with loser boundaries especially during times of hardship. As Speranza 2006 shows in her livelihood study from Makueni District in Kenya, women have taken on work traditionally perceived as male and vice versa. Particularly in times of drought female household members more and more take on male roles, like sale of livestock and crops.

After this short overview of the gendered roles in rural areas of Laikipia, it is time to highlight the strategies of peasants from a gender perspective. This section is divided into the division of activities which are directly and not directly related to the use of natural resources.

5.1 Agricultural production and farm investment

The agricultural sector is central in Kenya, providing over 70% of all jobs. 80% of all employees in the agricultural sector are women. The physical and social well-being of a person is often influenced by agricultural production (Kemble 2003). In terms of intra-household decision making men generally have more power such as on the choice of which crops to plant and how much of the land to cultivate, even if he lives off-plot (Speranza 2006).

“Women have no power over which seeds to plant or when to plant because they don’t have the money to buy them when they need them. If their husband doesn’t agree or he lives away and takes longer to make a decision, the hand of the woman is tied up.” (Nyaruai Wambugu Grace 2010)

As the work profile in Table 7 has shown, labour in the farming system is gendered: both men and women cultivate crops but generally men tend to be more engaged in the production of cash crops (where possible) and also with marketing the produce. This means that where cultivation is more for purposes of subsistence, it often falls under the responsibility of women. Sweet potatoes, pumpkins and cassavas are all crops with minimal
market prices but they are resistant against drought and therefore minimize the risk of a crop failure. These are known as women’s crops (Speranza 2006).

This situation was also found in the research region. In order to obtain an equal male and female representation in the livelihood analysis, the researchers aimed to get an equal number of respondents from both sexes. Even though the researchers managed to achieve this aim, it has to be noted that in the semi-arid region of Kihato it proved to be more difficult to find male respondents whereas in the semi-humid area of Mwichuiri it was the other way around. At the randomly chosen households, men were mostly present and wanted to do the interviews, so the researchers sometimes had to state a preference for talking to women.

In the wetter region men generate money with cash crops and in the drier region men work off-farm to earn cash. It is also found that in the study regions fh-HH are more involved in subsistence oriented crop production than male-headed households. Only for two fh-HH agricultural production is a main strategy.

It is important to point out that access to land and income from crop production are linked to two strategies: agricultural production and farm investment. For women access to land is linked to marriage, so their access depends on their social relationships with men (Francis 1998). The next figure shows, that on average the plot size of male-headed households is one acre bigger than the plot of female-headed household. However, if the plot size is divided by persons on plot, the pattern is different. In this case fh-HH own on average 0.7 acres/per person more than male-headed households. This can be attributed to the number of household members, which is smaller for fh-HH. In other words, the available plot size per person is bigger in fh-HH.
Beside access to land it is of interest to look at the respective incomes from the sale of crops. Female-headed household earn per household and per person three times less than male-headed household. This confirms women’s orientation on subsistence production once again.

To sum up the results show that women in study areas invest more in subsistence production and subsistence crops. Men invest more in the cultivation of cash crops and take on the role of marketing the produce.
5.2 Off-farm work

Results in previous chapters have shown that off-farm work is an important source of cash income. Off-farm work is also culturally grounded and women and men have different roles. The fact that more men than women work off-farm has a historical component, dating back to colonial times. Still nowadays, migration patterns from rural to urban centres in order to find paid employment are gendered (Bryceson 2002). Men who work off-farm usually come home during harvesting when the work load on farm is high to help the household during the labour peak (Speranza 2006). The next figure shows that in the research area men work twice as much off-farm as women. The difference is greatest for permanent employment opportunities.

![Off-farm activities men and women](Bigler 2011)

But both men and women look for off-farm activities. Particularly in insecure times like droughts, casual work becomes an important coping strategy for both sexes. This applies mostly to informal and seasonal employment. More women work in informal employment and low-earning segments when they are involved in off-farm activities (UN Research Institute for Social Development 2011). Furthermore, women’s time is already quite filled with care work and fetching water and firewood. The work burden for women is very high and often they do not have the time to engage in paid work. Fh-HH are faced with the same challenges as women in male-headed household. Even more so if single-headed women take care of children, and are faced with heavy daily workloads. When the whole work load rests on women’s backs, diversification into wage labour is difficult, because they are both short of time and of productive capital.
It has been found that the poorest households often have weaker access to off-farm activities (Barrett et al. 2001). The observation that male-headed households invest more in off-farm activities than women and that fh-HH have a lower income from the sale of crops, leads to the conclusion that female-headed household are on average poorer than male-headed households in the study region.

The results from the analysis of off-farm work can be summarized as followed: Off-farm activities are gendered. Women work less in paid work and where they do, it is more often in informal employment. Women in female-headed household do all productive and reproductive work by themselves and therefore have a heavy work load.

5.3 Education

“There has been little change in the past 20 years, but education brings change in small steps.” (Nyaruai Wambugu Grace 2010)

For smallholders education is a main strategy and it is highly valued in Kenya. For both men and women education is a strategy to overcome poverty (Speranza 2006). Since 2002 primary education is free in Kenya and the primary enrolment figures are over 80% for boys and girls. Primary school attendance is slightly higher for girls than boys. But in secondary school the enrolment ratio changes. Here slightly more boys are present in secondary school (UNICEF 2011).

Figure 4: Primary/Secondary attendance ratio 2005-2009 net . (Source: UNICEF 2011)
However, for university enrolment there is a big gender gap. Here only 29% of all university students are women (Kemble 2003). In the research area the following formal education degrees are found:

![Graph: Highest and lowest level of education in the HH]

Figure 5: Highest and lowest level of education in the HH in Kihato and Mwichuiri (Bigler 2011)

This figure shows the highest and lowest education of male and female under and above 40 years in each sample household. When looking at the highest and lowest level of education in all sample households there are slightly more men who hold the highest level of education and slightly more women which hold the lowest level of education in the household. This is mostly due to the missing formal education of women over 40 years of age. They are less well educated than their male counterparts. The younger generation is better educated in the formal schooling system. It is important to point out that an equal number of young men and women hold the highest level of education in the household. There are even more young men which hold the lowest level of education in their household than young woman. This result points to a major change in education and gender patterns in Kenya.

Men and women appear to see in education activities a long term investment and hold the expectation that well educated children will one day hold well-paid jobs and send remittances back to the rural area. In summary, education activities are of high value to both men and women in the study areas.
5.4 Social networking

Family and community networking are typical for peasant societies in rural Africa and are highly developed in the peasant societies (Wacker 1996). Typically women take over the role of the homemaker. For this reasons they keeps regular contact with the extended family and the neighbourhood. Through the given gender roles, men have more contact outside the settlement, but both are involved in self-help groups (Speranza 2006). Different types of self-help groups exist (Wacker 1996). In the research area most households are involved in some group. Women are twice as engaged in self help groups as men. Most women are engaged in saving and income-generating groups such as revolving funds and merry-go-rounds. Men are less involved in this kind of group.

Figure 6: Self-help groups (Bigler 2011)

The higher involvement of women in revolving founds can be explained with their societal role. Since men mostly market the farm produce, the access to cash income is very limited for women. Informal saving groups are an opportunity to improve women’s access to money (Speranza 2006). The scope of these groups is limited though, as women only get only a small amount of money, to buy some clothes for example (Nyaruai Wambugu Grace 2010).

“If a woman tries to get a loan, credit institutions ask for the man’s signature so she can’t take up a loan for herself.” (Nyaruai Wambugu Grace 2010).

Social networks are relationships between two or more person in a household, in the extended family or with relatives, neighbours and members of self-help groups. These relationships are affected by an exchange of goods, money and labour over time (Bigler 2011).
Figure 7: Saving options man and woman in the two study areas (Bigler 2011)

For women the access to a credit or a loan is limited and often they have to fall back on family networks or informal saving groups (Diallo 2003). This pattern is reflected in the figures regarding saving options. Men dispose of more formal saving options like bank or mobile phone account and are members in cooperatives whereas women are more engaged in informal saving groups.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of a survey carried out in two different ecozones west of Mound Kenya, this study has attempted to highlight the diverse livelihoods of small-scale farmers. The differing vulnerability contexts of the two regions are reflected by their varying returns on investments in farming due to the different lengths of the growing periods as well as the water supply.

In rural areas in Kenya the roles of men and women are highly gendered. Women are the homemakers and men the breadwinners. Through their pre-defined role men have more access to cash and natural resources. Often female-headed household consist of very few persons and/or the household head is aged. Due to the predefined gender roles, women have limited access to land and work with a monetary value. This fact makes women more vulnerable to poverty. But other factors like age and size of household should also be considered. A promising prospect for the future is that most women are highly involved in grass-roots organization like self-help groups and the level of education has improved in the last years.

So far little attention has been paid to intra-household distribution of resources and decision making processes. A more detailed analysis would be necessary to explore how food and cash income are shared between men and women in a male-headed household.
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