Gender analysis: exploring successful agro-businesses to foster cooperation between genders in South Sudan

Walking the path of women empowerment

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Executive Summary

This document presents the main findings of an assessment, conducted between May and July 2022, which explores the main agriculture activities that women and men in South Sudan carry out and how these may be leveraged to empower women. In fact, as agricultural farming has been an occupation traditionally conducted by women, the study assessed how successful projects of agro-business are motivating men to enter this sector leading to instances of cooperation between men and women under the leadership of women.

There are several important findings we present in this document based on the principal observation that these Food Security & Livelihood (FSL) projects are indeed working as self-help tools for women farmer groups. Of primary importance is the context, in particular the high percentage of the male population that has migrated out of their villages into the urban areas; this has led women to take the greatest advantage of the agricultural projects, contributing to a transformation of women’s gender roles both at the family and community level.

In the first section, “Main findings towards women’s agency”, we provide hints about these changes in women conditions (points 1 – 3), while in the second, “Discussion about gender threats” (points 4 – 5), we list the two main risks that may prevent this process to continue, as follows:

1. **Economic growth is leading to women’s empowerment**, as women consider their traditional agricultural responsibilities and related success as a central part of their identity and gender goals, they have been engaged in agricultural projects looking mostly for three elements: a) family feeding, b) economic resources to face daily expenses and c) respect\(^1\) from the community and from their male partners. But the overall result has led to a broader transformation, markedly an improvement in their self-esteem. In greater detail, by being engaged in agriculture activities, women have gained a set of abilities and knowledge that go from new cultivation and storage techniques to communication and negotiation skills. Women have learned how to make financial decisions such as saving money and have developed their own mechanisms for doing so. Furthermore, they have practiced the basics of budgeting and making business by selling their products in the market.

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\(^1\) When speaking about “respect”, at family levels, women mean not to face gender-based violence (beaten) by men. While, at community levels, they mean not to be regarded as women who do not follow their social roles.
The majority of them are aware of the advantages brought about by their own initiatives, which is progressively leading to more respect for them at the top of the entire agriculture value chain. Women farmers are increasingly taking charge of the gardens and becoming decision makers regarding the processing and sales of products, giving them more control over their resources, mostly at the farming level, and thus better management of their families and households.

2. These achievements have triggered the creation of numerous self-managed women farmer groups which members now recognize as essential for their future and the growth of the community. These groups are small, independent organizations based on self-management and communal goals, born from the need for collaboration to improve their farming methods, divide and share tasks, increase their harvests, and better manage their earnings through social/communal savings systems.

It has been enlightening for the women farmers to actively participate for the very first time in the construction and management of social organizations, since they were raised in a context where women are not allowed to even speak in front of a group of people and rather are expected to be mere “implementers” of what men say. Female farmers are now practicing basic abilities for reading, writing, and simple math, aiming to represent themselves as their own group leaders and improve their businesses. Remarkable examples include the use of social funds and saving boxes as they have become the most important way for women farmer groups to work towards financial stability and autonomy.

3. Female farmers believe that the humanitarian response can and should bring a positive contribution to social cohesion and social development in these regions. They are counting on the humanitarian response to keep their levels of production up, asking NGOs to provide not only agricultural assets and loans, but also to increase the efforts to foster the community-led transformations through training and awareness, as elements that will allow them to overcome their condition of vulnerability.

Moreover, they have articulated the request that humanitarian actions be focused on social or economic interventions oriented towards gender equality and to build effective communication spaces and awareness campaigns specifically addressed to
men, including on how to coexist peacefully and work through problems with their female partners. Women believe that work, education, and awareness are needed for men to learn to respect women, otherwise there will be a point in which their development will be halted by the existing gender norms.

4. **While women’s social conditions are improving, leading to new social dynamics, men are not being involved in the change of mindset.** There are several reasons that cause this gap between women and men. Men do not feel connected to agriculture as much as women because farming is viewed not as an occupation but as a source of family nourishment, which is commonly viewed as a woman’s responsibility. – Family wellness is culturally considered the responsibility of females in South Sudan, so the responsibility for the children's caregiving and the general family maintenance falls to the wife. In this context, men are absent or lacking in the family, forcing women to explore their own coping mechanisms, thereby becoming drivers of new social dynamics when involved in farming projects.

5. **Without the inclusion of the male population, economic female empowerment will be perceived simply as women being more valuable assets** as a result of the value of the goods they produce. Despite and precisely because of the lack of male participation, women’s persistent efforts propelled them into significant stages of development. To strike the right balance, aid initiatives should be based on a deep understanding of the social fabric of these communities, in particular the pronounced gender gap that has historically existed between men and women. Moreover, the involvement of men should be leveraged as an opportunity to shape a new broader vision of the interaction between genders. The biggest concern now is not only maintaining the achievements accomplished so far, but to use them as a starting position to promote a broader change of mindset. The future approaches of agricultural interventions in terms of gender inclusion will have to face such a challenge.
Background

South Sudan officially declared its independence from Sudan on the 9th of July 2011. From that moment onwards, the development of the country has been marked and conditioned by two factors: the first one was an intent of economic growth enhanced by the injection of foreign capital and the rise in humanitarian aid with which the country goes on. The second one was the emergence of conflict and active fighting between the official government and the rebel opposition, which sank South Sudan into a civil war that is still on going to this day.

In 2013, the fighting between these two groups officially broke out, mainly affecting the areas of Juba, Malakal, Bor, and Waw. In 2018, an attempt was made to establish a peace agreement between the warring parties, but with ethnic disagreements and new alliances, fighting between communities, as well as government human rights abuses, continued.\(^2\)

Since then, the persistent deterioration in food security has been unprecedented. In 2017, a famine was declared but was quickly contained thanks to the humanitarian community’s urgent and sustained multi-sectoral response.\(^3\)

AVSI has been implementing FSL projects in South Sudan since 2005 when the NGO arrived and established its first field office in Ikwoto County, Eastern Equatoria State (EES). In 2009, AVSI opened a second base in Torit County leading to an expansion of the activity in EES. More recently, AVSI’s presence grew again to include Lakes State (LS).

After years of implementing FSL and nutrition initiatives in both states, AVSI capitalized on its learning-by-doing to frame an original gender assessment aimed to inform the setup of the women empowerment component of the Rural Upgrade of Resilient Agribusinesses and Livelihood in South Sudan (RURALSS) project, a project funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands to be implemented by AVSI in Lakes and EES.

A contextual analysis was developed as part of the inception studies for the RURALSS project. The following table shows some of the data obtained from the multisector survey conducted in six counties, namely Wulu and Cuibet (Lakes State), Torit, Magwi, Lopa, and Ikwoto counties (Eastern Equatoria State). In particular, the table shows the conditions and support provided to families who are mostly or solely financially sustained by women (for simplification called “female-sustained family”) and the rest of the families.

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The survey analyzed the conditions of families, thus it does not provide information on women per se; however, the analysis of the conditions of female-sustained families can allow for reflection on the gender gap.\(^4\) It can be observed that families financially sustained mostly by women have a much worse food consumption score (are worse off) and are less likely to have a public role/occupation, to speak with local leaders, to receive financial support for productive activities, or be a member of an association.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food security, associationism and participation of female-sustained family</th>
<th>Female-sustained family</th>
<th>Non-female sustained family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food consumption</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Member of a decision making / public bodies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No particular role</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyampara (village chief) or Mukungu (village deputy chief)</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector leader</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlord</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative authority</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chairman or committee member of informal farmer group</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended public meeting</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humanitarian support</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural inputs i.e. seeds and or tools</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health / medicines</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food in the Schools</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition (e.g. Blanket supplementary feeding, etc.)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food distribution or food in exchange for work</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Food Items (kitchen sets, blankets, Khanga)</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advise from extension service</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash and or cash in exchange for work</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing gear</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School fees / uniforms</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Association</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal group of farmers</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer group supported by NGO</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village Saving and Loan Association (VSLA)/ Credit and Saving Group</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative/SME</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women group; Church group; Self-help group; Community-based organization, Youth group Health</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Interest group/Seed Multiplication group</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Generation Association group (IGA)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asset Security</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assets under dispute</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: AVSI, Multisector Survey 2022

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\(^4\) Here we do not refer to the more common notion of women-headed families because we have noted (not shown in the table) that women-headed families enjoy a level of food security in line with general population and much better compared to families who report themselves as men-headed families but in which women are breadwinner (the sole or major source of financial support to the family).
The results show that families where women act as breadwinner (Female-sustained family in table 1) are not only more likely to be food insecure (i.e. poor) but also tend to receive less humanitarian support, are less “organized” (likely to be member of an association), are less likely to be involved in decision making and public discussion. All such kind of aspects represent real obstacles to the empowerment of such families, and by extension to women acting as breadwinner.

However, as its projects were carried out over a number of years, AVSI witnessed some significant shifts in how men and women approach tasks like home gardening and cash crop farming. The assessment presented in this document is the result of observing such major social changes. The study aimed to understand the causes and motivations of changes that have occurred in these contexts, specifically in relation to FSL projects conducted in recent years, seeking views on what AVSI could do to encourage the most promising community-led transformations, so that both men and women progress not only economically but also socially.

Theoretical framework: The potential leadership of women

Historically, women have engaged in agricultural activities with the main objective of fostering the growth and development of their families. These practices, which are based on gender norms, have positioned women as the primary carers at home, in charge of maintaining and improving the family welfare and providing for its needs.

Social and political situations in the region of focus have forced men to migrate out of their villages, thereby conditioning their community and family roles. As a result, the female population has taken over many obligations within their households however without reaching the level to exercise decision-power or control over them. However, Doss (2013) notes that in order to understand the complex familial and societal interactions, “one issue is to identify the owners of and the people who have access to key resources and inputs”.5

In 2000, Whitehead contended that such a reality could be approached through objective and uncontextualized framing and narratives, which could result in a highly politicized model of gender relations and prevent sociological observation from daring to delve deeper into contemporary discourses based on new analysis. “Rural women, usually wives, are seen as the victims of exploitative male behavior, usually husbands. Rural men are seen as

exercising gender power by passing on the increased work burdens to wives, daughters and other female family members and by selfishly commandeering the money income from marketed agricultural products”.  

Undoubtedly, a lack of cultural and financial resources has resulted in several disparities between men and women, and Goetz (1997) further argues that humanitarian responses, based only on these perspectives, could have a negative impact on society by reaffirming gender threats and triggering harmful reactions from men against women. The majority of the literature on gender equality places a strong emphasis on women as the only family member who undertakes most of the agricultural work, in addition to household chores and caregiving responsibilities, and who has limited control over their own developmental processes. This could lead to an altruistic perception of the work done by female farmers which, in many cases, might make them more vulnerable. Instead of serving as a model for legislation that supports women’s potential, it might reinforce the status quo of their vulnerability and inability to change their own reality.

Gender analysis is the starting point for gender mainstreaming in programs and services; however, while it provides insight into the issues affecting women, it also ought to include indications about the relationships between the family and community, focusing on the main differences between men and women to identify the difficulties and opportunities that each face in doing their own activities.

AVSI defends a clear and straightforward approach for addressing gender social transformations, not to advance separatist or sexist discourses that suggest replacing the man at the top of the social pyramid with an empowered woman, but rather to create opportunities for both of them to participate equally.

The concept of empowerment is highly linked to agency, as the ability to act on behalf of what you value and have reason to value. As defined by Rowlands (1997), empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions about their own processes.

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6 FUTURE AGRICULTURES (2012). “Gender analysis: engaging with rural development and agricultural policy processes”. Taken from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a7fe5274a31e000062a/FAC_Working_Paper_02
7 Ibidem.
Our assessment was based on the underlying premise that building social capital is a viable theory of change to mobilize the power relations that characterize interaction between genders by providing cultural and working assets, thereby changing in EES and LS the way decisions are made over resources.

Research question, main objective & methodology

The research was triggered by asking ourselves the questions:

a. Which activities are leading to better interaction between men and women?

b. How is performing these activities enhancing the potential leadership of women?

To do so, it was needed to assess factors that either promote or constrain women’s agency and empowerment through agriculture while also identifying the main issues that these women face, as a result of the social dynamics caused by gender norms, and how to address them in future programs.

In order to do so, the following four questions have driven the research:

1. What are the reasons which hinder men and women from collaborating together in farming activities;
2. How the adversity that farmer groups and families face have led them to transform their own dynamics of coexistence;
3. How FSL and nutrition projects are serving as a factor of social revitalization;
4. How future initiatives that humanitarian aid could propose could keep promoting these community led transformations.

The assessment was conducted in the five counties of South Sudan where the RURALSS project is being implemented in EES and LS. Solely women were interviewed for this assessment as the focus has been put on women’s perception.

Methodology

The first step was to identify a sample of the farmer groups that have been participating in AVSI projects in the last five years using purposeful selection. In particular, AVSI has field offices in each of the territories where the assessment was carried out. The AVSI officers in charge of the agricultural projects were key players in mobilizing the women’s groups and
asking them for their participation in the assessment, while they were also the ones who contacted both the governmental and civil authorities (both represented by male figures) so that they were informed about the activity and its research purposes.

Once the women's groups were reached, discussion groups of about 10 women farmers were formed and trained facilitators asked the women to answer our questions through an open-ended and flexible format. The presence of the local translators was especially important to understand the concepts related to topics such as “empowerment”, key for contextualizing the discussion. Moreover, the translators were not only local actors but in all cases women -- during the first interviews, it was observed that female farmers were much more cautious giving their answers in the presence of men.

The data collection tools were specifically built to carry out this research and based on the variables presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Specifics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food security</strong></td>
<td>- Purposes of agricultural production</td>
<td>- Marital status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Benefits from agricultural production</td>
<td>- Main tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Coping mechanisms</td>
<td>- Contribution of labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Presence of AVSI - impact of the projects</td>
<td>- Relationship with holders and markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Division of labor and responsibilities</strong></td>
<td>- Women</td>
<td>- Place of living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Men</td>
<td>- Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Children</td>
<td>- Age and condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Collaboration male and female genders</td>
<td>- Contribution to family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access to control over resources</strong></td>
<td>- Equipment, tools, and materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Land and water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Sources of income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women needs and challenges</strong></td>
<td>- Condition and position in society</td>
<td>- Women’s triples roles (reproduction, production, and community roles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Strategic gender needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Changes in the recent years</td>
<td>- Reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Community roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agency and empowerment</strong></td>
<td>- Decision making and family heading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Gender roles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Women farmer groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Variables & indicators for gender assessment (AVSI, 2022)
Table 2 shows the variables and indicators which were used to frame the gender assessment. By studying this set of elements, we aimed to cover the whole sphere of women’s life to understand how these factors interact in their lives. This framework was established based on literature review and using the Moser Gender Analysis Framework\textsuperscript{10} and the Harvard Analytical Framework\textsuperscript{11}.

In the following table we present the general basis of the methodology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of research</th>
<th>Qualitative research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duration and dates</td>
<td>3 months (May – July 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Ikwotos, Torit, and Magwi (EES)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents</td>
<td>Beneficiaries – 150 women farmer group members (most of them participants of previous AVSI projects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools and resources</td>
<td>Open-ended questionnaires (2 hours long) applied orally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussions (FGD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variables studied</td>
<td>a) Families’ food security; b) Division of labor and gender roles; c) Women needs and challenges; d) Access to control over resources; e) Agency and empowerment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: AVSI methodology for gender analysis, 2022

**Targeted population**

To ensure the protection of respondents, we did not register names, age, or any specific information, and we did not ask for any specific profile to participate in the assessment, the only requirement was to be involved in agriculture tasks. Largely, we can say the following general characteristics about them:


- Most of the interviewed women were part of the farmer groups that have collaborated with AVSI in other agriculture projects.
- Women ages were from 17 years onwards.
- Mostly local language speakers, some of them could barely understand the South Sudanese Arabic. Some of the group leaders in Isohe and Torit were able to understand and speak in English fluently.
- 100% of them were married; among them, 60% happened to be widows. Another 30% reported not to receive any economic support from their husbands even if they are present and healthy.
- At least 40% reported to be in complete charge of the family because of their husband’s absence or to count with their support only during the harvest season.
- The interviews were made in their work fields (crop gardens) during working hours.
- Many women came along with small children.
Main findings related to women’s agency

Economic growth is leading to women empowerment

In both EES and LS, agricultural activities, as well as household duties, are elements with which women identify as part of their gender role. For them, to be a woman means to be the one responsible for farming, cultivating, cooking, feeding, raising and caregiving; they recognize the implications in terms of time and effort of being responsible for all that, but they know that carrying out these chores is not only part of their sense of belonging to their local community, but also how they guarantee their family’s and their own wellbeing.

Women main concern in agriculture is that gardens may not yield all the food that their family will need to survive, mainly due to lack of inputs (for instance seed and tools), appropriate knowledge, and manpower. Women truly feel the responsibility of getting their family ahead from threats such as hunger, illiteracy, and poverty, and they are aware about the importance of satisfying their basic needs to be able to work towards other goals for improvement.

The high commitment of women in agriculture has given them the opportunity to become healthier, better trained, and more independent, which at the same time is allowing them to continue their path of development, improve their practices, increase their outcomes and upgrade their role and the way they are seen as women. By being engaged and leading agriculture activities, women have taught themselves how to create and organize in groups, develop communication and business skills, save money and manage it according to their needs, and invest in new cultivations and storages. Some of them are now raising their awareness about the knowledge and skills that they have gained and what it means for them and their autonomy.

Culturally speaking, gender roles are still notably present and, and it might be challenging for women to see themselves as community and family leaders because doing so would mean challenging decades’ worth of views that see social and family leadership as the responsibility of men. The traditional notion that only men are capable of making decisions, however, is evidently changing as men’s presence is declining. For evidence, consider the movement of men to urban areas in search of employment, in addition to the loss of men due to war deaths, among others. Female farmers are starting to overcome these cultural barriers, realizing that they are the ones moving their families ahead and must therefore alter how the family’s assets and decisions are handled.

Since acquiring these skills and steadily becoming more independent from men, women are learning to value themselves more and more. Even some of their male partners have
noticed these changes leaving them free space to make their own decisions over the agricultural outputs and the business incomes. The next step is to make women -and men- aware of these changes as an achievement that will benefit the whole community, rather than a threat. The big challenge will be to make clear the real value of women as such, beyond the goods they are able or not to produce (food, children, or any material resource).

“Women make all the decisions because we are the ones in charge of everything at home. We are not asking men about which tools to buy or not because they are for us to work.”

30-year-old woman member of the farmer group “Obudu Ragi” (Open heart) at Chahari, Isohe, ES. (2022)
Self-managed women farmer groups are perceived by members as essential for growth

Women farmer groups are a common way of organization among women to carry out their agriculture tasks. These groups are small, independent organizations based on self-management and communal goals, born from the need for collaboration of women farmers to improve their farming methods, divide and share the tasks, increase their harvests, and better manage their earnings through community savings systems.

In EES, the farmer groups interviewed are highly consolidated and engaged with their own agricultural development processes. Security concerns in Lakes State have been preventing their growth as a result of protracted conflicts among the regional tribes. It appears that women are as devoted to agricultural production as a means of supporting their families, but they are less aware than EES participants of the potential for improving their quality of life by acquiring agency via the process.

To understand how these groups are created, it is important to remember that, in most cases, business production and self-consumption activities are not separated. The final use of the production is determined by how much is harvested when the family farm. Therefore, it could be said that, for women, there is no division between householding and gardening tasks because both are a necessary part of their daily tasks.

To face their double duties, female farmers learned to group together, where, in these groups, they not only find the extra support to complete tasks that were traditionally assigned to men (such as activities that require physical strength or related to management positions), but also a social network that provides security and solidarity. They have shown the initiative to assemble the groups and use them as a resource to handle their obligations independently.

Most of them are illiterate women that have carried out agriculture activities since they were young; however, as it is culturally accepted for girls to be raised to become wives and mothers rather than attending an education, they never questioned the importance of going to school and being educated. By being part of the group, they discovered that basic abilities such as reading, writing, or basic math, are paramount in having a better understanding on how to run and boost their business, which then allows them to dictate their lives as they please.

12 The interviewed women shared that, lately, with the arrival of the current government, they have been experiencing a development never seen before and they are finally starting to focus on their own growth.
Saving money is a common goal shared by the female farmers, with it being more common in EES (20%) than in LS (6,3%), and therefore each cluster has begun to rely on a saving box or a social fund. Most of the female farmers rely heavily on it as a means to protect their own integrity and autonomy. Traditionally, only men were permitted to make decisions about the family money. Their saving boxes have become a great strategy for women to guarantee their economic independence, satisfy the basic needs of their families, and manage their own earnings to enhance their business.

“The name of our group is Konyrot, which means -to defend yourself- and we decided to name ourselves like that because by producing our own food, we defend ourselves…” , shared a farmer group at Cueibet, LS. Another example of the same kind of initiative is Ioktueng, also in Cueibet, which means “we go ahead” and Mon lo cocoo at Magwi, which means “women are stronger than men”.

Primarily through the activities within the farmer groups, they have started to share their knowledge to the other members whenever they receive training from an NGO or discover by themselves a new method to improve their practices. For example, a woman in EES stated that men were supposed to oversee building stores or fences. As her husband is not around, she learned alone how to build a store to keep their harvests and then she taught her female partners how to do it as well.

Women have emphasized their desire to learn more and succeed in making budgets, saving money, attending literacy training, as the literacy rate is higher for men in South Sudan, and conduct agro-businesses (such as bread making or sewing and brewing alcohol). Moreover, they learned how to avoid and eradicate pests, use ox-plow, and how to use irrigation techniques fit for the dry seasons.

“At the beginning the chief of the village was the representative of our group, he was a man because he was speaking in English and we didn’t have the knowledge to lead ourselves. After working hard for a lot of time, now we have learned many things and we are ready to be our own leaders”.

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Female farmers believe in humanitarian response as elements of social cohesion and community development

Women in EES and LS are relying on NGO projects to access two key inputs - training and equipment - necessary to keep up their levels of production. Following this logic, if they get to maintain this, they will be able to reach other two specific objectives: raise sufficient
earnings to maintain their families and send their children to school so that they will also start their own development processes and change the future for the next generations.

Some women are now starting to realize the new dynamics of both family and gardening. They are aware that this is just the beginning of awareness for both men and women about the need for a change in dynamics. In order to achieve this goal, women know that they must participate in training to improve their jobs, sharing the knowledge they obtain, and prioritizing education for boys and girls equally (46.8% use the money to pay for school fees and medication).

“...if you raise a good boy, sending him to school and teaching him respect, when he gets married he will also help his wife because he has already learned. If the support continues, we will be able to work and send all our children to school”.
Interviewed woman in Abara Payam, from “Gang en gang” group.

Women highlighted the importance of increasing awareness campaigns specifically addressed to men, highlighting the need for men to respect women and children and their responsibility in contributing to the family.

Humanitarian response can enhance agriculture activities by providing quality seeds, equipment, and training, as well as raising social awareness. By involving both male and female farmers during interventions, community members realize how the work in agriculture is benefitting their individual growth, as well as the development of the family at large. This represents a real opportunity to move towards gender equality, peaceful interaction, community development, and women agency.

The interviewed women in both EES and LS expressed regret over what they locally refer to as “the misbehavior of men”, speaking on the negative manners perpetrated by men such as overdrinking during work hours or disrespecting the farmer group rules, which pushes the women to exclude the men from the groups rather than collaborating with them. However, there are certain instances where women have observed men showing a greater desire in collaborating, interacting, and participating peacefully.

Women farmer groups based in Ikwoto County, in EES, are a remarkable example of how agriculture projects could increase cohesion among the community. Since 2005, when AVSI started to implement projects, men began to collaborate with women over time. They did this as a result of realizing the progress women make on all levels – personal, familial, and
professional – as well as the benefits they derive from it. Men are not as involved or responsible for the agricultural value chain as women are, and they only take part in a few of the specialized tasks that make it up. However, it was seen in this instance that when few men decide to collaborate more frequently, it is mostly because they recognize the benefits of it.

Female farmers are well aware of the great benefits they have gained from the collaboration with the Italian NGO, not only because it has provided them with the right tools to perform their activities, but also, thanks to the continued training and support, they have learned how to do it by themselves. Although their needs have not yet been entirely met, they acknowledge that their quality of life has certainly improved.

“We are asking NGOs not to leave us now, just like men do”.

New founded farmer group from a mother support group at Nyong, Torit, EES. (2022)
Discussion about gender threats

The social condition of inequality triggering a change of mindset for women and leaving men apart from it

The women interviewed agreed that while 90% of women carry out both household and agricultural tasks, men barely reach the 10%. Women oversee their self-maintenance, that of their children, the house, and sometimes even the man himself. There are several reasons that cause this gap between women and men.

There is a serious phenomenon of men migrating out of the villages due to several factors, the main ones being extended families, and the second being the search for non-agriculture related jobs, as in some areas there is the belief that agricultural activities are a task mostly for women. Whether they are present or absent, men are not responsible for the family maintenance and wellbeing. While women are the ones caring and giving birth to the family offspring, men do not feel the responsibility to take care of them. Therefore, they do not feel as linked to agriculture as women do. Women tend to feel linked to agriculture as it is an occupation, but also a means for which she can feed and nourish the family.

Men are increasingly becoming absent figures in the family, or, in many cases, temporary workers hired by women farmers to complete specific tasks. The responsibility of the household maintenance and the agriculture production is not shared. The figure of the “husband” is blurry; this is either because of the men’s mass migration, or because of their lack of commitment. Women are now exploring their own coping mechanisms to become drivers of new social dynamics in which men are not involved.

In addition, early and forced marriages are common practices in the context of South Sudan; as a result, it is not rare to see elderly men in the villages married to young women. In both Eastern Equatoria State and Lakes State forced marriages are reported at 63%, while 70,6% of women reported knowing or being a widow woman without the financial support of any adult male. At that stage, the majority of women find themselves either alone with all the responsibilities of being a “wife” but without the figure of a “husband”, or with the responsibility to care for the entire family, including sick old husbands incapable of contributing to the house; in neither of these situations are the woman being recognized for their labors.
“In the way it is right now, women cannot have any rights because we are not men. When we get married, we lose our rights. Men deserve all the rights because they are the ones supposed to look after women”.

Woman of Abara Payam, at Magwi County, from the “Gang en Gang” group.

Young boys and girls help at home and in agriculture chores equally. As they start to grow, they begin to follow the activities that belong to their gender role especially in the household domain; however, as long as they live in the family home, they should both help despite the sex. It is worth noting that this situation changes when they get married.

For boys, when they get married, they adopt the cultural belief that their wife is supposed to do everything at home, even if they were helping their mothers within their nuclear families. “When they get married, they begin to feel like the MAN of the house” shared one of the women referring to the symbol that men represent at a cultural level. They just believe that as fathers and husbands, they are more important and therefore deserve to be served. Some others become the head of several families and, while seeking a job, leave the villages and lose contact with their wife and children.

The scenario is different for girls because the rights of this girl or young woman are passed directly to the man when she gets married as the families get paid for conceding their daughters to the new husbands; this is one of the main reasons why in South Sudan women have the biggest workload. Girls and women are treated as men’s property once they get married, and are expected to obey, provide, and serve for their husbands. According to a multisector survey conducted by AVSI in Lakes State (2021), 64% of the interviewed families were found to use abusive words or language. This is because it is widely believed that when a young girl gets used to this abusive language, she will be prepared for marriage as she may be subjected to this abusive language from her husband.

As the way it is contextualized, marriage may condition the rights of women under men’s authority. This position, together with the other listed factors, have created a social condition of inequality that is triggering a change of mindset for women but leaving men apart from it.

Women know of their cultural obligations to treat men with respect and to accept all aspects of the marriage. However, in some areas, female farmers have reached important levels of awareness making them realize the physical, psychological, and emotional abuse that they have experienced and rising their will to end this cycle. In many cases, this has meant limiting their interactions with men as much as possible.
Avoiding the risk that economic empowerment of women reinforces the cultural stereotype that women are merely productive assets

Due to men’s lack of commitment to embrace their family and agriculture duties, women are exercising independence from them in the absence of a male presence. Female farmers have become the main actors in charge of carrying out agricultural work. This gradually led to them being socially recognized as the group’s leaders, giving them more authority within the family but at the same time possibly increasing even more the gap between genders and making it harder for them to interact peacefully.

Currently, the biggest gender-related concern for humanitarian response should be that women are already participating in activities that foster their processes of learning, growth, and development, both in a cognitive (through knowledge) and practical (through abilities) way; however, these big achievements are not yet being leveraged to reach agency and empowerment, as they are still only valued in terms of the economic growth they are bringing. Moreover, all the benefits they have achieved are sometimes being sensed as an increment of burdens that are not changing their real social status.

Men are no longer present like they used to be and this has increased women development; this could very likely lead to a situation where men are no longer part of the new-born transformations. Without the acknowledgement of the male population, economic female empowerment will simply strengthen the idea of women as more valuable assets amid the increment of goods they produce. If they have more children or food items, their value rises; however, as soon as this production becomes insufficient, or the outcomes do not serve to satisfy the cultural expectations of the community, the woman's value decreases as if it were a product. A woman has not yet been conceptualized as a human being deserving of rights and respect.

All these changes found their origin in a context of complete vulnerability where women face a much heavier workload than men, together with the lack of acknowledgment about the importance of their role for the continued development of the communities. Communities continue to reject this as a means of empowering women and power is a matter of relations. Only when men will be able to understand that women deserve to be respected as their equal partners, that women will be able to scale to the next stage of seeking true rights where they can enjoy more power, not over men, but over themselves.
Two Directors of Cooperative and Rural Development in different payams in EES and LS were interviewed and they reported that there are no women’s protection policies applied by the government at county or national levels. NGOs are the only ones advocating for it and therefore, AVSI intends to develop collaboration strategies with local authorities to develop awareness campaigns to raise respect for women, as well as work more diligently on advocating for women’s rights at the government level.

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13 This despite some legislations approved by the South Sudanese central government that nevertheless are rarely applied in reality.
Conclusions and recommendations

To conclude, with the aim of helping to define the roles of men and women in agriculture according to their gender settings, the following lines showcase six areas of interest. Additionally, the following points could highlight and tackle the needs that specifically women have in terms of household and agricultural production, towards their agency and empowerment as agricultural leaders and self-sufficient carers.

1. The main purpose of agricultural production remains the same in both EES and LS, self-consumption as a primary goal, and income generation as a secondary goal. Income generation is needed to buy other food items, pay school fees, face medical emergencies, and replace old agriculture assets. Women are mostly responsible for carrying out agricultural work and this is gradually leading them to be socially recognized as the leaders of it. Some of them have second sources of income besides agriculture and agribusiness, including but not limited to, selling charcoal or firewood, brewing and selling alcohol, or preparing land for cultivation for someone else. Agriculture, however, remains the first and most significant source of income.

For South Sudanese women, the value of agriculture is based on 3 principal points: feeding the family, providing cash to cover other expenses, and through these, feeling that they have accomplished their gender duties, which in turn gains them respect from men. Some women are able to fully control themselves and their responsibilities at work because they are widows or live alone, while others are able to do so because their husbands are not actively engaged in agricultural activities or any other form of family support, even if they are physically present. Women are starting to gain more and more respect in the communities as the head of the whole agriculture supply and value chain.

2. Female farmers used their physical work as the greatest instrument to defend themselves as a coping mechanism to advance their families. Facing the lack of commitment and collaboration of their husbands, women have been practicing independence from them, without men even knowing. In some cases, their male partners have agreed on what they ask just because of experiencing the benefits and all the goods that women bring from the garden and the sales. Getting their approval though, does not mean that men are accepting the new female role as leaders of the agricultural production, even less of the family; rather, they are strengthening their views that regard woman as an asset. The gap between groups could widen even more as a result of the findings.
Majority of the men’s population are either not present in the villages or too old to participate in farming activities. Men’s participation in farming is very specific and not active: they collaborate after women’s requests because the commitment for the family wellness is not shared. It is crucial, therefore, to concentrate on raising men’s awareness on gender stereotypes and their impact on the way they interact with women. This will help them develop interpersonal skills, a greater understanding of gender respect, and a culture of equal participation in family and community development.

3. For most men and women respect is a matter of strength. Since men are stronger than women, it is seen as a natural right to abuse them when they fail in meeting their gender roles. Due to their cultural roots, women feel they should accept this situation, but in most cases, they recognize and accept that they can no longer put up with it. Today’s women are developing levels of awareness that allow them to come to the realization that they do not deserve this type of treatment. However, in most cases women feel incapable of reacting because power, which for them is synonym of strength, belongs to men.

In the context of South Sudan, women not only suffer isolated acts of GBV, but they also live in a context of gender inequality. As social dynamics cannot be changed from outside as foreign impositions that might find only an infertile ground not to flourish, NGOs support could provide women with the right inputs (training, awareness, feedback, work assets and loan) to transform their own dynamics from within and see real and progressive changes over time. Multiple dimensions should be involved for these changes to start: family dynamics, work practices, economic growth, culture foundations and social inequalities should be must all be examined.

4. It is possible to engage men in agriculture through NGO interventions. Men have seen that women are getting into new processes that are taking them to better ways of living, and some of them are beginning to pay attention to it, because they want to progress too. There are some activities that men conduct specifically during the agriculture value chain, such as preparing land by cutting and clearing, and overseeing the animals, mostly. Men are also very interested in learning the use of machines, vehicles, and equipment. As a way to attract their interest, specific training could be offered to men; to involve them through activities that they already perform while also teaching them how to do it more efficiently and better.
5. Women could start real empowerment processes by leveraging their economic development through agriculture. When it comes to carrying out their agriculture tasks, women feel they can be independent. This is a space where they do not have to ask permission from men; they know what to do and their male partners do not care that much as long as they bring food home. At home, both girls and boys or young men fear the figure of the father but respect their mothers, as caregivers and providers. This may represent a possible starting point for identifying space for remodeling the dynamic between male and female caregivers, toward a more shared responsibility of caring. Also, this could help changing the self-perception of women as capable of leading a household (particularly but not exclusively for women headed household), hence, upgrading their role in society and advancing gender equality.

The physical and emotional absence of men is one of the biggest concerns, but it has also been one of the key factors in fostering women empowerment. Women have been encouraged to pursue their own development as a coping mechanism to face daily challenges. They started to learn new things, engage into practices that did not belong to their gender role, taking the lead of the family and finally looking for ways to improve their life quality relying only on their own work. Some of them expressed satisfaction about dialogue sessions in the community. The presence of an NGO mediator during those sessions made them at ease to freely speak and share their thoughts. However, **women still do not recognize this as a potential means of enhancing gender dynamics as much as means of enhancing economic growth dynamics. It is needed to focus on how to provide that push of consciousness about their potential leadership and empowerment to keep it growing and consolidate their self-esteem, creativity, and self-awareness.**
Annex – Instruments for data collection

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS / INTERVIEWS TO FEMALE FARMERS

Date: ______________________________ Place: _________________________________
Name of the Farmer’s Group: _________________________________________________
Number of participants: ______________________________________________________
Starting time: _______________________ Ending time: ____________________________

1. - According to your context and your community needs, which is the main purpose of agricultural production?
How is your community benefiting from agriculture?
What are the moments in which you struggle the most? / What strategies have you used to face these challenges? (Ex. managing natural shocks such as lack of rain, pests, excess sun exposure, cattle riding or having no food?) / What do the men do about it?
Have you ever collaborated with NGOs for agriculture projects? / Which has been the impact of the project?

2. - From the following tasks of agricultural production, we would like to know which are developed by women, by men, and which ones you develop together:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparing/ survey land:</th>
<th>Top dressing:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cutting and gathering trees:</td>
<td>Winnowing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burning:</td>
<td>Transport:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivation/ Digging:</td>
<td>Store:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeding:</td>
<td>Business/ marketing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvesting:</td>
<td>Earnings:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When men and women collaborate together, which are the consequences in the production? - What are the consequences in the family?

How has the participation of men changed over time? What is the reason for these changes?

What other activities do you have when you are not involved in agriculture? Which are the ones for men?

Are you married? Is your husband present at home? How is his contribution to the family?

What strategies have you used with men to encourage their participation in agriculture? - What do you think that could help to increase it?

How are boys and girls related to agriculture? Which are their responsibilities according to their sex? - How does this change when they get married?

3.- What do you eat? Is your feeding different from the feeding for the children or for your husband?

Who makes the decisions about the feeding? How is the process of decision making?

Who is the one in control over the agricultural resources such as farm equipment, fertilizers, seeds, etc.? How is the process of decision making?

Which are the issues that you face to access markets, compared to men?

Do you own land? What do you do when you want to access land to start a garden?

Who are the ones who own the land? How do you manage harvest when you are cultivating in a land that is not yours?

What do you do when you need credit or financial support to purchase farming or household assets?

Which other sources of income do you have?

Which kind of business could you start to take more advantage of your harvests? For example, making juices, baking or selling prepared snacks?

4.- According to your context, which are your roles or duties that you should perform as a woman?

Which are the main restrictions for men and women? - What are the elements that define these restrictions?
How do you think women participation in agriculture has been different in the past, for example, for your mothers or grandmothers? How do you think it could be different for your daughters?

Have you seen that some men are becoming more interested in agriculture in the last few years? - Why?

Have you ever experienced physical or sexual assault while developing your agriculture tasks? - Can you explain the situations?

What do you do when you experience any violence attack from men?

5. - How do you organize with your community to develop agricultural activities? Do you have any farmer's group or are you part of any agricultural projects?

How have these groups helped you to feel more secure on a personal level? How have they helped to improve work?

Which skills have you developed by developing agriculture activities?

Which goals have you reached?

How have these changes helped to gain more respect from men? - By which acts do you recognize that they are respecting you more?

What do you think can be done to give women more power and independence?
1. According to the context and the community needs, could you define some elements as the main purposes of agricultural production?

2. Which are the main responsibilities defined by gender? Which are the tasks for men and for women?

3. Which are the socio-cultural beliefs that define these practices?

4. Which are the challenges that women are facing? How could they be addressed?

5. Which are the policies at local or regional level that offer security for women or that look after their empowerment? What has it done in the last years about gender security?

6. What do you think could be done by NGOs to tackle the harmful practices for women?
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