

Insights Gained from USAID Cooperative Development Program – CLEAR: Assessing the Impact of Women's Engagement in Cooperatives



Introduction

USAID [Cooperative Development Program \(CDP\)](#) – Cooperative, Leadership, Engagement, Advocacy & Research (CLEAR) (2018–2023), implemented by Global Communities was designed to support and enhance Kenya's cooperative ecosystem. CLEAR focused on promoting youth and women's socio-economic empowerment through the cooperative business model by tapping into existing opportunities in the service industry.

A key emphasis for CLEAR was advancing gender equality and equity within cooperatives by supporting both cooperatives and their leaders. To realize these objectives, CLEAR formulated a gender strategy employing four core approaches:

- **Empowerment and Capacity Strengthening**
 - Expected Outcome: Augmented knowledge of gender equality in the target counties and enhanced capacity among cooperative leaders, officers, and members to establish gender-responsive cooperatives.
- **Women in Cooperative Governance and Management**
 - Expected Outcome: Increased opportunities for women in leadership roles, contributing to improved gender equality within cooperatives.
- **Cooperative Policies, Legislation, and Regulations**
 - Expected Outcome: Reinforced policies, legislation, and regulatory frameworks addressing gender equality at both county and cooperative levels.
- **Media Advocacy**
 - Expected Outcome: Increased visibility of gender equality and women's empowerment in cooperatives through media channels such as radio and television.

CLEAR has developed a [Gender Equity and Good Governance Guide](#) for cooperatives to utilize in training their members. This comprehensive guide comprises twenty-six sessions organized under six topics, including Exploring the Concept of Gender, Gender Based Violence and Cooperatives, Strengthening Cooperatives through Family Planning and Parenting, Communication in Households and Cooperatives, Cooperative Governance, and Conflict Prevention and Resolution among members.

To facilitate effective learning, a range of participatory training methodologies is employed. These include group discussions, interactive lectures, role plays, group exercises, brainstorming, case studies, and visualization techniques. These methods encourage active engagement among adult learners, whether the training is conducted in-person or online. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these training sessions were conducted virtually.

This Learning Brief presents insights into the impact of women's engagement in cooperatives. It highlights the contributions of women's engagement to the successes of five selected cooperatives

that have benefitted from the above-mentioned CLEAR gender training. The brief provides recommendations on how women can be more effectively engaged in cooperative activities.

Data for this brief was collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving representatives from five cooperatives based in Kenya: Vision 4 Housing Cooperative, Uprising Cooperative, Kokwatai Cooperative, Chipukizi Voice of Drama, and Suba North Cooperative.

Findings

The challenges to women's engagement in cooperatives

Although there has been significant progress in women's engagement in cooperatives, there is still more work to be done to support and sustain women cooperators. The challenges to women's participation expressed in the (FGD) are as follows:

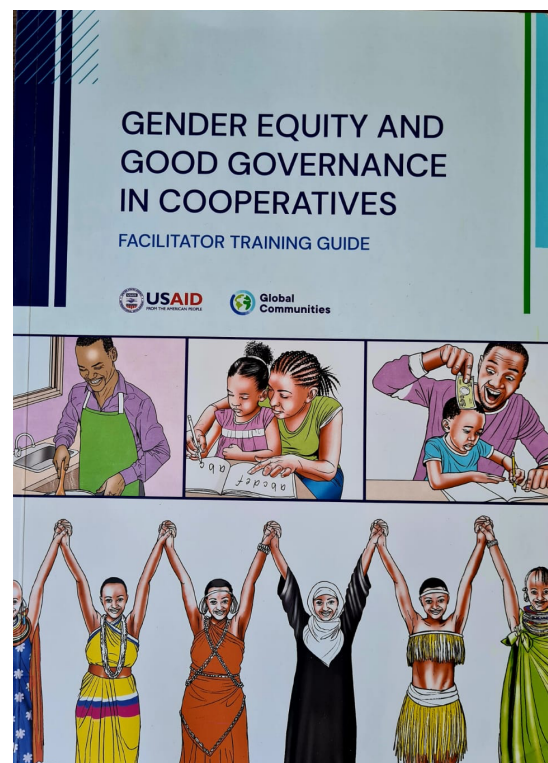
Psychological barriers – Women struggle with a lack of self-confidence and intimidation when expressing their views in a male-dominated cooperative arena. Some opt to keep quiet even when they have important contributions that they could make.

Lack of motivation– Women lack incentives to participate in cooperatives, these include policies that facilitate flexible meeting timings, private spaces for nursing mothers, security in potentially insecure environments, opportunities for leadership roles and inclusive environments where women feel free to voice their opinions without fear of judgment.

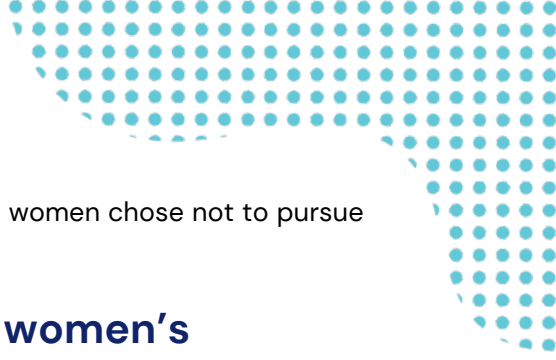
Lack of spousal support– In many communities, traditional gender norms often dictate that women's primary roles are centered around reproduction and caregiving rather than income generation. These traditional perceptions can significantly restrict women's engagement, particularly if their spouse is not involved in the cooperative. A woman's success within the cooperative often hinges on the support of her husband. For instance, conflicts may arise if the spouse is unaware of the timing of cooperative meetings and feels that his wife is neglecting her domestic duties in favor of prioritizing cooperative activities.

Land Ownership– Cultural norms, limited access to education, and societal expectations pose substantial barriers for women to own property, consequently restricting their involvement in cooperatives related to land and home ownership. Challenges rise as women encounter difficulties in owning land and other assets, which often serve as prerequisites for cooperative membership.

– Several female members expressed feeling that their opinions were not respected by their male counterparts, frequently encountering correction or challenge simply because of their gender. In



Global Communities Gender Equity and Good Governance Guide



response to this negative criticism and disrespectful treatment, these women chose not to pursue leadership roles.

Understanding the changes and impact of women's engagement in cooperatives.

As a result of gender trainings conducted through the USAID Cooperative Development Program – CLEAR, the following impacts have been reported regarding women's engagement in cooperatives.

Increase in women's participation in leadership.

Following gender training sessions facilitated by CLEAR, cooperatives experienced a significant increase in the election of women to leadership positions. Information collected prior to the training showed that fewer women assumed leadership roles, often due to fear, limited opportunities, or the absence of supportive policies. The CLEAR gender trainings emphasized the importance of amplifying women's voices as valuable resources in cooperative decision-making. Notable success stories emerged from post training feedback; one cooperative unanimously designated a woman leadership position in their board, while in other cooperatives, men intensified efforts for women to pursue leadership roles. These lessons not only motivated women to seek top positions but also promoted greater appreciation for women's opinions among all cooperative members.

Mobilization and Recruitment of new members

The participants observed that women are good at mobilizing and recruiting new members at an individual and community level. This engagement of women has contributed to increased membership. Women have good relations at community level and because of this they are well poised to market their cooperatives and recruit new members.

Increased profits for the cooperatives

Many women, already members of financial groups like table banking groups and informal investment groups or merry-go-rounds, locally known as '*Chamas*', excel in saving money and share their best practice in savings to other members of the cooperative. This increases overall member savings but also contributes to a collective effort towards home ownership.

Spiritual nourishment and Counselling

A practice that is highly appreciated by members is how women have taken up the opportunity to share spiritual knowledge and information with other members and provide counseling services to those who need them. From the FGD conducted, women took the lead in conducting prayers, ensuring that the significant spiritual aspect, deemed important in cooperative settings, was consistently integrated into meetings. Beyond spiritual guidance, women offered valuable social support to both members and the cooperative community, contributing to the addressing of mental health issues.



Guidelines for cooperatives to enhance women participation in their businesses.

Below are recommendations to cooperatives on how they can women's engagement in their activities.

- Cooperatives and communities need to provide members with training and mentorship on issues related to gender and the importance of engaging women in cooperatives. These interventions can be implemented through gender advocacy and community sensitization and will change the mindset and societal perceptions that inhibit women's engagement in cooperatives.
- Success stories and case studies are essential learning tools that illustrate how women's engagement has impacted cooperatives. This information will provide practical examples of how cooperatives can contextualize and implement strategies suitable for their cooperatives.
- It is important to encourage cooperative members and leaders to adopt gender-sensitive policies and bylaws, including those that provide for family-friendly measures such as promoting work-life balance, establishing childcare facilities, and offering flexible work hours.
- Community sensitization programs need to be implemented by cooperatives on gender equality and women's empowerment to promote societal behavior change. These forums can also be platforms to market cooperatives and advocate for women's participation in cooperatives.
- One of the reasons why women may not participate in cooperative activities is their differences in time-use from men. Women spend more time on care giving work than their male counterparts. It will be important for cooperatives to schedule meetings during times that accommodate women's other responsibilities at home. From the above FGD, cooperatives who implemented this approach reported higher participation of women.
- Even though women participation has increased in membership and leadership, the cooperative space is still male dominated. This is apparent in governance and leadership, calling for a change through initiatives that challenge norms. Efforts are needed to empower women socially and politically by addressing gender power imbalances and aiming for cultural shifts in how society views gender roles. These initiatives can be led by transforming the traditional patriarchy and toxic masculinity society to relying on men as advocates for equality and non-discrimination at both interpersonal and societal levels.

Conclusion

Remarkable progress has been achieved in enhancing women's involvement in cooperatives, resulting in notable and tangible transformations within the engaged cooperatives. As pivotal contributors, cooperatives play a crucial role in striving for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (SDG Goal 5). It is imperative for these cooperatives to leverage the tools, knowledge, and resources at their disposal to spearhead cultural and behavioral shifts within both their cooperatives and communities.

Cooperatives must serve as advocates of gender equality in a leadership role, utilizing the acquired assets to instigate positive change. Achieving gender equity in cooperatives demands a collective endeavor striving for and implementing gender-sensitive policies to cultivate an environment that facilitates increased female participation. Such initiatives not only benefit women but in addition contributes to heightened productivity and income levels for the whole cooperative.

This learning brief was written by Fredrick Nyagah, Gender Technical Specialist and Molly Raichenah, Project Officer CLEAR Program.

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