



# Empowering landless women through collectives in the agrifood systems: A review

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# Overview

Collectives are viewed as agents for women's economic empowerment in the Agrifood System through collective action. Globally, women constitute about 36% of employed people in AFS and almost half of the workforce in the food processing and services sector. As such, empowering women in the agrifood systems is a vital prerequisite for fostering a fair and peaceful world as well as enhancing women's income and wellbeing. This review explores how collectives can empower vulnerable and often landless women in the agri-food sector. The review highlights the types of collectives, the level of formality and how that affects women's participation in collectives. Broadly, the role of collectives in women empowerment can be described as being economical, social or political empowerment. However, for a full and effective empowerment of women, there must be an enabling ecosystem of formal laws, rules and regulations and informal social norms, religious beliefs and customs favouring collectivization. There also need to be favourable socio-economic and cultural factors that allow for women's ability and willingness to collectivize. Women collectives can potentially improve women's income-earning opportunities, access to financial resources, and other social outcomes. However, collectives still face challenges such as inadequate access to productive resources, insufficient participation of women in decision-making, structural and cultural gender constraints, and the overburden of collectives with women empowerment.

**Key words:** collectives, women, Agri-food, empowerment, collective action

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## Introduction

The agrifood system (AFS) employs nearly 1.2 billion people worldwide, and almost half of the global population lives in households associated with the agrifood chain (Davis et al., 2023). AFS refers to the multitude of interconnected sectors of agriculture such as crops, forestry, fishery and livestock as well as associated economic activities that contribute to the production, processing and supply of food and related products (Campanhola & Pandey, 2019; Degieter et al., 2022). The agrifood sector is a vital source of livelihood for women in many countries in the Global South and as such, a major employer of women. Globally, women constitute about 36% of employed people in AFS and almost half of the workforce in the food processing and services sector of AFS (Camargo, 2023). Additional statistics indicate that women working in the agrifood sector earn 82 cents for every dollar men earn despite being significantly more likely to work in vulnerable positions in the agrifood chain than male workers (Camargo, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic further disproportionately affected women in AFS. For example, nearly 22 % of women lost their livelihoods associated with the off-farm sector of AFS in the first year of COVID-19, compared to only 2% of men (Camargo, 2023). The COVID-19 crisis deepened the structural knots of gender inequality in different regions of the world and threatened women's autonomy (Camargo, 2023). Women account for a more significant share of agricultural employment at mostly lower levels of economic development. That notwithstanding, inadequate education, limited access to basic infrastructure and markets, high unpaid work burden and poor rural employment opportunities outside agriculture severely limit the opportunities for women's incomes and livelihood growth in the AFS (Burke & Jayne, 2021; Ishemo & Bushell, 2017; Msosa, 2022; Quaye et al., 2016). Consequently, women empowerment in AFS has become essential in improving the food security and climate resilience in the Global South (Bryan et al., 2023; Camargo, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2022). Gender equality and empowerment of women (SDG 5) is a vital prerequisite in fostering a fair and peaceful world as well as the progress to create a world free of hunger. Also, empowering women, especially in the agrifood sector can be instrumental in enhancing well-being, incomes and resilience of women and their households.

Agricultural collectives are acknowledged to offer an array of economic and social benefits that can empower women and improve their livelihoods (Bharti, 2021; Dohmwirth & Hanisch,

2018; Duguid & Weber, 2019; Sethi et al., 2017). Sethi et al. (2017) describe collectives as associations or organizations established through the voluntary collaborations of individuals united by a common goal of achieving socio-cultural, political and economic benefits (Arathi & Shahapure, 2023; Bharti, 2021; Dutt et al., 2016) through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. For example, women collectives, especially in the agrifood sector are fundamentally based on values of self-help, equality and solidarity (Bharti, 2021; Kumar et al., 2015), as such can support women empowerment through financial freedom and access to productive resources and services.

Over the last four decades, women collectives such as cooperations have expanded in their economic relevance, and socio-economic theories have attributed this to the role of collectives in enhancing economies of scale, expansion of new markets, facilitation of long-distance trade, improvement of market efficiency and management of risk (Msosa, 2022). Regional collectives in the AFS with a high market share can also help moderate price volatility (Mazzarol et al., 2014; Msosa, 2022). Thus, Mazzarol et al. (2014) argue that collectives may sometimes be viewed as more relevant than for-profit corporations because collectives are better positioned to weather economic downturns; booster economic growth in the Global South; re-invest surplus funds; support local women and are more democratic in their governance structure. Aside the economic benefits, women collectives are acknowledged to provide socio-cultural benefits to members. For example, Bharti, (2021) stipulates that in India, women working collaboratively in shared work sheds outside their domestic homes can challenge the norms of seclusion and unequal household labour that often characterize patriarchal communities (Bharti, 2021). Given the multifaceted benefits of collective, this review examines how women collaboratively work in formal and informal collectives and how they benefit economically, socially, and politically from collectivizing. The review also highlights the key challenges of women's cooperatives and opportunities for facilitating women empowerment through collective action and agency. Moreso, this review examines the socio-cultural factors that mediate women's willingness and ability to collectivize as well as enabling ecosystem that promotes collectivization.

## Formal and informal collectives

In the Global South, collectives primarily comprises community-based institutions organized into a structured group of residents, with members being mostly women or mixed with men and hold periodic meetings for specific collective actions and benefits (Sethi et al., 2017). Collectives can be broadly formal or informal and represent distinctive modes of women associations that serve as a platform for women empowerment and collaborative action for social, political and economic benefits (Duguid & Weber, 2019). Collectives are pivotal in fostering the empowerment of women in the agri-food sector (Dohmwirth & Hanisch, 2018; Sethi et al., 2017), however, both formal and informal collectives have their respective challenges and opportunities in improving the socio-economic livelihoods of women. This section discusses formal and informal collectives and the forms of collectives that fall within a spectrum of formality. Formality in this context refers to the incorporation status, level of by-laws and procedures adopted by the organizational structure of the collective (Duguid & Weber, 2019).

## Formal collectives

Formal women collectives are structured groups, often registered under legal frameworks of regions or states with established operational guidelines. Formal collectives usually operate with a defined governance structure with elected executives responsible for the governance and administration of the collective (Duguid & Weber, 2019). Formal collectives can be established through the deliberate efforts of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), or community-based groups to unite women around a shared objective, such as economic, educational, political or social empowerment campaigns (Duguid & Weber, 2019). Formal collectives are usually State-registered and required to conform to internationally agreed principles embodied in State cooperative regulations and legislature (Sethi et al., 2017). Registered and approved women collectives enjoy various benefits, including facilitated access to trainings, credits and markets (Bijman & Wijers, 2019; Ishemo & Bushell, 2017). Through collective actions, vulnerable farmers such as women are able to harness their collective synergies in strengthening their bargaining power in the markets, which reduces the transactional costs and risks they confront in the market, enabling them to reap the full benefits along the value chains thus increasing their incomes and overall socio-economic status (Bijman & Wijers, 2019; Ishemo & Bushell, 2017). According to Duguid & Weber (2019), women unions and cooperatives primarily fall within the spectrum of formal collectives. Figure 1 shows the range of formality of different women collectives.



Figure 1: Spectrum of formality of women collectives

Source: Duguid & Weber (2019)

## Unions

According to Duguid & Weber (2019), unions, especially trade unions, are among the highly formalized women collectives. That notwithstanding, women in the informal sector including the processing of agrifood products have collectivized as unions to create a safe space that serve as a collective voice for women (Duguid & Weber, 2019). Examples include the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) which sought to eliminate bonded labour in Nepal. In 1996, GEFONT launched the Kamaiya Liberation Forum-Nepal (KLFN) to bring to the government and to the public the plight of the Kamaiyas, who were bonded agricultural laborers including women (Rimal, 2019). GEFONT also embarked on various projects and activities aimed at improving the welfare of the Kamaiyas and their families. As part of the The Kamaiya Labour Act in 2002, some previously landless women received land ownership despite persistent bias in land distribution that mainly favoured men (Rimal, 2019).

Another example of a union is the Sikhula Sonke of South Africa, a women-led social movement union that has succeeded in improving the livelihoods of women working in the AFS in Western Cape (White, 2010). Sikhula meaning ‘We Grow Together’ in *isiXhosa* was formed out of need and a deliberate creation of the NGO Women on Farms (WFP) (White, 2010). Prior to the emergence of Sikhula, one of the fundamental challenges of women in the wine and fruit sector was a lack of union representation. The union evolved beyond a labour union to encompass the general wellbeing of their members. As indicated by the organizer of Sikhula;

*‘Sikhula Sonke’s objectives, however, stretch beyond those of a traditional trade union. The organisation has a broad social mandate. It is ‘more than a union because we look at more than labour problems. We look at all issues that affect women and their children’. Organiser, Sikhula Sonke seen in White, (2010).*

To improve the overall livelihoods of women, the union also focuses on enhancing the status of women within the agricultural domain. As such, it directs efforts towards coordinating joint advocacy initiatives conducting effective negotiations and building good relationships with government structures and employers (White, 2010). Sikhula Sonke recognizes that social and labour concerns facing women are interlinked. For example, the union tackles issues of alcoholism, which is not directly within the scope of a traditional labour union but affects the ability of workers to defend their working conditions and income/wages (White, 2010). Expanding its reach beyond conventional trade union activities allows the movement to have a multifaceted approach to dealing with the livelihood concerns of its members and, in so doing, makes

it more efficient in meeting members’ needs. Contrarywise, structured as a trade union allows Sikhula to build a paying membership base with an authority as a legitimate organization to engage the government and other stakeholder on improving women’s livelihoods (White, 2010)

## Cooperatives

Cooperatives are yet another formalized collectives that often have formal incorporation status, structured policies, by-laws and an established constitution (Duguid & Weber, 2019). A cooperative enterprise is a group-based organization owned and controlled by the same people who use its services (Sanyang & Huang, 2008). Cooperative enterprises are directed by norms, values and cooperative principles. Cooperatives can promote economic and social development because they are commercial organizations that follow a broader set of values than those associated purely with profit orientation (Kristin et al., 2023; Sanyang & Huang, 2008). This is because cooperatives are primarily owned and managed by those who use its services. As such the decisions taken by cooperatives balance the need for profitability with the wider interests of the members and the broader community (Sanyang & Huang, 2008). Cooperatives also foster economic fairness by ensuring equal access to markets and services for the membership base, which is open and voluntary (Sanyang & Huang, 2008).

An example of a cooperative is the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of India, which is not only an empowering association for women in the home-based industries, but also helps to collectivize women informal workers in diverse industries to form women-led co-operatives, NGOs, and regional groups (Colovic & Mehrotra, 2020; Nierenberg, 2013). SEWA’s membership is over 1 million with nearly 55% engaged in the agrifood sector (Jay et al., 2022; Nierenberg, 2013). To empower landless women in AFS, SEWA has established subsidiary groups that primarily focus on the agrifood sector including the Rural Distribution Network (RUDI)-SEWA’s Agribusiness enterprise; Kamala – SEWA’s food processing initiative and SEWA Bazaar – SEWA’s vegetable value chain (Ghatak et al., 2023; Nanavaty, 2020; Thorpe & Emili, 2020). Undoubtedly, evidence has indicated that SEWA fosters an enabling economic ecosystem for women to earn more income and further provides crucial community support to members including health, food security and improved overall livelihoods (Nierenberg, 2013). As recounted by a member;

*“We now earn over 15,000 rupees [\$350] per season, an amount we had never dreamed of earning in a lifetime,” says Surajben Shankasbhai Rathwa, a member since 2003. (Nierenberg, 2013)*



## Informal Collectives

Informal women collectives usually include a non-hierarchical women's groups or organizations with each member having somewhat equal decision-making power (Duguid & Weber, 2019). Informal women collectives are founded using different organizational structures, intricately mirroring the context including the sector of work (e.g., agrifood), economic ecosystem, and the objective for collectivizing (Duguid & Weber, 2019). They range along a spectrum of formality, which is defined by incorporation status, and the level of by-laws and procedures adopted by the organizational structure. This section describes the different types of collectives that lean towards the informal spectrum of women collectives including women association, groups and networks.

## Associations, groups and networks

Networks, Self-Help Groups (SHG) and social or religious organizations can serve as ways of organizing women-led or women-centred collectives. These include the many women-led and -founded community-based informal networks or groups that empower women informal workers to gain better income from their ventures including the agrifood sector as well as to find a collective voice around health and safety issues in the community (Bharamappanavara et al., 2016; Duguid & Weber, 2019). For example, SHGs are usually village level collectivization of women aimed at the economic elevation of women. SHGs also serve as vehicles through which governments collaborate with other organizations like NGOs to implement development projects such as anti-poverty initiatives (Bharamappanavara et al., 2016). According to Duguid & Weber (2019), there is less research and reporting on this spectrum of collectives due to the fluid and less formal nature. Woldu & Tadesse, (2015) have postulated that women are more likely to be members of informal Self-Help Groups such as Village Savings and Loans Groups than more formal groups partly because they gain more social and economic benefits from these informal groups, especially at the grassroots. Woldu & Tadesse, (2015) further argue that small-scale local informal groups are better positioned and usually build strong solidarity on socio-economic and political issues beyond economic empowerment of their members. However, these small-scale informal groups may face challenges, including limited capital mobilization and access to other productive resources (Msosa, 2022). For example, women in the agrifood processing sector may often lag in meeting the quality standard of agriproducts, especially

in the international market, due to limited access to machinery that will clean grains and lack of instructions and guidance on quality standards required to sell products (Msosa, 2022)

## The structure and governance of women collectives

The governance of collectives is crucial to the success and empowerment of their members. Some factors that are vital in the governance collectives such as cooperatives include autonomy, participation, democracy, regulated entry, incentivized exits, well-defined rules and rights, a constitution and legal documents, leadership, term limits, transparency and independent board members (Kristin et al., 2023). However, these factors vary greatly depending on the spectrum of formality of the collectives. More formal collectives such as cooperatives and unions would likely have more of these factors as key to their governance compared to more informal women collectives such as SHG.

The governance and management of collectives are structurally different from conventional organizations, especially regarding ownership and distribution of decision rights. In collectives such as cooperations, the right to ownership is primarily rooted in the logic of collective ownership grounded on memberships rather than capital (Billiet et al., 2021; Michaud & Audebrand, 2022). Through the separation of decision rights from capital, collectives are able to create strong ties with members through the internalization of ownership (i.e., members feel a sense of ownership of the collective). The collective ownership structure of collectives incentivizes a focus on sustainable use–transaction relationships with members rather than financial merit (Billiet et al., 2021). Also, collectives have a democratic decision-making structure, often a one-member-one-vote principle, which is usually implemented at General Assembly of members (Nikolić et al., 2021). For example, Michaud & Audebrand, (2022) stipulates that the notion of democratic governance among cooperatives is exhibited through three mechanisms including the decision-making mandate of the general assembly, where each member has a vote; the authority of the general assembly to appoint directors; and the composition of the governing bodies (e.g., board of directors, supervisory board), which are all members of the organizations rather than external shareholders (Michaud & Audebrand, 2022). This implies the governing body of cooperatives are elected among its members. Though the governing structure of collectives may differ, it usually comprises a general assembly; main committee; inter-groups; small-sector groups; and sub-committees (Tiwari, 2016).



There are some inherent challenges in the structure, values and principles of the governance of cooperatives. These challenges include issues of : member cohesion; board member motivations; board independence; member participation; selection of board members; performance measurement and identity and integrity (Michaud & Audebrand, 2022). For example, cooperation can experience conflicting or sometimes opposing interest among individual members or different sub-cooperations in the case of multi-stakeholder cooperations. In such cases, the governance may become overly skewed to the interest of one group of stakeholder to the neglect of others and creating different factions, thus, paralyzing decision-making (Michaud & Audebrand, 2022; Verhees et al., 2015). Board members may face an identity crisis between being primarily trustees of the organization and representatives of a particular position or of a subgroup of members. In such instances, they may face a belonging paradox, as they must juggle their connection to the interests of their subgroups with their obligation to the collective goal (Michaud & Audebrand, 2022)

## Women empowerment through collectives

Collectives are based on the social, economic, and political needs of its members, particularly women who often lack access to productive assets and resources (Bharti, 2021). Empowerment is a complicated concept. However, Rowland (1997) described empowerment as the process through which people and organizations or groups who are powerless or marginalized become aware of the power dynamics at work in their lives and develop the skills and capacities to gain reasonable control over their lives and livelihoods. Also, according to Rowlands (1997: 14) ‘empowerment is more than just participating in decision making: ... [it] must involve undoing negative social constructions so that people can see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions.’ Empowerment is also described as “the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them” (Bennett, 2002: 13). Empowerment entails greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives (Hossain et al., 2020). Empowerment is a fundamental part of the ideology of women collectives, where women get together to achieve goals that they typically cannot achieve as individuals (Arathi & Shahapure, 2023; Bharti, 2021; Mudege et al., 2015). Collectives have the potential to empower women beyond their economic endeavours to include social and

political empowerment. This section discusses the various ways women collectives can empower their members economically, socially and politically.

## Social empowerment

Apart from their economic potential, cooperatives offer socio-physiological benefits to members including a sense of community belongingness and security and a sense of importance in the local organization (Ferguson & Kepe, 2011). Cooperatives provide a conducive setting for collective problem-solving and articulation of basic needs (Sanyang & Huang, 2008). Social empowerment can be understood as the “ability to exert control over decision-making within the household. Measures included women's mobility or freedom of movement, freedom from violence, negotiations and discussion around sex, women's control over choosing a spouse, women's control over age at marriage, women's control over family size decision making, and women's access to education” (Brody et al., 2015: 19).

The Manyakabi Area Cooperative Enterprise represents one example of how gendered power structures are changing, and the cooperatives can facilitate social development (Ferguson & Kepe, 2011). For instance, through membership and participation in the Manyakabi Area Cooperative Enterprise of Uganda, women have become more independent and gained leadership and business skills, these newly acquire capacities have enhanced their coping strategies broadly (Ferguson & Kepe, 2011). Consequentially, these intangible social benefits have empowered women in the Mbarara and Isingiro areas, and increased their ability to withstand challenges related their livelihoods and poverty through group solidarity and problem solving (Ferguson & Kepe, 2011).

Cooperatives serve as a platform for gathering, interactions and socialization. Thaker et al. (2020) reported that the Milk Cooperative society in Gujarat state of India eliminated unnecessary misunderstandings and facilitated conflict resolution among members as they interacted and became more familiar. Also, through the activities of the cooperation , women interacted with numerous stakeholders, including government, thus boosting their self-confidence, freedom of speech, mobility and decision-making power both at home and in the community (Thaker et al., 2020). Also, cooperatives can serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge and skills which foster local community knowledge and health (Thaker et al., 2020). For instance, the Manzanas and Doni cooperative members in Mexico learned to preserve numerous herbal plants from local older women with immense indigenous/local botanical knowledge (Thaker et al., 2020). Statements from members of the Mananzas and Milpa

Maguey cooperatives illustrate some of the socio-cultural functions of women collectives;

*We did not know how many plants we have, their uses and how to prepare them. We have learned how to cure ourselves with our own plants at home. (Member, Manzans) (Thaker et al., 2020)*

*We must learn from our members. It might be something in the members' life from which we can learn to solve a problem. We realise our value as a woman and appreciate our way of life. These help us solve our conflicts. (Member, Milpa Maguey) (Thaker et al., 2020)*

Collectively, these women decided to enter agricultural ventures, enabling them to improve their livelihoods as female farmers to reduce their socio-economic vulnerability. Their goal was to establish improved incomes independently of men. Consequently, they decided to engage in agricultural ventures in which men do not traditionally participate but where there is potential for high earnings. After unsuccessful attempts at entering various enterprises, including various fruit and vegetable sales, the cooperative management became interested in making bulk sales of beans and maize to the World Food Programme (WFP). This is now one of the cooperative's most lucrative ventures for its predominantly female membership, with approximately 10 to 15 farmers from each of the farmers' groups belonging to the cooperative participating in this venture (Ferguson & Kepe, 2011). In addition to the economic benefits that arise from participation in the cooperative's income-generating enterprises, the cooperative play broader social roles within the community. Leaders organize the members and disseminate information throughout the community. This focus on information dissemination contributes towards community development projects at large – such as projects in education, health and hygiene, and savings/investments – and enhances agricultural productivity. Through participation in the cooperative, women have developed greater independence and status; have gained leadership and business skills and argue that they have improved their coping strategies in general. These intangible benefits have empowered female farmers in Mbarara and Isingiro, allowing them to better withstand challenges relating to livelihoods and poverty. Women have also developed business creativity and coping mechanisms that help them to respond to challenges and capitalize on new beneficial arrangements, which, in turn, often result in tremendous economic success (Ferguson & Kepe, 2011).

## Political/leadership empowerment

Brody et al. (2015: 19) describe political empowerment “as the ability to participate in decision-making focused on access to resources, rights, and entitlements within communities. It could be measured using indicators such as awareness of rights or laws, political participation such as voting, the ability to own land legally, the ability to inherit property legally, and the ability to gain leadership positions in the government.”

Collectives can serve as a seedbed for fostering women's political empowerment and enhancing their leadership capacities (Singh et al., 2018). For instance, the participation and experience of members in the management and governance of the affairs of cooperatives in Rajasthan enabled women to learn the art of administering political institutions (Singh et al., 2018). Also, through the women's participation in discussions and cooperative training sessions, they may develop essential leadership skills such as speaking out on political accountability (Brody et al., 2015). For instance, nearly 80% of women in mixed and women-only cooperatives were comfortable speaking up in groups with the presence of men compared to only 48% of non-members, as such cooperatives tend to offer a conducive environment. Moreso, Dohmwirth & Hanisch, (2018) found that women of a diary cooperation participated in trainings, had leadership positions in the cooperative and were more likely to engage in leadership activities outside the cooperatives compared to non-member women. Participation in social activities of SHG can also expose women to their rights and give them political capital through networking (Brody et al., 2015). Women who participated in the local government indicated that their prior participation in SHG served as the foundation for their leadership positions in the government (Brody et al., 2015; Knowles, 2014). Another example of collectives serving as agents of political empowerment is SEWA. SEWA organized mostly poor, self-employed women to make them self-confident self-reliant, and prepare them for leadership positions in the community and household. (Datta, 2003)

## Economic empowerment

Brody et al. (2015: 19) describe women economic empowerment “as the ability of women to access, own, and control resources. It could be measured in a variety of ways, using outcome indicators such as income generation by women, female ownership of assets and land, expenditure patterns, degree of women participation in paid employment, division of domestic labor across men and women, and control over financial decision making by women.”

Cooperatives are crucial in the economic empowerment of women in the Global South through increased production and profits; access to productive resources; and control over income.

## Increased production and profits

One of the economic benefits of collectives is providing a platform for landless poor women to increase their production and technical efficiency and generate profits from the agrifood industry (Ma et al., 2023; Tesfay & Tadele, 2013). The study of Indian dairy cooperation with women majority indicated that members produced and sold more milk per day compared to non-members. Additionally, the number of cattle kept and owned by members were significantly larger than non-members (Dohmwirth & Hanisch, 2018). This indicates that members of the cooperatives attained a higher productivity per animal, with an increase in dairy income (Dohmwirth & Hanisch, 2018; Tesfay & Tadele, 2013). Women's animal and milk productivity were even more pronounced in women-only cooperatives that produced more efficiently than non-members (Dohmwirth & Hanisch, 2018). Another key example is SEWA, which helped women make profits by producing and selling their products and services at competitive markets (Datta, 2003). In some instances, cooperatives enhanced the collective bargaining power of women who were able to sell their produce at higher prices than they would have without the cooperatives (Datta, 2003). Tesfay & Tadele (2023) also found that membership of the Multipurpose Cooperative Societies in South-Eastern Zone of Tigray, Ethiopia increased members crop production by 2.28 quintals. The increased productivity of observed among women cooperative members can be attributed to the increased supply of the necessary productive resources to members (Tefay & Tadele, 2013).

## Increased access to resources

In AFS, access to productive resources is crucial in increasing production and profit margins, and women in the Global South usually lack access to these productive resources due to structural and systemic gender norms (Kansanga et al., 2019; Mohammed et al., 2022; Nyantakyi-Frimpong, 2020). Therefore, one of the primary motives of women collectivizing is to facilitate their access to the productive resources such as capital, land, information and networks required to make livable incomes from their livelihoods (Ghatak et al., 2023; Hossain et al., 2020). For instance, women in the Indian dairy cooperatives had better access to and higher control

over credits compared to non-members. About 90% of the cooperative members had access to at least one loan compared to 66% of non-members (Dohmwirth & Hanisch, 2018). The higher access to credit by cooperative members is attributed to the presence of women's microcredit SHGs in the communities where dairy cooperatives are located. Moreover, women perceive that they have more control over credit acquired through SHG than those from banks (Dohmwirth & Hanisch, 2018). Women collectives such as SHG can also promote the adoption of technologies which increase productivity (Ma et al., 2023). Collectives in the AFS can influence the behaviour of members' technology adoption by serving them with various market and technology-related information as well as guiding them to efficiently apply these technologies (Ma et al., 2023). A similar finding is reported by Faysse et al., (2012) where about 65% of members of the dairy cooperative in Morocco reported that through participation in the cooperative, they introduced innovative dairy production methods such as new concretes in feeding cattle, milking machines and building new cowsheds.

## Increased control over income and resources

Women collectives promote higher decision-making over productive economic resources as well as decisions over their incomes (Abdulahi et al., 2015; Ma et al., 2023). Membership of in cooperatives is acknowledged to increase revenues among women. Women's income increased about 50% in the Osun State of Nigeria after joining cooperative societies (Abdulahi et al., 2015). Dohmwirth & Hanisch (2018) found that women in cooperatives had a decision-making score of 66%, indicating higher levels of control over their household incomes than non-members, with a decision-making score of only 15%. Women collectives strive to ensure their members have income, food and social security. As such, they develop employment opportunities for members by helping shape them into producers of goods and services, owners, consumers, and managers (Datta, 2003). Similarly, SEWA has facilitated rural womens' income generation activities in AFS for mostly self-employed women who have no control over capital and other productive resources and little to no economic security (Datta, 2003; Ghatak et al., 2023). As part of the cooperatives mandate, they train women to aim for higher incomes/wages and interact with socio-economic structure with self-respect and dignity (Datta, 2003).

# Women's participation in collectives: Mediating factors

Several mediating factors affect the participation of women in collectives. Broadly, these factors can be categorized into social, economic and cultural factors that influence women's decision and ability to participate in collectives in the AFS.

## Socio-cultural mediating factors

Social norms related to appropriate social contact can influence the participation of women in collectives by skewing the participation requirements in favour of men especially in a patriarchal context (Meier zu Selhausen, 2016; Mudege et al., 2015). For instance, (2015) found that when men were the founding members of mixed collectives, social norms and rules limited their interactions with women in the community, especially married women (e.g., they could not approach them without their husbands' consent). Although these groups were considered gender inclusive, these social norms limited the information about the collective to mainly men and hindered women's participation. However, single and widowed women were more likely to join the potato farmers group of Malawi because of the absence of men (Mudege et al., 2015).

Also, socio-economic status of individuals can mediate their membership and participation in cooperatives. For instance, people who have held community, official or traditional positions and their relatives are more likely members of cooperatives (Woldu & Tadesse, 2015). Other individual demographic characteristics such as age, education, family size and household role can significantly affect cooperatives' membership (Woldu & Tadesse, 2015). Women who were heads of their households were more likely to be members of cooperatives because they have more freedom to make decisions including joining collectives than women who do not have such freedoms (Woldu & Tadesse, 2015). Moreover, some male members of potato collectives objected to their wives joining the group because of the firm belief that men are the heads of households and should represent their households to interact with external agencies (Woldu & Tadesse, 2015).

Some cultural beliefs of people can facilitate or hinder collectivization among women. In Dedza Malawi, it was believed

that women are more trustworthy than men and willing to work together in collectives for their common good (Mudege et al., 2015). Also, In Dedza-Malawi where uxori-local matrilineal marriages are practiced, women noted that men hesitated to join agricultural cooperatives or invest in their marital homes. As such, women felt it was their duty to join collectives to improve the living standards of their households (Mudege et al., 2015). While the entrenched social norms that restrict women from joining and participating in collectives are sometimes challenged, they still influence the behaviour of women. In Mozambique, married women have less freedom to engage in activities outside the households and in many cases, cannot participate in cooperatives without the approval of their spouses (Gotschi et al., 2009).

## Economic mediating factors

One of the primary motivations for women joining collectives is economic improvements. Collectivization provides an avenue to facilitate member access to productive economic resources such as land, capital and information (Alarcón & Sato, 2019; Woldu & Tadesse, 2015). In Mexico, conditions including the long absence of and irregular remittances from emigrant husbands, lack of household revenue, better incomes from collectives cooperative wage better than other wages such as selling tamales, and infrastructural supported by governmental and NGO funding facilitated the acceptance of cooperative among communities (Alarcón & Sato, 2019). The economic motives of joining cooperatives are exemplified in statements of the Milpa Maguey and Manzanitas Cooperatives of Mexico;

*At first we asked for help from our husbands. One had a position in the ejido<sup>1</sup> and we needed land to build our shop. The husband was the chair of the board and he convinced the other members to give us a part of the collective land. (Member, Milpa Maguey).*

*When the municipality gave us the money to build the cooperative, our husbands helped us by convincing the townspeople to donate the collective land for this project. (Member, Manzanitas) (Alarcón & Sato, 2019).*

In the case illustrated, the primary motive for women deciding to collectivize was to get access to land, which they otherwise would not get access to as individuals. Solomon (2023) also explored the reasons for women's higher participation in SHG and found that women indicated that they had access to thrift loans without collateral security. Some of the women interviewed indicated that:

<sup>1</sup> Ejido is a collective land, result of agrarian reform since the Mexican revolution and still in force.



*We have a strong bond among us. Therefore, our group members are ready to give thrift loans without collateral security. (Solomon, 2023)*

*We encourage the members to start enterprises as an income generation activity. We never miss attendance in our weekly meetings. Men could not attend the regular meetings because of their fishing activity at different times. We encourage the members to repay the loan amount on time. Therefore, the government is ready to give more loans to us" (Fish Vendor and PCSM member) (Solomon, 2023)*

Further, Meier zu Selhausen (2016) found that the land sizes of female farmers correlated significantly with their probability of joining cooperatives and that one additional increase in acre of land owned by women increases their probability of membership by 30%. The lack of ownership of land also undermines women’s self-confidence and economic empowerment which retards their ability to take up leadership positions within cooperatives (Kaaria et al., 2016).

## Enabling ecosystems for the collectivization of women

An enabling ecosystem is required to facilitate women's effective and efficient collectivization. According to Duguid & Weber

(2019), there are various elements needed for economic empowerment of collectivized women. These factors include; women the freedom and ability to collective; a facilitating process for collectivizing women and the collective itself; and fostering women economic empowerment through enhanced access to needed resources and agency. The major components that can create a suitable ecosystem for the collectivization of women include the community context and laws, rules and regulations (Duguid & Weber, 2019).

The community context comprises the socio-cultural and religious norms that guides the lives of people and inherently affects the collectivization of women. Such norms can either favor the collectivization of women or deter participation in collectives and as such varies geographically (Duguid & Weber, 2019). Moreover, policies, laws and regulation of national, regional and local governments affect formation, success and sustainability of collectives and collective action (Duguid & Weber, 2019). For example, the presence of equity and gender-based laws at the national level (e.g., pertaining to access to agrifood resources and sale of agrifood products) may facilitate the collectivization of women. Figure 2 below shows the interactions among community socio-cultural/religious norms and laws to create an enabling ecosystem for the thriving of women collectives.

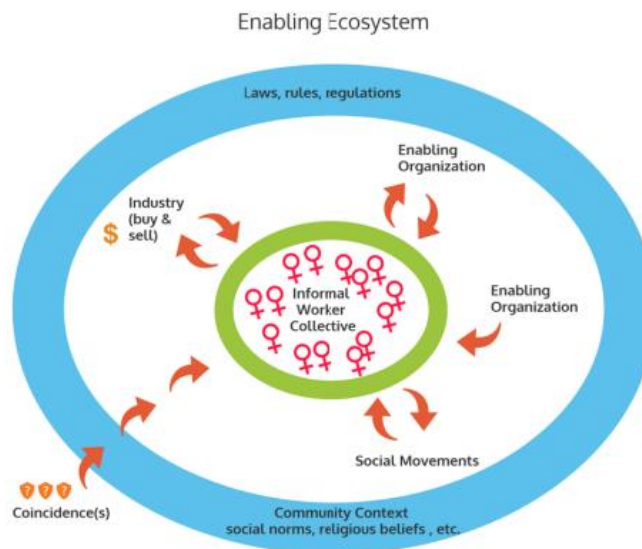


Figure 2: Enabling ecosystem for women collectivization.

Source: Duguid & Weber (2019)

## Women and collective action, agency and empowerment

Collective action is described as ‘action taken by a group (either directly or on its behalf through an organisation) in pursuit of members’ perceived shared interests’ (Faysse et al., 2012; Marshall & Scott, 1998). Thus, women collectives are not synonymous to collective action but are vehicles of collective action. The non-profit based practices principle of collectives affords members mutual support and strengthens their self-esteem (Alarcón & Sato, 2019). Collective action is closely related to collection empowerment, which describes a situation where ‘individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than they could have had alone’ (Rowlands, 1997).

Through collective action, women can harness their collective power and numbers to improve their bargaining position and become more competitive in domestic and international markets in the agrifood value chain (zu Selhausen, 2016). Markets in the agrifood value chain can be exploitative for individual women, with often poor bargaining power in male-dominated sectors, limiting their economic growth. However, women collectives gain much more bargaining power as a group to improve access to markets and negotiate better prices for their goods and services. By coming together and joining forces with others, women are offered the economic, social and political leverage they need to enable them to reap a greater share of the profits in agricultural value chains (Mudege et al., 2015). Collective action facilitates women’s access to productive resources such as pooled capital, investments and expertise that is crucial for scaling up their enterprises in the AFS (zu Selhausen, 2016; Mudege et al., 2015). For instance, through the collective action initiatives of agro and food processing cooperatives, smallholder farmers particularly women pooled their resources together to acquire machinery to transition from the less lucrative primary agricultural production to more lucrative ventures in the agrifood processing sector (Sanyang & Huang, 2008). Another successful outcomes of collective action in empowering women in the agrifood sector, specifically in shea butter processing and trade in Mali is indicated here by a participant in a study conducted by (Baden, 2013).

*I thought that if the women in my village were able to come together in a single development organisation, they would contribute to establishing social peace in the village and be better respected by their husbands and by men in general in the village. In 2005 we*

*then created the ‘U pa u yè lo’ Women’s Association (Let us unite to take care of ourselves) which later became the multifunctional co-operative ‘U yè lo’ (Let us take care of ourselves) ... Finally, I did some thinking, and I realised that until now the only economic resource that has been the exclusive preserve of women in Minyanka Footnote1 society was Shea butter. The training and information I received confirmed that the improved butter was economically more profitable. So I mobilised members of the co-operative to be trained in the production of Shea butter. Today all the women in the co-operative who produce Shea butter say they derive significant income from this. (Oxfam women’s collective action (WCA) individual interview, Kaniko village, Mali, during fieldwork in Koutiala district, 6–12 June 2012) (Baden, 2013)*

Baden, (2013) indicates that the collectivization of women in the agrifood sector has made women visible economic actors through producing and selling improved Shea butter and other high-value Shea products. Consequently, women have increased their contributions to household incomes amid a decrease in the economic viability of other primary agricultural activities such as cotton-growing in the Koutiala area of Mali (Baden, 2013). Aggregating and pooling individual resources and efforts by collectives in the agrifood market usually promises greater market reach, negotiation power and economies of scale. However, achieving these requires high levels of trust among members, and collectives can serve as vehicles of trust by building on social networks and community capital (Baden, 2013).

The collective action potential of women collectives may even extend beyond the economic empowerment to more socio-cultural changes. Baden (2013) noted that through the collective efforts of women, men in Kaniko, Mali, were more willing to attribute 2-3 hectares of land for shea production and also plant trees in their farms to support women shea processing cooperatives. Through collective action, women collectives had an increased likelihood of controlling incomes from the sale of Shea butter, honey, or vegetables (Baden, 2013). For example, Azmina Omari, a member of the Gare Horticultural co-operative in Tanzania, indicated that:

*You just tell your husband the profit you made from the business but you don’t give him the money. (WCA interview, Gare ward, Lushoto, Tanzania, 6 March 2012) (Baden, 2013)*

Women’s increasing control of household income can potentially lead to a shift to more joint decision-making arrangements in settings where men traditionally are the sole decision-makers in the household. In Mali, the importance of women’s income within the household was increasingly recognized, especially in the context of declining men’s income from cotton production in the Koutiala



Circle of Sikasso (Baden, 2013), leading to the involvement and consultation of women in vital household decisions.

## Challenges of collectives in empowering women

Women collectives are undoubtedly vehicles of collective action and women empowerment and have been widely employed to improve women's livelihoods, especially in the Global South. However, women collectives may still face some challenges in empowering women. Some of these challenges include; inadequate market information, poor transportation, product quality, inadequate skills and structural and cultural gender constraints.

Women collectivize to gain access to vital resources such as information about new technology and access to agrifood markets and infrastructure. However, inadequate access to information is still one of the key challenges that women in collectives face. The disparities in women's access to agrifood market information may be exacerbated in mixed collectives. In rural Sub-Saharan Africa, women are less likely to be educated and/or have a good understanding of the national language which is usually different from local dialects (Njobe & Kaaria, 2015). In national cooperatives, where the primary language for disseminating information may be in the national language, women may be more likely to miss out on crucial information. Also, poor transportation networks are a key challenge to accessing agrifood markets, especially in rural communities. Improved access to new and international markets is often accompanied by set standards of product quality. The agrifood market has become competitive with consumers demanding for high-quality produce. Women collectives' inadequate access to productive resources such as machinery and expertise may hinder their ability to meet such quality standards and attract higher prices (Chatzitheodoridis et al., 2017). Also, poor road networks, infrastructure, and delivery delays may lead to a decline in product quality, especially with perishable goods such as vegetables (Aliyi et al., 2021; Msosa, 2022).

In collectives, the position or role of women may also pose a challenge to their true empowerment if they are not part of the decision-making process. Exclusion of women from the decision-making process will deny them the right to voice their needs and negotiate their improved access to the agrifood market (Wafae & Sara, 2021). Women may not be empowered in collectives if their roles, responsibilities and position in the group do not allow them to benefit from a level of self-determination and governance (Mohammed et al., 2022; Wafae & Sara, 2021). In the absence of the full and effective participation of women in the decision-making process of collectives, the distribution of resources needed

for women's economic empowerment may be skewed to only men since women have no say in allocating these resources.

Structural and cultural constraints also limit women's participation in collectives and empowerment. Often, men are the custodians of household assets which are often reflected through traditions and sometimes law (Msosa, 2022). Women face daily socio-cultural restrictions, effectively limiting their opportunities to benefit from collectives in the agrifood system. Also, cultural barriers stretch beyond social jurisdictions and sometimes take the form of legislative prohibitions that institutionalize the subordination of women's rights and interests (Msosa, 2022). Moreover, entrenched religious and socio-cultural obstacles can impede women from commuting to distant marketplaces and negotiating prices with men, thwarting their engagement in more profitable and empowering sections of the agrifood chain (Msosa, 2022). Also, women may be constrained by time in the marketing and sale of their produce. For example, some rural markets operate from 4 to 8 pm, the period when women are usually engaged in gendered household responsibilities such as cooking and childcare (Msosa, 2022).

Collectives are seen as vehicles for women empowerment and as such, there are usually high expectations in improving the livelihoods of their members through increased access to productive resources, poverty eradication and broader socio-economic developments in communities. While collectives have the potential to achieve these outcomes, these are usually very difficult to achieve. Consequently, women collectives may overburden themselves with infrastructural and socioeconomic changes to empower women while downplaying the responsibility of governments in ensuring and protecting women's basic rights (Finnis, 2017). For example, issues of ensuring access to a good road network and infrastructure for the efficient transportation of good is the responsibility.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This review broadly explores the types of collectives and the spectrum of formality within which the categories of women collectivization fall. Women cooperatives and unions in the AFS mainly lean towards the high formality spectrum of collectives, with Self-Help Groups leaning toward the more informal spectrum. The level of formality of collectives is vital in determining women's willingness to participate and the benefits they derive from their membership. For instance, women collectives within the high formal spectrum such as trade unions and cooperatives, are usually larger in size and have more bargaining power and resources to

access international and larger markets for their members. However, individual and more local and informal collectivization of women, such as SHGs, are often more tailored to build strong solidarity among members, collective action and empowerment in local communities. Consequentially, women are more likely to be members of informal SHGs than more formal collectives because of the grassroots benefits such informal groups offer. However, informal collectives may often be limited in resources such as capital mobilization and access to international markets.

In most collectives, the government structure is centred on collective ownership, where the right to ownership of the group is grounded in membership as opposed to capital, creating a strong bond with members through the internalization of a sense of belongingness and ownership of the group and resources. For the effective collectivization of women, there needs to be an enabling ecosystem consisting of formal laws, rules and regulations as well as informal social norms, customs and religious beliefs that support women's collectivization. Aside from elements of the enabling environment, socio-cultural and economic factors also affect women's ability and willingness to join collectives. Despite the role of collectives in women empowerment, there remain challenges that hinder collectives as a means of women empowerment. These challenges include; inadequate access to productive resources, especially with more informal collectives, the lack of full and effective participation of women in collective decision-making, structural and cultural gender constraints, and the overburden of

collectives with women empowerment with neglect of the role of governments.

Sustained efforts are needed to improve women's participation in collectives and to harness collective action to improve women's economic and socio-cultural livelihoods in the Global South. Since women are more likely to join informal Self-Help Groups that are often under-resourced, government policies and initiatives should specifically target local groups to support them with resources (e.g., Agri-processing expertise, access to markets, transport infrastructure) and create an enabling agrifood ecosystem that allows for more women to join these collectives and leverage on these resources. This will also help elevate the economic conditions of the more vulnerable and often landless women since they are more likely to participate in these highly informal collectives. Also, there is needed for community initiatives to demystify specific structural and cultural barriers that still hinder women's effective participation in collectives. There can also be financial and non-financial incentives for vulnerable women to join collectives. Certain monetary requirements for membership of collectives can be discounted or waived considering the intersectional vulnerability of women. For example, a landless widow living alone may not be required to commit financially to join the collectives. Non-financial incentives may also include encouraging vulnerable households (e.g., husbands and mothers) to allow and motivate their family members, such as spouses and daughters-in-law, to join and participate in collectives (Brody et al., 2015).

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