

# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: NEGOTIATING GENDER NORMS IN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT IN RWANDA

## Introduction

In its 2010 Gender Strategy, the Government of Rwanda (GoR) notes: *“Rwandan society is characterized by a patriarchal social structure that underlies the unequal social power relations between men and women, boys, and girls. This has translated into men’s dominance and women’s subordination. Gender inequalities have not been seen as unjust, but as respected social normality.”* In agriculture, these generalized inequalities translate into poor agricultural performance. The GoR recognizes that modernizing the entire sector depends on challenging men’s role as lead decision-makers and empowering women (National Gender Strategy, 2010).

At the policy level, the GoR has made strong commitments towards achieving gender equity and equality. Gender equality is enshrined in the 2003 Constitution. This established a quota for women in decision-making organs of at least 30 percent. The legal position of women vis-à-vis men has been considerably improved by new laws on matrimonial rights (1999), gender-based violence (2008), and women’s legal right to land (2005). The Land Tenure Regularization (LTR) program, for instance, which aimed to register land titles of all landowners in the country, included married women’s name on land titles together with their husbands’ (Santos *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the government has made considerable effort to mainstream gender in all sectors, which includes raising awareness about gender and women’s rights among civil servants on national and local levels, and among the general population. It is yet unclear, though, to what extent this is providing openings for challenging gender norms in rural agricultural settings.

In this resource, we discuss a case-study conducted in one sector in Eastern Rwanda which we will refer with the fictional name Nyamihingo. We show **that, despite**



Photo: S. Quinn/CIP.

## broader institutional changes, men's and women's roles and relations in relation to farming, and the gender norms governing them, are changing in piecemeal ways.

This resource is for research and development practitioners working in agriculture and rural development in Rwanda. The objective is to provide information about the ways in which gender norms in Eastern Rwanda are changing, and which ones remain persistent. This is expected to promote and facilitate gender-responsive and transformative approaches to agricultural research and development.

The resource is based on findings from the GENNOVATE<sup>1</sup> project, a global comparative research initiative that addresses the question of how gender norms and agency influence men, women, and youth to adopt innovation in agriculture and natural resource management. In the study area, one community profile, six single-sex Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and eight interviews were conducted with men and women.

## Background and context

Rwanda is home to three different ethnic groups, the Twa (1 percent), Tutsi (16 percent), and Hutu (83 percent), who all speak Kinyarwanda (Adekunle, 2007). Ethnic and political conflict between Tutsi and Hutu has marked the contemporary history of Rwanda and the larger Great Lakes region to an enormous extent, including violent clashes between 1959 and 1961, and more recently in the 1990s, peaking in 1994 with the genocide against the Tutsi, with an estimated half to one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu killed, and a quarter to half a million women raped (Chretien, 2003; van Reybrouck, 2010). After the genocide, women formed up to 70 percent of the population because of the targeted killing of men during the genocide, and were at the forefront of rebuilding the country.

The case study was conducted in a sector in Kayonza district in Eastern Rwanda, an area which borders Tanzania. The district's poverty scores are average compared to other districts in Rwanda; forty-three percent of its population are considered "poor" (NISR, 2011). Farming is the main occupation in the district with 71 percent of the population above 16 years old identifying as "independent farmers" and six percent as "wage farmers" (casual laborers) (ibid). Trade is the second most important occupation with 10 percent of the population involved. The mean size of land cultivated per household is 0.82 ha, with 22 percent of households in the eastern district cultivating less than 0.3 ha. Main crops are banana (cooking), maize, beans, sorghum, sweet potato,

cassava, and vegetables. Commercialization of crops (share of total harvest sold) is 27 percent on average, which is similar to other districts. One in four households are headed by a woman and a further five percent of households are classified as "de-facto female-headed households," which means the husband is ordinarily absent. One in two households in the district was affected by the 2011 Land Tenure Regularization program (NISR, 2011) that aims to register land titles of all landowners in the country and secure the land rights of women.

## Gender norms

Gender norms are unwritten social "rules" which influence women's and men's roles and behavior. These norms can promote or limit the ability of women and men to maximize opportunities related to agricultural production, commercialization, and innovation. Gender norms are typically intertwined with tradition and concepts of culture. Gender norms are not static; they are dynamic and change, sometimes rapidly, over time. Sometimes actual practices seem to diverge from the dominant gender norm. This can be triggered by a variety of factors, including new technologies and ideas, which can provide new opportunities, or create more stringent constraints. When divergence from a dominant norm takes hold it can lead to normative change. In agriculture, gender norms influence the way farming is done; similarly, agricultural innovation also influences gender norms.

## 1. Traditional gender norms and actual practice in the domestic, social, and agricultural spheres

### 1.1. Between tradition and transformation: Gender norms in the home

The findings show that norms are changing, but at different rates. The implications for women's decision-making power in the home are generally positive, though challenges remain.

The cornerstone of gender inequality at the household level between husband and wife is the traditional status of men as "head" of their household, to which the wife and children are expected to demonstrate obedience. Respondents, both women and men, emphasized that the ideal husband and

<sup>1</sup> GENNOVATE, or "Enabling Gender Equality in Agricultural and Environmental Innovation," is a qualitative, comparative, and collaborative research initiative on gender norms, agency, and agricultural innovation involving 137 case studies across 26 countries and drawing on the voices and lived experiences of over 7,500 rural women, men, and youth of different socioeconomic levels. For more information, including on methodology and sampling, see, the GENNOVATE website, [gennovate.org](http://gennovate.org), and Petesch *et al.* (2018).

household head is a man who provides for his family. He has the financial means to ensure good healthcare and education for everyone. He is self-sacrificing and a role model to others. Because of his responsibilities, men are expected to be the main decision-maker with regards to household spending and how to manage the farm and other household enterprises. Men, partly due to their roles and responsibilities, are able to move freely in and outside of the community. A man does not expect his wife to ask him about his encounters and how he spends his time. He is free to meet up with other men in a bar or at other public places, for example, *“A husband can go to the café to have a drink while his wife prepares dinner at home; the contrary, however, is quite impossible,”* as a man from the poor FGD puts it. A man is also free to “discipline” his wife.

Gender-based violence is common: a poor woman commented that:

*“According to our culture, a woman who was not beaten was not a woman.”*

This norm of the ideal husband has not changed significantly over the past decade, though there are some changes.

Normative expectations are very different for women, and they are changing much more rapidly than norms for men. Ten years ago women still “belonged” in the house and were not involved in paid economic activities. Women were expected to take care of children and conduct household work such as washing, cleaning, and food preparation. Even in very poor, food-insecure households, women would work as casual laborers on other people’s farms only in secret and when their husbands were away from home, because their husbands would not openly accept their wives working for money. There was a strong tendency to consider women who moved outside their own household’s compound and fields as behaving inappropriately and as sexually promiscuous. A poor woman

respondent recalled how women themselves internalized these norms:

*The woman was tied to her house, and going outside her house was considered in her mind like being a prostitute.*

According to gender norms, women were not expected to go out to seek leisure or company, and they required their husband’s consent before leaving the home. Respondents, both women and men, reflect that women’s mobility today is still largely controlled by husbands, in particular due to a fear of their wives having affairs with other men. However, things are changing, though slowly. Around two

thirds of young men respondents consider that women must inform their husbands when they want to go out, but a third disagreed.

When men engage in extra-marital affairs this is not seen as a significant concern as illustrated by a man from the poor FGD, *“A man can go live with another woman and then return again to his wife without much shame, but for a woman who leaves to live with another man, this is not so easy!”*

In the past, and today, young married women complain about restrictions on their mobility, though in general young women appear to experience more mobility than the same age group a decade ago. Furthermore, as women grow older their freedom of mobility also increases.



Vendors sell potatoes and bananas in a marketplace, Musanze, Rwanda. Photo: Ian Masias/IFPRI.

## 1.2. The implications of changing norms for women's decision making

Women and men in Nyamyhingó agree that although men remain household heads and primary decision-makers according to traditional norms, women today are much more likely to participate actively in decision making. In the poor women's FGD, they say, for instance, that a good husband "gives his wife a chance to have a word."

After the genocide in 1994, large numbers of men were imprisoned for many years, leaving their wives to fend for themselves. During this period women became key providers and decision-makers in the home and on the farm. When men returned it was not possible to push women back into their former acquiescent roles. Women expected to be consulted. Furthermore, gender-based violence reduced considerably. This trend is noted in national statistics and confirmed in the local context of Nyamyhingó by both men and women. Women remarked that now "there is a law protecting women against domestic violence and a husband is afraid to beat his wife." Beyond fear of the law, many men respondents have come to understand that beating their wives causes harm not only to women but to children and the household in general.

Furthermore, women are increasingly gaining the freedom to move around freely and to participate in community activities such as village meetings and agricultural training events. Women are now more likely to engage in village life beyond their own compound, and men are more likely to accept this. When women were asked why previously restrictive norms around women's mobility have changed in such a short time, they argued that the Government of Rwanda and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) have played an important role. Women's empowerment policies, strategies, projects, and training courses have raised the awareness of both men and women about gender, and have increased women's self-confidence.



Farmer from Cyuve district. Photo: Stephanie Malyon/CIATInternational.

Women study participants reported gaining more autonomy with respect to decision making around expenditures. They can make small purchases on their own though they are expected to inform, or get consent, from their husband before making larger purchases. It remains a norm that men are not expected to discuss their own expenditure decisions with women, although in reality many men are increasingly doing so.

## 1.3. Between tradition and transformation: Gender norms in the field

Men, in their function as household heads, are still considered the primary managers of land. A wife is usually assigned some land by her

husband in order to produce food crops for household use. In addition, a wife is expected to assist her husband on "family" land with almost all aspects of crop management, including laborious tasks such as weeding that are female-dominated. Although women work on the family plot, men do not work with women on the women's plot. Here, women conduct all necessary practices themselves. Women's access to inputs such as fertilizer and seed is typically via their husband.

Both men and women respondents highlight the gendered nature of specific crops. Banana (*Musa spp.*, cooking, and brewing types) is considered exclusively a man's crop, and beans are generally considered a woman's crop—as are most other food

crops for household consumption. Banana is a dual-use crop: it is consumed at home but also sold, predominantly by men, and the income derived belongs entirely to men. This is despite the fact that women provide significant labor to banana production, for example in weeding. However, women are overall less involved in banana production than men. Some crops are managed by both women and men. Participants in the middle-class women's focus group say for instance that *"when we plant maize, children eat fresh maize; we make flour, we sell at the market, and we use milling machines,"* while participants in the young men's group state that *"maize is profitable and easy to sell."* In addition to beans and maize, vegetables are important crops for women. Vegetables are typically grown at the homestead and therefore simpler for women to combine with household chores.

Women's crops are generally grown without any external inputs and thus experience low productivity. According to women and men study participants in Nyamyhing, the normative rationale for this, and more broadly for women's lack of engagement in commercial crops, is, on one hand, that women's key responsibility is to satisfy the food requirements of the household, and on the other, that since men manage money, women do not need to. It is up to men to ensure that the household has everything it requires.

However, changes in women's economic roles and responsibilities are challenging these norms. It is becoming more common for women to sell part of their produce and to experience some economic independence from their husband. In most households, it is now common for a woman to earn a small income through engaging in petty trade, sales of food crop surpluses, and casual farm labor. It has also become easier for women to receive or access agricultural inputs directly, from nonprofit organizations or agro-dealers. This is facilitated by the increased presence of savings and credit organizations in the area. Over time, women may be able to start investing in strengthening the productivity of their crops as well, and

to engage more strongly with cash cropping. Gender norms are most resistant when it comes to banana. Women can sometimes harvest a banana bunch for household consumption, but they cannot harvest banana to sell at the market or to make banana-beer. Banana is portrayed as a security crop to men as well: *"When the man looks at banana in the field he sees the household is safe both in terms of money and food"* (middle-class women's FGD).

Men are also engaged in tree planting to help control erosion and to generate timber for their own use and sale. Timber is associated with men because timber is used for both house construction and charcoal production, which are considered male responsibilities. Also, timber is important for income generation. Finally, the association between trees and land is significant. The planting of trees implies land ownership. Since men are considered land owners, it is therefore their responsibility to plant trees and in so doing manage erosion as well.

## 2. Implications of the findings for AR4D, rural advisory services, and other development partners

Gender norms continue to stipulate that men are household heads and key decision-makers in the study area. However, men are no longer sole decision-makers in many homes; women are consulted and can influence expenditure decisions. Unlike a few years ago, women are now generating their own income, through selling crops and as paid laborers. Women's mobility has increased and gender-based violence has decreased. Despite these changes, male control over land, trees, and banana remains almost absolute. Women remain primarily subsistence farmers regardless of their desire to generate more money.

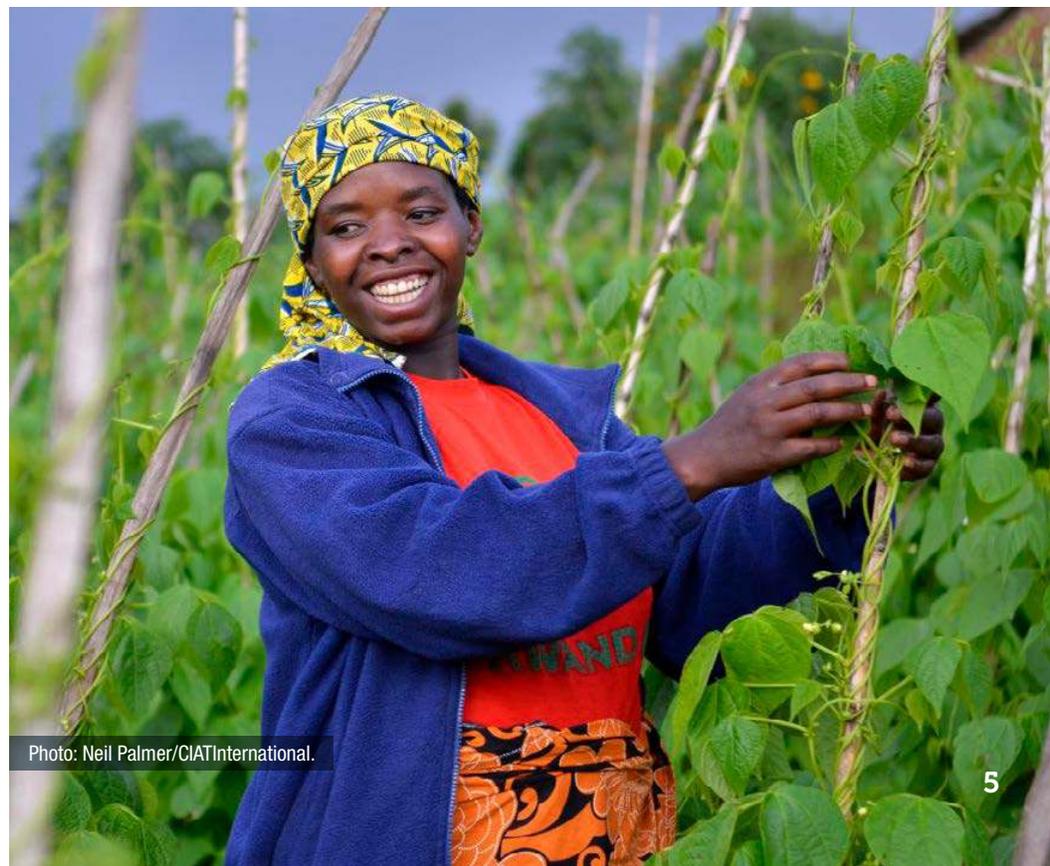


Photo: Neil Palmer/CIATInternational.

This case study shows that gender norms in Nyamyhingo are complex, contradictory, and changing with different understandings co-existing at the same time. Government policies and strategies aiming to strengthen and legally protect women's position in relation to ownership, domestic violence, and promoting women's active participation in politics and management have been important for changing perceptions about appropriate behavior for women and men. The presence of NGOs and CSOs has been significant in contributing to changes

in normative expectations and to strengthening the case for women's empowerment. But despite these efforts, the changes are yet to arrive at desired outcomes such as gender equality indirectly, or linked outcomes such as higher agricultural productivity and increased commercialization of crops.

AR4D in Rwanda would benefit from explicitly focusing on examples where the aforementioned policies and efforts led to changes in gender norms and to increased productivity and/or increased commercialization.

## 2.1. Concrete lessons

This case study has specific relevance for work in Eastern Rwanda, but the implications of the findings are of interest to AR4D and rural agricultural services more broadly. Worldwide, communities are changing in response to multiple challenges and opportunities and Nyamyhingo is just one of many. Some features of relevance beyond Eastern Rwanda include:

➤ **Masculinities are slow to change.** This is demonstrated across many GENNOVATE case studies and other work on gender norms, e.g., the World Bank 2012 report *On Norms and Agency*. Working with men's groups is a way to foster "positive masculinities" in ways that benefit both women and men. Some men's groups have developed innovative and supportive methodologies that help men and boys to change, and which simultaneously work on transforming cultural environments which can make it difficult for men to do things differently. The MenEngage Alliance is an example of an organization working with men's groups worldwide to foster gender transformations.

➤ **When crop markets improve, men tend to take over.** This phenomenon has been recognized for a long time. Regardless of how much work women do on a crop, improving their marketability through value chain work and other

activities can either deepen male ownership of specific crops, or cause women's crops to become men's crops. Several strategies can be developed to prevent women from losing out. Rolling out Household Methodologies (HHMs) alongside technical interventions helps families to plan their livelihoods together and to decide how income should be spent. Gender Action Learning System (GALS) is one of several HHMs that foster collaboration, the building of assets owned by women as well as men, and investment into a family's future.

➤ **Women are mostly locked into subsistence production.** "Conceptual lock in" means that men are framed as key agricultural decision-makers and are thus targeted by extension services and governmental programs more broadly. This is particularly the case in commercialization programs. This contributes to the creation of a dual economy, where women's agricultural activities are often considered less important, are poorly researched, and receive little attention from the extension services. However, turning this around, i.e., explicitly targeting and strengthening women's agricultural activities, understanding that women are also interested in boosting productivity and that their incomes form part of the farm system as a whole, is an opportunity for AR4D.

➤ **Women are gaining economic independence.** This is related to a variety of factors, including necessity as farming families struggle to meet their needs, male outmigration, wider dialogue and legislation around women's economic and social empowerment, and more broadly to push and pull factors that vary across societies. Increasing women's income does not necessarily mean women become empowered and more able to participate in decision making over income. In some cases, men may seek to retain their role as head of household and to enact their role as decision-maker. In so doing, they may go against women's preferred ways to spend money. Again, HHMs and working with men's organizations are important ways to help women and men, and communities themselves, to change local institutions and structures, and allow them to create change without feeling that change is being imposed.

➤ **Women and men increasingly collaborate more in the household and take decisions together.** Although men often remain the principal decision-maker within households, women are gaining more voice. Sometimes this means their contribution in the decision-making process is explicit, but more often women's roles in influencing and taking decisions remain mostly invisible. Simple survey-fashion questions to

women or men about “who takes the decision within this household on X, Y, and Z” with pre-coded binary answers such as “husband” or “wife” or with the added “joint” do not add much to understanding these decision-making processes and their gender dynamics.

➤ **Gender-based violence is more likely to decrease when strong laws are backed up by awareness raising.** The GENNOVATE dataset generally shows that awareness raising on gender-based violence is important, but insufficient. Legislation, and backing this up through police action or other ways to realize the law, is necessary.

➤ **Gender norms are relaxing in some ways but remain rigid in others.** It remains incredibly rare for men to participate strongly in housework, childcare, and care of the elderly and sick. At the same time, women remain strongly time-constrained. Addressing this issue through HHMs and labor-saving devices remains a key priority. Technical interventions focused on crops should consider partnering with NGOs, CSOs, and other development partners to help find ways to reduce women’s time burdens.

➤ **Young married women experience the least mobility and decision-making power.** Over time, women gain more freedom, but it is a tragedy that young women cannot contribute their skills at a time in their lives when they are most ready and capable of learning, and have the strongest interest in shaping their futures. Working with young women in AR4D must be prioritized.

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**Contact:**

**Lone Badstue**

International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT)

**email:** [lbadstue@cgiar.org](mailto:lbadstue@cgiar.org)

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