

Towards gender-responsive BANANA RESEARCH for development in the East-African Highlands



Banana production is an important livelihood for farming households in the East-African highlands as food and as a source of income. Banana is a crop with a long history in this region. Although not originating from Africa, it is believed bananas have been cultivated in this region since 2000 BC. It is not surprising that the technical aspects of banana production are intertwined with rituals, habits, and social norms. In this guide, we highlight and discuss social norms surrounding banana production, zooming in specifically on gender norms. Understanding these norms coupled with the ability to address them is essential for the development and design of high-quality banana-focused research for development (R4D) projects which benefit men as well as women.

The East-African highlands, covering parts of Uganda, Tanzania, and DR Congo, and the whole of Rwanda and Burundi, are diverse in terms of ethnicities, agriculture, and political systems, yet there are also many important similarities. This resource, based on data from six GENNOVATE case studies conducted in four countries in the East-African highlands, provides a set of issues to consider in relation to the integration of gender in banana research for development.

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.

Woman casual farmer receives her pay in bananas and carries them home on her head, Isingiro, Western Uganda.
Photo: Bioversity Int./Anne Rietveld.

What we know so far

Similar trends across the East Africa Highlands

1. Banana as a semi-permanent crop indicates a claim on land and land is for men.

In the East African highlands, banana is usually cultivated as a permanent crop. Stands as old as 40 to 60 years are common. As is often the case for trees, planting banana on a field is conceived as laying claim to the land. In most of the East-African highlands, land is still firmly in the hands of men, and thus it is primarily men who control (manage and derive benefits from) banana plantations. Women's options

to choose banana as a livelihood are consequently limited. This is similar for other social groups such as young men and women who have not (yet) acquired land and are farming on land of relatives, or renting land.

When women do cultivate banana independently, they are almost always women whose husbands have off-farm employment or a business and are (mostly) absent. In some cases, a man has passed away and has left his widow land with a banana plantation already established. However, women's rights to inherit land planted with banana differ across the region. In some regions, such land may be directly inherited by the children or other relatives of the late husband. Or, widows continue living on the land of their late husband and manage the banana plantation, but harvestable banana bunches are partly taken by relatives.

2. The banana plantation is owned by men but women work on it.

Although it is relatively rare for women to own banana plantations in the East-African highlands, they often work in the plantations. Women are expected to allocate part of their time to work on their husbands' fields and crops. The amount of time they need to allocate to the banana crop is much dependent on the mode of production and the type of banana, which is again quite varied across the region and within different areas. Plantations with cooking-banana cultivars are usually more intensively managed than plantations with mostly beer-banana cultivars. For instance, in Western Uganda there is a lot of commercial, intensively managed cooking-banana production, and women are expected to weed the plantation by hand, which takes a lot of time and causes



Woman brewer ripening banana to be processed into gin in Kiboga, Central Uganda. Photo: Bioversity Int./Anne Rietveld.

back pain. Across the region, women are usually responsible for weeding but sometimes also contribute to the management of diseases, for instance de-budding the banana male flower. Men usually harvest banana and – in more intensively managed plantations – perform heavy but less frequent work such as de-suckering and uprooting of mats.

3. Intercropping of banana potentially creates conflicting interests for spouses.

Intercropping of banana with other crops is very common. The most common intercrop is beans but other legumes, coffee, maize, sweet and Irish potatoes, cassava, taro, and vegetables and fruits such as chili-pepper, papaya, pumpkin, and amaranth are also grown. Whereas the management and profits from permanent cash crops such as banana and coffee are mostly controlled by men, women often manage and benefit from annual intercrops. They cultivate these crops because they are expected to provide nutritious food to their families. They also sell surplus production for income generation. Intercropping with banana can often be a necessity because in areas where banana plantations dominate, women typically have no access to other land. Banana intercropping can thus be an indicator of land scarcity. However, intercropping can create a conflict of interest between spouses because 1) banana productivity typically decreases due to competition for water, light, and nutrients with the intercrop; 2) annual crop cultivation activities such as digging can damage the surface root system of banana, further reducing productivity; 3) banana management, for instance control of Banana Xanthomonas Wilt (BXW) disease, might lead to trampling of intercrops such as beans. Especially in places where banana production is of high commercial value and where land is scarce, intercropping can lead to intra-household conflicts and gender-based violence.

4. Men control income from banana.

Across the region, banana is an important cash crop. The raw fruit is either marketed or, in the case of beer-banana cultivars, it is processed into beer and gin. In households where an adult man is present, income derived from both raw and processed banana is controlled by men. Gender norms generally prescribe “money” and “income-generation” to be men’s business. It is argued that women have no need for money as it is the husband’s responsibility, as head of the household, to decide and provide. Women with money are frequently considered as threats to their marriage as it is assumed that once a woman has money she will no longer accept and respect the authority of her husband.

Irrespective of these norms, women are engaging more and more in income-generating activities across the East-African Highlands. These activities are seldom linked to banana production or commercialization though, especially when it comes to married women. An exception is when women clandestinely harvest banana and sell it without their husbands’ permission. Both in Uganda and Burundi men and women mention doing this. Men refer to this practice as “stealing” and women describe it as “having no choice.”

In some households, men use banana income to provide for their families. In others, men leave it to women to support the family.

These practices sometimes lead to domestic violence as men may feel justified in punishing their wives for such actions.

Although the income from banana is mainly controlled by men, women usually do have access to banana for



Banana farmer with his child in Isingiro, Western Uganda. Photo: Bioversity Int./Anne Rietveld.

home consumption requirements. Banana income is often the main source of school fees for children and therefore considered vital to ensuring an education. There is considerable debate and variation across and within the different areas as to the extent to which men should take primary responsibility to provide for their families. In some households, men discuss equally with their wives how to spend banana income, and they provide for school fees, health services, and other basic needs. In other households, men are increasingly leaving financial responsibilities to their wives and spending their banana income on leisure and second or third families.

5. Banana cultivars preferred by women and men.

Men and women across the region have one common denominator when it comes to banana cultivar preferences: they appreciate diversity. Sometimes this preference for high diversity is driven by cultural traditions. In Central Uganda, for example, specific cultivars play a role in diverse rituals and ideas about healthy banana plantations. In other areas, considerations around risk-spreading seem to be more important as a rationale for high cultivar diversity. There are also regional differences in the preference for types of banana;

with cooking banana being most popular in Uganda and Rwanda and beer-banana more common in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. However, women everywhere express a preference for cooking banana cultivars, as even in beer-cultivar dominated systems, these are the cultivars they will harvest for home consumption. Some cooking-banana cultivars are more appreciated than others though: while women tend to appreciate cultivars which are tasty or easy to cook, men tend to prefer cultivars with big bunches and extended shelf life for better marketability.

Varying trends across the region

The GENNOVATE research highlighted some area-specific trends relating to intensification and diversification in banana production.

- In Kayonza district in Rwanda, women express a **move away from banana** as their first choice of crop in favor of maize because of the high and increasing disease pressure on banana caused mainly by BXW. Men on the contrary still consider banana production an essential element of their livelihood, providing stability and security.
- In both Uganda and Rwanda, **beer-type banana cultivars are rapidly being replaced by cooking-type banana cultivars** due to, on the one hand, agricultural policies promoting cooking types over beer types and, on the other hand, increasing marketability of cooking banana.
- In Isingiro district in Western Uganda, banana production is becoming **increasingly intensive** with high-labor investment (e.g., hand weeding by women) and increased use of organic manure. In Kiboga district in Central Uganda, the use of herbicides in banana plantations is becoming more common. These contrasting developments have important implications for **women's labor requirements**. In Isingiro, there is an increased demand for women's labor for weeding both within the household and on local labor markets. In Kiboga, this demand for women's labor for weeding is reducing. Herbicides are, meanwhile, applied mostly by men on plots they control and manage.
- In Mushinga in South-Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo, there are strong indications that **agriculture is feminizing** as men go



Woman with son in front of banana plantation in Kayonza, Rwanda.
Photo: Bioversity Int./Anne Rietveld.

into mining or “business” instead of farming. Men remain interested in forestry and beer-banana production as a profitable investment with low labor requirements but leave annual crop production mostly to women.

Banana production trends are influenced by external drivers of change, including urbanization and changes in urban demand for food; road infrastructure and market accessibility; government agricultural policy; investments in extension services; and conflict and insecurity. They are also a function of local opportunities and interests related to, for instance, land availability, labor markets, soil fertility, access to agricultural inputs, and cultural crop preferences.

Designing gender-responsive R4D projects

It is important that R4D projects are gender responsive – that is, the R4D benefits both men and women and harms neither. The information above can serve as background for designing gender-responsive banana-focused R4D projects in the East-Africa highlands, but additional, site-specific research might be needed to understand fully how gender and banana production interact.

In any case, it is important to distinguish between women in female-headed households and women in male-headed households and between polygamous and monogamous marriages. Intra-household decision-making and women’s access to and control over resources is likely to vary between different household arrangements.

Potential research questions

Land – Who is allowed to plant semi-permanent crops such as banana on land? Is it possible to plant banana on rented land, and, if so, can the farmer



Banana bicycle trader in Cibitoke, Burundi.
Photo: Bioversity Int./Anne Rietveld.

planting banana retain the land under a long-term lease? Under which circumstances can a wife plant and manage banana for her own benefit on her husband’s land, or on land which has been allocated to her? What rights to land and semi-permanent crops (such as banana) do widows or separated women have?

Intercropping – Is banana intercropped with other crops? Is there a gender division with regards to who owns and/or manages the different

crops, including banana, on the field? What are men’s and women’s reasons for intercropping, and how is this related to individual and household responsibilities and objectives? What is total and per crop productivity per unit of land, and how does this translate into yield for men and yield for women? Can a banana R4D intervention potentially create an intra-household tension related to intercropping? (See sub-section “Intercropping of banana potentially creates conflicting interests for spouses” earlier in the tool.)

Labor – What are roles and responsibilities of men and women with regards to banana production? How much time do women/men spend on these tasks on average, and how is this divided over the year and across a day? What obligations do the husband and wife have to each other with regards to banana production and the provision of labor? How are male and female children involved in banana production? Is there any recognition of women’s inputs into the management of the household’s banana plantation, and, if so, how is this expressed? What are the potential implications for the patterns of labor allocation for men and women that can result from a banana R4D intervention?

Income – Who in the household is responsible for harvesting and selling banana? To what extent is there transparency in the household between spouses with regards to income from banana and its expenditure? What kind of household or individual need is typically covered with income from banana, and which are not? Which women can gain income from banana? Are sales and income from cooking banana differently organized than sales and income from beer-banana?

Cultivar preferences – How, why, and to what extent do men and women value on-farm diversity of banana cultivars? What gender-

specific preferences for banana cultivars, specific banana traits, or combinations of traits can be identified for men and women?

Suggestions for further reading

1. CRP report RTB - GENNOVATE RTB-HT team. (2017). Gender in Agricultural Change: Towards more inclusive innovation in farming communities. GENNOVATE Report to the CGIAR Research Programs on Roots, Tubers and Bananas and Humidtropics. GENNOVATE Research Paper, RTB, Lima, Peru.
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3. Kakuru, M., Rietveld, A., Mbabazi, G. and Ajambo, S. (2018). Banana-based beverages in East and Central Africa – a money-maker for rural male and female value-chain actors?. *Acta Hort.* 1196, 229-236. <https://doi.org/10.17660/ActaHortic.2018.1196.28>

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