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## **Gendered Challenges and Unexplored Avenues in Rural Women's Involvement in Advancing Sustainable Food Security through Tea Production in Kenya and Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

*This study offers a comparative analysis of gendered tea production in Kenya and Uganda, interrogating the structural and intersectional barriers that constrain rural women's participation in the tea value chain. Drawing on feminist intersectionality theory, the research reveals how gender, class, geography, and institutional dynamics intersect to marginalise women as undervalued labourers, despite their vital role in tea cultivation. Through qualitative insights and policy critique, the study highlights the need for inclusive reforms by the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) and Uganda Tea Development Agency (UTDA), emphasizing women's access to training, incentives, and decision-making platforms. The findings underscore the importance of grassroots engagement and context-specific policy design, advocating for a feminist intersectional approach to enhance equity, agency, and sustainability in the tea sector. Ultimately, the study calls for a reimagining of agricultural development that centres women's voices and contributions as vital to community resilience and food security.*

**Key words:** Gendered challenges, Rural women, Sustainable food security, Tea production, Unexplored avenues

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### **1.0 A Historical Perspective on Tea Production in Kenya and Uganda**

Tea production has long been a cornerstone of the economies of Kenya and Uganda, with both countries maintaining a significant global presence in tea cultivation and export. Kenya, in particular, holds a leading position within the East African community, as Kamer (2022) notes, and is recognised as the region's top tea producer. The sector's economic significance is substantial: in 2009, tea contributed 4% to Kenya's GDP, amounting to Ksh 97.7 billion, and accounted for 28% of the country's export earnings (Koros, Tshelang, & Masangano, 2023; TBK, 2014). Nearly three million Kenyans, approximately 10% of the population, rely on tea cultivation for their livelihoods. Beyond its economic contributions, tea production supports infrastructure development and environmental conservation.

A majority of Kenya's tea output, about 60%, comes from smallholder farmers under the management of the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) (TBK, 2011; KTDA, 2016; KTDA, 2022). Uganda ranks second in tea production within the region, with an annual output exceeding 80,000 metric tons. Tea remains one of Uganda's top foreign exchange earners, alternating with coffee and fish in export rankings.

Despite their dominance, Kenya and Uganda face increasing competition from other global producers such as Sri Lanka and China. This competitive landscape underscores the need for continuous innovation and strategic adaptation to maintain market relevance (Kamer, 2022; Koros et al., 2023).

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Nonetheless, Kenya, alongside China, Sri Lanka, and India, collectively accounts for 75% of global tea output (Ateka et al., 2018).

### **1.1 Agro-Ecological Conditions and Regional Production Zones**

Kenya's tea thrives under optimal agro-climatic conditions, particularly in the Highlands. The red volcanic soils and favourable weather patterns, especially in regions such as Kericho, Sotik, Kisii, and Nyeri, create ideal environments for tea cultivation (Gesimba et al., 2005; Waarts, Ton, & Jansen, 2012). These areas benefit from approximately 80% of the country's favourable weather conditions.

Uganda's tea-growing regions similarly benefit from temperate climates and well-distributed rainfall, averaging 1000–1500 mm annually over 150 days. The soils in these zones are fertile, well-drained, and maintain a pH of around 6. Key tea-producing districts include Hoima, Wakiso, Rukungiri, Kisoro, Mukono, Kanungu, Mityana, Mbarara, Kabarore, and Bushenyi (Muzira, Nabasumba, Natuha, & Okello, 2024).

### **1.2 Structural Dynamics and Labor Contributions**

Kenya's tea sector comprises both large-scale plantations and smallholder systems, with the latter dominating production. Over half a million smallholder farmers contribute to 60% of the national output (Ateka et al., 2018). Since its introduction in the early 20th century, tea has remained a vital cash crop in East Africa.

In Uganda, tea is cultivated by both plantation companies and smallholder farmers. The industry supports over 80,000 small farm households and employs more than 150,000 skilled and unskilled workers (Kawooya, 2021). An estimated one million Ugandans derive their livelihoods from tea-related activities.

However, productivity disparities persist. In Kenya, KTDA (2013) data reveal that small-scale plantations yield significantly lower volumes of processed tea compared to their large-scale counterparts. Despite these challenges, scientific advancements have improved production across both scales (Gesimba, 2005; Xinhua, 2021).

Uganda's tea sector suffered setbacks during the political instability of the 1970s and 1980s, which led to the departure of key industry stakeholders, particularly of Indian origin (Muzira et al., 2023). In response, the Ugandan government has implemented reforms through the Uganda Tea Development Agency (UTDA), mobilised tea planting initiatives, and deployed extension officers to train farmers in best practices. These efforts aim to enhance rural food security and revitalize the sector.

### **1.3 Gendered Dimensions and Rural Women's Role in Agricultural Sustainability**

Rural Uganda plays a pivotal role in national food security, with women constituting a considerable proportion of the agricultural labour force. Guloba (2017) and Bamanyaki (2020) estimate that Uganda is home to 13.5 million rural women, compared to 4.1 million in urban and peri-urban areas. Agriculture accounts for 72% of Uganda's economy, and women in rural areas are its primary drivers. Despite this centrality, modernisation of farming remains superficial (Bamwesigye et al., 2020). Most Ugandans (71%) practise subsistence farming, with gradual shifts toward modern techniques. Yet, structural barriers such as limited access to land, credit, extension services, and decision-making spaces continue to constrain rural women's full participation in agricultural transformation.

Tea production depends on a complex interplay of factors: land availability, bush age and density, labour access and utilisation, plucking cycles, proximity to collection centres, rainfall, soil fertility and pH, and overall husbandry practices (TBK, 2014). Within this matrix, rural women's contributions remain under-recognized and under-leveraged.

## **2.0 Purpose of the Study**

This study seeks to illuminate the gendered challenges and untapped opportunities in rural women's involvement in sustainable tea production in Kenya and Uganda. By examining historical trajectories, ecological conditions, structural dynamics, and gendered labour contributions, it aims to inform policy and practice that advance inclusive, resilient, and food-secure agricultural systems.

### **3.0 Feminist Intersectionality Theory**

The Feminist Intersectionality Theory posits that individuals experience privilege or oppression through the convergence of multiple social identities. Gender, for example, intersects with race, ethnicity, religion, class, and nationality to shape one's access to power and resources. This framework illuminates how gender interacts with broader social, economic, and political structures to produce complex experiences of marginalization, particularly for women in agriculture (Tavener et al., 2022).

In this study, we demonstrate that while gender remains a central lens for analysing the challenges faced by Kenyan and Ugandan women tea farmers, an intersectional approach is essential. By examining which axes of social differentiation, such as marital status, wealth, and education, intersect with gender, we gain deeper insight into the layered barriers these women encounter. This analytical strategy is critical for understanding how multiple identities compound or mitigate disadvantage, shaping women's agency and positioning within tea production systems.

### **4.0 Intersectionality in Land Access and Tea Production**

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, women constitute at least half of the agricultural workforce and play indispensable roles in food production and rural livelihoods (UNDP/IMF, 2007). However, gender roles, socially constructed and deeply embedded in systems of production, reproduction, distribution, and consumption, continue to constrain women's access to resources and opportunities (Kibere et al., 2013). These constraints are intensified by intersecting socio-economic factors that influence land ownership and agricultural participation (World Bank, 2000; Overholt, 2008).

Moving beyond binary gender distinctions, it is crucial to recognize how women's age, marital status, education, ethnicity, cultural background, and economic standing interact with gender to shape their access to land for tea farming. In rural Kenya and Uganda, women's ability to own or lease land is often determined by the intersection of gender with marital status and wealth. For instance, a woman from a wealthy household with a stable income is more likely to access land than one from a low-income background. Marital status is particularly influential, with categories such as widowhood, polygamy, monogamy, divorce, and cohabitation affecting women's rights to utilize land and benefit from tea farming assets.

### **5.0 Gendered Land Ownership: Evidence and Implications**

Despite their substantial contributions, women frequently face unequal access to and control over land and resources (Kibere et al., 2013). Gender biases in land ownership remain a significant barrier to women's economic empowerment (Makone, Bitange, Soire, & Odero, 2017). According to FAO (2018), men are allocated an average of 2.4 acres of agricultural land, compared to 1.9 hectares for women. Mukasa et al. (2015) report that only 16% of women are landowners, in contrast to 84% of men. Data from the Gender and Land Rights Database (GLRD) and the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) show that in Uganda (2009/2010), among households reporting land ownership, 18% of agricultural land was owned by women, 34% by men, and 46% was jointly owned.

These disparities reinforce male dominance in tea cultivation and land ownership, even though women comprise the majority of the tea plantation workforce. Limited access to land, compounded by low wages and restricted educational opportunities, renders female-headed households more vulnerable to poverty than their male counterparts (FAO, 2014; Diiro et al., 2018). Through the lens of feminist intersectionality, we argue that gender intersects with class, education, and income to construct women's vulnerability and limit their full participation in tea production. Addressing these gendered inequities in land access is, therefore, vital to reducing poverty in tea-producing communities in Uganda.

Anderson et al. (2016) further highlight that women own a disproportionately small share of household agricultural land, and their plots tend to be significantly smaller. In 2011, 18% of women reported sole ownership of land, while 48% reported joint ownership with their husbands. Overall, women accounted for 39% of landowners (sole or joint), compared to 60% for men. Sole ownership was reported by only 14% of women, versus 46% of men. These figures have shown little improvement over time.

Among small-scale tea holders in rural areas, most women lack direct access to land, with decisions about land use typically made by husbands or male relatives. Natal and marital affiliations heavily influence land ownership and access, which in turn affect women's ability to secure sustainable livelihoods. Upon the death of a husband, women may be excluded from harvesting tea or denied proceeds by the husband's family (Nightingale & Richmond, 2022; Dery, 2015). Such marginalisation is shaped by intersecting identities, gender, marital status (widowed, divorced, single), natal lineage, seniority within the family, and cultural norms that define women's roles and entitlements in society.

## **6.0 Gendered Access to Inputs and Land for Tea Farming**

Women-headed households face significant barriers in sourcing tea farm inputs compared to male-headed households. These challenges stem from limited access to resources, which restricts their ability to purchase inputs. Often, women-headed households own small plots of land more suited to subsistence crops such as potatoes, maize, beans, and bananas. Because they rarely sell tea directly to factories, they are excluded from receiving inputs distributed by processing plants. Consequently, male-headed households appear more empowered in addressing poverty through tea farming (Muzira et al., 2023).

Although women are actively engaged in the production of cash crops like tea, their control over land and other productive resources remains limited. BSR & IDH (2018) report that while 31.7% of tea farmers are women, few are landowners thus reinforcing the persistent exclusion of women from land and property ownership despite their vital role in agriculture.

## **7.0 Gender Disparities Across the Tea Value Chain**

Gendered inequalities permeate every level of the tea production chain, from household labour to factory processing and market access. This persists despite legal and managerial frameworks intended to promote women's participation (Huijsson, 2021). Women contribute approximately 60% of the farm labour force, yet they receive disproportionately low returns from tea proceeds. Generational and gender power dynamics shape access to and control over resources, with gender-neutral services failing to address the distinct needs of women and men. Such oversight exacerbates women's social and economic disempowerment.

In South-Western Uganda, a study revealed that although both male- and female-headed households had similar educational levels, men predominantly led tea production. Tea cultivation was the primary livelihood source, and men's dominance in this sector translated into greater control over household income (Ezra, Corti & Madina, 2014).

## **Decision-Making, Market Access, and Cultural Constraints**

Women's roles in agriculture are often undervalued, limiting their influence in decision-making and policy formulation (ILO, 2002; World Bank, 2001). Alinyo & Leahy (2012) found that husbands typically made major decisions regarding the marketing of cash crops and controlled the revenues. Asiimwe (2010) confirmed that in regions like Mukono and Buganda Central, men traditionally dominate cash crops such as tea, cotton, coffee, vanilla, and tobacco. Anderson et al. (2016) attribute this imbalance to the fact that men head over three-quarters of smallholder households.

Ali et al. (2015) describe a "dependency gap," where women's heavy domestic workloads negatively impact their productivity and economic opportunities. Gender intersects with low income and cultural expectations to limit women's decision-making power in tea production, thereby reducing their overall productivity.

Gender inequality in land access also restricts women's market participation. In Kabale and Mbale districts, Sebatta et al. (2014) found that limited land ownership constrained women's ability to engage in cash crop markets. Patriarchal norms further restrict women's mobility and access to public spaces, including markets. Studies by Katungi & Smale (2006) and Meinzen-Dick et al. (2010) show that social norms curtail women's interactions outside accepted networks, limiting their access to market information, negotiations, and contacts.

## **9.0 Structural Challenges in the Tea Sector and Global Market Shifts**

Despite its economic significance, the tea sector faces persistent challenges that disproportionately affect women. These include low productivity driven by high input costs, poor agricultural practices, underfunded extension services, aging tea bushes, and deteriorating soil health (Bryan et al., 2011). Rising energy prices, expensive labour, costly infrastructure, and limited financing further strain production.

Climate change compounds these issues, with prolonged droughts and erratic El Niño rains disrupting ideal growing conditions. Tea cultivation requires temperatures between 10–30°C, annual rainfall of 1250 mm, and acidic soils, conditions increasingly threatened by environmental instability.

Global demand for black tea is also declining, particularly in key markets such as the Russian Federation, North America, and Europe. Consumption has dropped by 3.5%, 2.3%, and 1.4% respectively, as consumers shift toward alternatives like carbonated drinks, energy beverages, and bottled water. This trend undermines food security and income stability for women in tea-growing regions (Bryan et al., 2011).

### **9.1 Declining Tea Earnings and Export Challenges**

Kenya's tea industry has faced a downturn in international performance. According to Nyawira (2022), tea earnings dropped by 9.1% in the final quarter of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020. Data from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) shows a decline from KES 30.5 billion in Q3 2020 to KES 27.7 billion in Q3 2021, primarily due to reduced export volumes (Nyawira, 2022). This downward trend persisted throughout 2021, signalling broader structural challenges.

### **9.2 Low Domestic Consumption and Farmer Vulnerability**

Both Kenya and Uganda report low per capita tea consumption of 0.6 kg and 0.4 kg respectively, against a global average of 1 kg per person. This limited domestic demand, coupled with low prices, and constrained profitability, disproportionately affects smallholder farmers. Reduced productivity and demand hinder their ability to produce high-quality teas that can compete globally (Peris, Dorothy, & Evangeline, 2017).

### **9.3 Labor Conditions and Gendered Inequities**

Poor working conditions and disproportionately low wages for women contribute to labour unrest and diminished farmer incomes. These issues heighten vulnerability to climate change and poverty, compounding the challenges faced by tea workers (Ergon, 2022).

### **9.4 Mechanisation and Workforce Displacement**

To cut labour costs, tea estates are increasingly adopting machine harvesting. Depending on the machine type, one unit can replace 10 to 50 field workers. Although machine-harvested tea typically earns lower prices than hand-plucked tea, mechanisation is expanding across estates. This shift has sparked controversy due to job losses, with estates reporting workforce reductions following mechanisation (Melican, 2021).

### **9.5 Grievance Mechanisms and Institutional Gaps**

Ergon (2022) highlights the absence of formal grievance mechanisms among Certificate Holders (CHs), especially those with single factories sourcing from smallholder farmers. Seasonal and outsourced workers often lack awareness of reporting procedures, and even informed individuals express mistrust in the system's fairness. A disconnect between company-based mechanisms and local customary dispute resolution practices further complicates accountability and redress.

### **9.6 Piece-Rate Pay and Wage Inconsistencies**

The study also critiques piece-rate pay systems, which disproportionately disadvantage female workers. While Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) offer rates above legal minimums, they fail to establish a wage floor. Workers paid by piece rate may earn below the basic daily wage if quotas are unmet. Operational factors cause income variability, undermining wage equity and obstructing progress toward a living wage (Ergon, 2022).

## **9.7 Living Wage Benchmarks and Sectoral Misalignment**

Most CHs pay wages below various living wage benchmarks. Multiple conflicting standards such as those from the Global Living Wage Coalition (GLWC) are used as proxies despite being designed for other sectors like flowers and coffee. As of May 2022, the Rainforest Alliance (RA) has commissioned the Anker Research Institute (ARI) to develop a tea-specific benchmark for Kenya (Ergon, 2022).

## **9.8 Unpaid Care Work and Gendered Labour Constraints**

Women's time spent on unpaid care work such as childcare, household food production, and support in husbands' gardens limits their ability to expand market production. Men, by contrast, cite lack of funds to hire labour as their primary constraint (Ellis et al., 2006; Budlender & Moussié, 2013). These gendered roles diminish women's bargaining power and decision-making within households.

## **9.9 Gendered Barriers to Credit Access**

Credit facilities often base loans on cash flow and asset value, typically measured by tea deliveries to factories. With most farms registered under male names and lower proceeds in women's accounts, women receive limited credit. Gender intersects with income, asset ownership, and cultural norms to restrict rural women's access to financial resources and full participation in the tea sector.

## **10.0 Recommendations and Conclusion**

This comparative study of gendered tea production in Kenya and Uganda has illuminated the deeply embedded inequalities within the tea value chain. Grounded in feminist intersectionality theory, the research reveals how overlapping structural barriers such as gender, class, geography, and institutional neglect limit rural women's full participation in tea production. These constraints not only marginalize women as undervalued labourers but also undermine broader goals of community well-being and agricultural sustainability.

To address these challenges, the study recommends that the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) and the Uganda Tea Development Agency (UTDA), in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, urgently revise policies to promote women's equitable engagement in the sector.

### **10.1 Policy Recommendations**

- i. Reform KTDA and UTDA policies to promote women's equitable access to training, incentives, and leadership roles.
- ii. Organise inclusive forums to raise awareness on gender discrimination and its impact on food security and community well-being.
- iii. Centre grassroots voices in policy design to ensure context-specific, responsive solutions.

### **10.2 Strategic Imperative**

Central to these recommendations is the adoption of a feminist intersectional approach, not as a theoretical add-on, but as a practical framework for policy design, institutional reform, and community engagement. By interrogating the intersecting dimensions of marginalisation, this approach enables more nuanced, responsive, and transformative interventions.

### **10.3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, enhancing women's agency and visibility within the tea value chain is not only a matter of justice, but also a strategic imperative for sustainable development. Listening to women, investing in their leadership, and restructuring systems to reflect their contributions will strengthen the tea sector in both Kenya and Uganda, and foster more equitable futures for rural communities.

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