

# CULTURE: A DETRIMENT TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COOPERATIVES

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The elderly women are dressed in colourful light-green T-shirts as they showcase their cosmetics during the World Environment Day at Patongo sub-county yard in Agago district.

Gathered in one of the tents erected for exhibitors of products made from wild plants, the women, who are members of Onenanyim Cooperative Society in Agago district, are exhibiting cosmetics and food products the society members make from shea butter.

The ripe fruits of the shea tree are harvested between April and August each year. During this period, the members often go to the forests to harvest shea fruits. They roast or crush them while still raw to get to extract the precious butter, which is boiled, sorted, packaged and sold at the local markets or exported.

## Reviving cooperatives

Cooperative unions have registered growth in number since 1913 when the first farmers' association was founded by African farmers. When the cooperative movement marked 100

years in Uganda in 2013, 14,060 cooperatives, with a membership of about 4 million people, were confirmed to be registered with the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives.

The government, through the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives, is currently planning to revive and promote the formation of cooperatives across the country owing to the fact that they can be an effective means through which the poor can achieve economic security and an improved quality of life. Onenanyim Cooperative Society is one of the cooperatives in the country whose activities are being revived.

However, although females form the majority of cooperative members as, indeed, they constitute the bulk of those involved in the agriculture sector, and therefore perform the bulk of the tasks in producing the crops that cooperatives deal in, culture continues to influence or, rather, hinder the participation of women in the activities of cooperative societies.

## Cultural obstacles

West Acholi Cooperative Union in northern Uganda is a case that shows

that women are yet to be fully engaged in cooperatives owing to gender inequalities perpetuated by cultural norms and practices. The union serves Gulu, Nwoya, Amuru and Omoro districts and has 96 affiliated cooperative societies.

Bob Alberto Ogen, the union's manager, said that a major challenge to the society that mainly engages in cotton production, processing and marketing, was the societal attitude that cotton is a male crop that women have nothing to do with. The women may be involved in the production of cash crops, but culture bars them from active involvement in the selling of the cash crops.

This resulted in unintended consequences, because women did the donkey work and men would only surface during the harvest and sale of cotton, women ignored the society's activities and cotton growing in general.

According to Ogen, women are culturally believed to be suited



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solely to caretaking in households. To that effect, men often question the women's suitability for leadership. Men, Ogen observed, think women do not have the time to deal with leadership responsibilities of managing cooperatives because most times they are engaged in domestic work, as culture dictates.

Gender equality and women's empowerment are challenges both within co-operatives and in the environment in which co-operatives operate. The marginalisation of women in the public sphere and the structural exclusion of women from financial mechanisms have hindered them from reaping the sweet fruits of the cooperative movement in Uganda.

He also noted that, much as Uganda's education sector and stakeholders are emphasising girl-child education, skills development and education for girls and young women are still inadequate. This paints them as inferior to men as far as the distribution of roles and responsibilities in cooperatives is concerned.

Skills gaps among many women means that they lack the level of education or technical capacity to, among others, undertake the negotiations or advocacy required in cooperatives. Such cultural challenges faced by women extend beyond the social sphere to include legal restrictions that institutionalise women's marginality, for example in land acquisition and management which are key for production as it were.

### Countering cultural impediments

To counter the cultural impediments, diversification is considered the appropriate remedy. West Acholi Cooperative Union introduced sorghum and soybeans as alternatives to its members and, according to Ogen, the



women did not only return to the union but their numbers have since doubled.

Voluntary Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) have also been introduced where members, comprised mainly of women, save on a weekly basis and pool finances from which they can borrow for business and livelihood needs.

Started in 2001, Onenanyim Cooperative Society was set up by the women to counter the male-dominated cooperative society, according to the society's secretary, Kevin Adong.

"We came together as a group in 2001 wanting to deal in cotton as a women-only group because we hardly benefitted from the crop that we produced in our households," Adong stated.

Like many women in the countryside, Adong has the responsibility to fend for her family. Yet, she says, her husband kept her away from making any decisions over how to use the money got from sale of farm produce.

"Today the decisions over what to do with proceeds from our shea butter business purely rests with us. Previously, however, I and the children did all the garden work and the men only appeared at harvest and sale time to dictate how the money was to be used," she noted.

Ogen said they had challenges in bringing women and youth on board in their cooperative because cooperatives were seen as projects for males and adults. Women have a significant role in carrying out economic activities yet their contribution is seldom recognised.

Kweyo and Pabo Rice Cooperative societies in Amuru district are working to fight gender inequalities. Esther Arac, a member of Pabo Rice Cooperative Society, says it is a condition that members should come with their spouses for meetings and while receiving payments for their produce sold through the society.

"This is one way of engaging women because, in any case, it is the women who do the garden work. They should, therefore, see the proceeds from their labour," Arac said. In Kweyo Cooperative Society's VSLA group, 80% of the members are women.

Ms Kevin Adong, a member of the group, says the society has empowered her to learn modern methods of farming, which is improving her livelihood. "I have gained skills and knowledge in agribusiness and other economic activities. I can access business financing and market through the cooperatives," Adong said.