The quality of sugarcane registered to women: Evidence from an intervention in Uganda

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In smallholder households that engage in commercial agriculture, women are often involved in the physical labor related to the cash crop, but do not engage in the market-facing activities. As a result, men tend to control the profits from these crops, which are increasingly important to household livelihoods. The Farm and Family Balance project implemented an intervention that sought to mitigate this issue. The project encouraged households associated with a large sugar company near Jinja, Uganda to register at least one of their sugarcane blocks with the wife instead of the husband, thereby including her in the market activities associated with that block and giving her access to the block profits. Take-up of the intervention was high; 72% of households that were offered the opportunity chose to participate. The project was implemented as a randomized control trial to allow for the study of the impacts on households. In this note, we provide information regarding the quality of the blocks transferred to women and the resulting changes to the company’s portfolio.

Information regarding sugar block quality was collected at baseline before the intervention, when almost all blocks were registered to or managed by men. At the project midline, we collected information on blocks that were now registered to women (almost entirely through the project itself). We consider indicators of quality including block size, block age (number of previous harvests), and distance to the home. Size and age are measures of the value of the block. A larger block should produce more income. Because sugar blocks can be harvested (after a period of regrowth) three or four times before replanting is needed, younger blocks will produce more income than older blocks. Distance is not an indicator of quality per se, but it may be difficult for women to manage blocks that are further from the household.

We use the midline data on women’s blocks collected between October and December 2017 to compare them to men’s blocks at baseline (July to September 2016; information on men’s blocks was not collected at midline). Most of the women’s blocks measured at midline will have been reported at baseline as men’s blocks, but we unfortunately cannot match blocks across survey rounds.
We first find that blocks newly registered to women are 33% smaller than men’s blocks, a difference that is highly statistically significant. In particular, women are less likely to have blocks that are 2 acres or more in size, and less likely to have blocks that are 0.5 or 1 acre in size. Second, we find that women’s blocks are on average significantly younger than men’s blocks, and in fact are most likely to be in the plant phase, meaning that they have not yet been harvested. Though the block size result suggests that women’s blocks are less valuable, they may actually be more valuable because they are younger. Finally, we find that women’s blocks are 18% closer to home than men’s blocks. This may be because it is easier for women to care for blocks that are closer, given their duties at home. The fact that women’s blocks are smaller may also be related to the issue of their workload.

We also examine the self-reported quality of blocks that were registered to women. We asked how the quality of these blocks compared to other blocks held by the household. In the majority of cases (53%), the quality is reported to be either in the middle of other blocks, or the same as all the other blocks held by the household. Additionally, nearly 1/3 are reported to be the best quality block held by the household, and only 12% are reported to the lowest quality block. This indicates that households are not systematically transferring low quality blocks to women.

We additionally study how the contract intervention affected the composition of blocks held by the partner sugar company using administrative data provided by the company to the research team. We rely on complete rosters of all blocks registered to the company both prior to any intervention (August 2016) and following the completion of the intervention (August 2018). Using this data, we study whether the extent to which the company contracted with women changed over this time period. The administrative data is a complete record of all company registrations and is not limited to farmers that participated in the study.

Prior to the intervention, only 15% of farmers with registered blocks were women. Following the intervention, this number had risen to 26%. Similarly, 12% of total blocks were registered to women before the intervention, increasing to 17%. It is true that the increase in women-registered blocks is less than the increase in registered farmers who were women, indicating that each woman holds on average fewer registrations than each man.

We can also use the administrative data to test for differences in block characteristics by gender of the registrant. As in the survey data, we find that, post-intervention, blocks registered to women are younger than blocks registered to men. This represents a change from the pre-intervention period, when the average age of blocks was equal for men and women. We also find that while women’s blocks were already smaller than men’s before the intervention (1.4 vs. 1.6 acres on average), the new registration of women’s blocks increased this gap (1.2 vs. 1.6 following the intervention).

This evidence shows that encouraging smallholder households to register blocks to women results in significant increases in the number of women who hold registrations for sugarcane blocks, meaning that significantly more women are participating directly in activities related to cane marketing. The project also resulted in increases in the number of blocks held by women. Although blocks registered to women are smaller on average than blocks measured to men, these numbers nonetheless represent a large increase in total cane holdings by women. Additionally, other measures of block quality including age and self-reported relative quality do not suggest that women’s blocks are systematically inferior to those held by men.

This analysis suggests that the high take-up of the contract intervention is not limited to blocks of inferior quality. Additional analysis from the midline survey indicates that most blocks registered to women
are indeed managed by the registrants, highlighting the potential for large, positive impacts on the participating households. These impacts will be examined using the project endline survey. Additionally, analysis of how the patterns of women’s registrations in the company records evolve over time is important to understanding if the intervention was able to increase women’s involvement over a longer time horizon.

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