Role of men in a women’s empowerment initiative: Evidence from Uganda

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Women’s empowerment is a significant element of economic development (Duflo 2012). Because most women in the developing world reside in male-headed households, considering the role of men in advancing women’s empowerment is an important research objective. In this note we report results related to the take-up of a women’s economic empowerment initiative aimed at sugarcane farmers in Uganda, and focus on the agency of men in determining the household’s participation. We also assess the impact of a couples-based workshop on project take-up.

In this study, we partnered with Kakira Sugar Limited (KSL), a large sugar company near Jinja, Uganda, that sets the purchase price and buys most of its sugarcane from smallholder contract farmers, who are mainly men. Though women participate in labor related to sugarcane, they are infrequently involved in any of the sugar-related marketing activities, meaning that men generally control the sugar-related income.

The project sample was comprised of 2,370 households who farm sugarcane and have sold to KSL in the past. In our sample one-third of the chosen households are polygamous and husbands are an average of 8 years older than wives. There are on average 5 children in each household and husbands are more literate than wives (83% vs 63%), where 21% of the wives never attended any school.

Half of the total households were offered the empowerment intervention which encouraged male sugar farmers to transfer a sugarcane contract to their wife or to register a previously uncontracted sugarcane block in her name. A wife with a contract gains access to inputs, cash advances and final payment for the block. This intervention was designed to make the registration process as simple as possible for women: project staff visited couples in their homes, facilitated the necessary paperwork, and paid the associated bank account opening fee. As an incentive, households who participated were also given a solar lamp worth approximately $30. However, husbands still were required to agree to these registrations.

Overall, husbands were supportive of their wives’ participation in management, marketing, and sales. Take-up of the intervention was around 70% of the group offered the intervention. In the study midline survey we record reasons for the 30% refusal rate. These were (i) husband did not want to give any
cane to the wife (49%), (ii) there was not enough cane or enough land to take-up contract intervention (44%), (iii) it was not fair to other wife/wives (11%), and (iv) the wife did not want to be the registered owner of the cane block (3%).

We analyze which husband and household characteristics were most predictive of refusal of the intervention. The following were all predictive of intervention refusal: husband has no education, low levels of assets or expenditures, wife has no prior involvement in sugarcane farming, and the husband preferred to manage the household’s money himself (measured experimentally). Wife’s characteristics (education, literacy, numeracy, etc.) are not predictive of refusal.

In a cross-randomized intervention, half of the sample received and invitation to a couples’ workshop. The training was based on the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) methodology developed by Oxfam Novib in Uganda (Mayoux 2012). The workshop helped participants recognize contributions of each member towards the household and taught a balanced approach to household management and access to resources. One goal of these workshops was to encourage take-up of the intervention by turning men into advocates for women’s economic empowerment.

Households that were randomly assigned to the workshop were 7 percentage points less likely to refuse to take-up the contract-related intervention, however, as noted earlier, refusal was low even in households that did not receive the workshop.

In addition to reducing refusal overall, we also study whether the workshop was successful in mitigating the disadvantage in takeup experienced by households displaying the characteristics mentioned above. In general we find that workshop was most influential in increasing take-up for those households that were least likely to take-up the intervention when not offered the workshop. The results suggest that the workshop was most effective in mitigating disadvantage in take-up related to household divisions of labor or gender norms. Specifically, the workshop reduces the gap in take-up between households where the wife was involved in cane and not by 2/3. The workshop also more than closes the gap in take-up for households whether husband prefers that wives manage money versus those households where he prefers to manage it himself.

The success of women’s economic empowerment initiatives such as the one discussed here rely on men’s participation and acceptance. Specifically, we find that a husband’s and/or couple’s characteristics are more predictive and significant to a household’s refusal than that of the wife. This suggests that programs that focus on women alone may not be successful. However, the workshop that sought to increase gender balance decreased refusal, and mitigated many of the identified predictors of refusal. Targeting couples and understanding the role of men appears to be a critical first step in unlocking women’s empowerment.

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