

## **Femininity and leadership in the face of controversial women's empowerment on family farms in Benin**

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This article proposes questions for the analysis of gender stereotypes that influence the social empowerment of women on farms in Benin.

Benin is a West African state that covers an area of 114,763 km<sup>2</sup> and extends over 700 km<sup>6</sup>, from the Niger River in the north to the Atlantic coast in the south. Benin had a population of 10,741,458 in 2016. The country is one of the member states of ECOWAS and has Togo to the west, Nigeria to the east, Niger to the northeast, and Burkina Faso to the northwest.

Benin's Rural Development Policy Declaration (DPDR), 2000 advocates a cross-cutting integration of gender and development aspects into all agricultural and rural development actions. Gender analysis is a tool that provides a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of men and women. It is based on the principle that the roles assigned by society to men and women are of paramount importance. In practical terms, gender analysis implies that special efforts are made to identify and involve all people, whether men or women. Indeed, it is essential not to consider men or women as homogeneous groups, but to analyse the specificities of each population group. The gender distribution of heads of agricultural households indicates that female heads of agricultural households account for 15.7% of all heads of agricultural households. This highlights the preponderance of male heads of agricultural households. Although few of them are heads of agricultural households, many are engaged in agriculture. In fact, 30.5% of the country's producers are women. Similarly, 46.9% of the agricultural workforce is female. In addition, the consideration of age groups makes it possible to highlight that women are in the majority among agricultural workers aged between 25 and 34 (DIRECTORATE OF AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS, 2023)

Social dynamics have long marked the actors of the agricultural world over the years because of the environment transformations and facing of new challenges. In the world with modernization, structural transformations, and strong mechanization but especially in Africa and Benin where the challenges of production, processing and marketing are evolving with of a rise in knowledge; The actors involved in the agricultural sector are inclined to boost their

*“habitus”* and their modes of operation (Bourdieu, 1986; Lachaise-Benoist, 2001). Operational and structural changes in the agricultural sector contribute to reinforcing gender inequalities in the quest for sustainable development and sustainable agriculture (Landais, 1998). Unfortunately, today, social structures and dynamic interactions that support them face gender stereotypes that tend to make it ineffective and unbalanced (Rélouendé et al., 2012). The actors of the agricultural world considering the bicategorization into men and women experience challenges of personal development that reveals the lack of knowledge of the work of women despite their active participation in farms (Barberis, 1963; Yedusenge et al., 1990) . Thus, women become a strategic actor in terms of capital on farms because of their strong participation and active presence at all stages but remains a weak link in decision-making modes and processes (Droz et al., 2014; Onibon Doubogan & Ygué, 2017) . This unequal situation (Hamel et al., 2014) stems from lifestyles, structural and cultural logics that govern African social organizations, but hinders the various efforts to promote and value women and their work. If women can be considered indispensable actors in the production process on farms and whose action is systematic, would they not also be interested in valuing their work differently that could make them capable of participating in other actions in society? This question engages women empowerment and concerns more the social empowerment of these. Many works have attempted to analyze gender, in particular the position of women in households and the different spaces of socialization in which they find themselves (Benoudji et al., 2018), but their results don't take in consideration full characterization and dimensions of women empowerment for a theorization with universal understanding. If Stoessel-Ritz, (2015) in his work evokes the various health issues in intensive agriculture and in family farming, for example, it is worth remembering the existence of a multitude of forms or types of agriculture. In the sociological sense of the term, agriculture according to the practices that accompanies it designates a social and constructed character that predetermines the distribution of tasks, the distribution of power, the management of know-how and know-how, the whole of which materializes the social relations that structure exchanges and interactions within its sphere. This plurality of agricultural space would also be conducive to other forms of valorization of women's agricultural activity for their empowerment (Descarries & Corbeil, 2020; Wamadini Souratié, Farida Koinda, Bernard Decaluwé, 2019). Consequently, from the perspective of reaching the female gender and understanding the modes of action and its interactions with society at the primary level of socialization, it is important to focus on the symbolic interactional mechanisms that structure agricultural spaces by presenting the structural and cultural obstacles that prevent women from achieving a high level of leadership that allows them to participate in the various

decision-making processes in organizations. to which they belong. According to FAO, family farming is the largest form of agriculture practiced, with more than 500 million farms in the world. Within this large number of family farms are also women (Vincens, 2012). Will the mechanisms leading to the empowerment of these women not make it possible to improve the living conditions of farming communities? Shouldn't the social norms, traditions and gender stereotypes that limit women's participation undergo transformations to foster an egalitarian, inclusive and better developed society?

It is therefore important to question, from the perspective of a gender and sustainable development analysis, the invalidity of the controversies of discourses relating to women's development and empowerment in African social structures and specifically on farms in Benin.

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