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Women's Changing Opportunities and Aspirations Amid Male Outmigration

Insights from Rural Kenya

01.
About this brief

This brief presents a study on the changing opportunity spaces of men and women in the drylands of eastern Kenya (Crossland et al., 2021). It sheds light on the dynamics of rural aspirations in relation to both gender and age within the themes of outmigration and feminisation of agriculture. Using a novel methodology combining short narratives with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of aspirations and the wider socio-cultural context within which they are embedded and makes several recommendations for progressing aspirations research. The purpose of the research is to provide a better understanding of people's current situations, desired trajectories and the influences that shape these aspirations, so that researchers and development actors might better tailor their support options to meet the needs of different user groups by matching technologies to their strategies and demands.



Photo: ©Neil Palmer (CIAT)

02. Why look at aspirations?

- *Given the seasonal, risky nature of farming, inherent limitations of small farm size and prevalence of land degradation, peoples' livelihoods are diverse and rarely rely solely on farming.*
- *Investment decisions are complex and involve trade-offs between multiple livelihood activities. Agricultural production is unlikely to be the only aspect of a household's livelihood portfolio they are seeking to maximise.*
- *Not all who farm may want to be a farmer. Indeed, many may seek to step out of farming completely and focus on local or migratory off-farm income sources instead.*
- *Peoples' aspirations are likely to play an important role in investment decisions.*

Through understanding people's current situations, desired trajectories and the influences that shape these aspirations, agricultural researchers and development actors might tailor support options to better meet the needs of different user groups by matching technologies to peoples' strategies and demands (Mausch et al., 2018).



Step Out

For people who do not see a future in farming and want to **'step out'** and pursue non-farm income sources or even migrate to urban areas, labour-saving agricultural technologies, loans and training in non-farm skills may be more appropriate.



Hang In

For people who are net buyers of staple food crops and lack alternative options to farming or still hope to be able to 'step-up' at some point and are therefore **'hanging in'**, agriculture could provide an important safety net. Given their lack of resources, innovations aimed towards social protection and food security are likely to be important for this group.



Step Up

People who aspire to **'step up'** their farming activities are likely to be more willing to invest in longer-term and/or more financially intensive options, such as agroforestry, land restoration or irrigation technologies.

Agricultural assets and resources

Source: Adapted from Dorward et al., 2009

03.

What is an opportunity space?

The concept of ‘opportunity spaces’ has recently been used to conceptualise the formation of aspirations (e.g. Elias et al., 2018; Rietveld et al., 2020). An ‘opportunity space’ can be defined as “the spatial and temporal distribution of the universe of more or less viable options that [a person] may exploit as she/ he attempts to establish an independent life” (Sumberg et al., 2012:5).



Photo: ©Joshua Hanson-unsplash

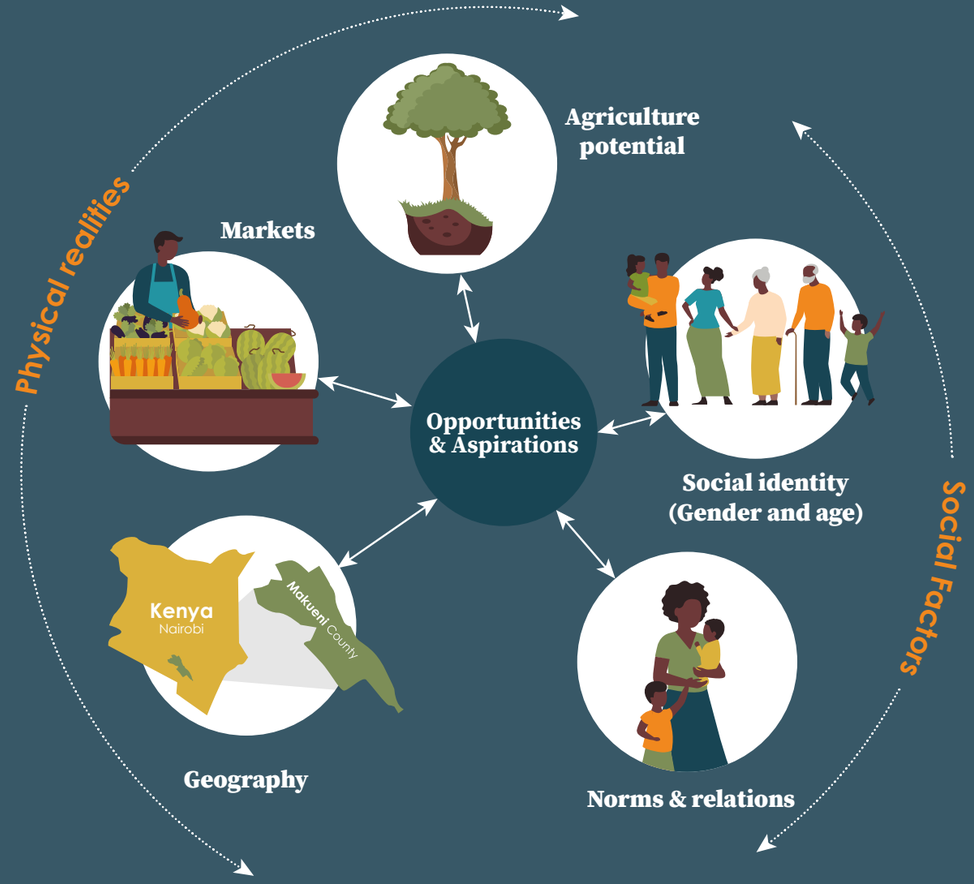
A person’s opportunity space is a function of:

- *The physical realities in which they live e.g., climate, geography and market availability; and*
- *Social factors e.g., social identity (gender and age), norms and relations.*

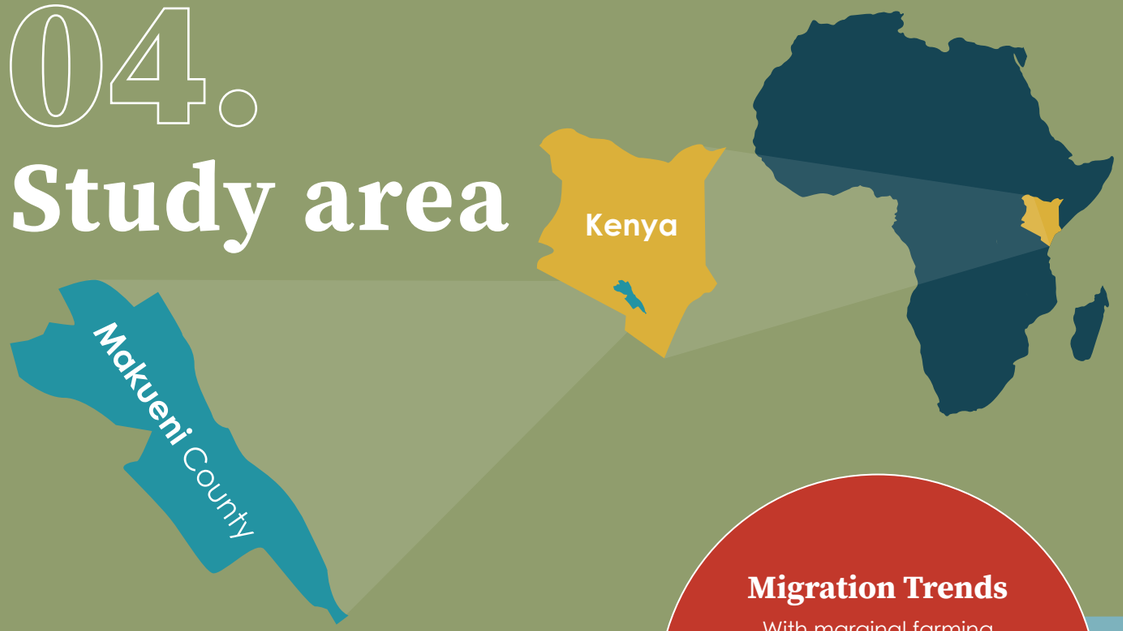
Age and gender are important social factors as they tend to determine access to, and control of, agricultural assets and resources and thus livelihood possibilities throughout life.

Consideration of the intrahousehold relations that underpin men’s and women’s livelihood strategies and aspirations are increasingly pertinent with intensifying migration trends. In Makueni County, men are increasingly migrating to supplement household livelihoods with more distant off-farm incomes, with women often assuming the role of primary farmer and gaining greater agency over household and farming decisions.

Using a novel methodology combining short narratives with interviews and focus group discussions, this study aimed to provide a more nuanced understanding of how such changes shape men’s and women’s aspirations.



04.
Study area



Land Degradation

Agricultural productivity is limited by widespread land degradation in the form of soil erosion and low inherent soil fertility.

Migration Trends

With marginal farming conditions and insufficient off-farm employment opportunities locally, many people, particularly men, are increasingly choosing to migrate to towns or cities in search of work.

Health and Wellbeing

There are high levels of both poverty and food insecurity.

Intrahousehold Roles and Relations

Local communities are predominantly patriarchal, with the husband seen as the head of the household and the wife as the carer of the home and children. Women's land rights remain restricted by customary practices whereby women rarely inherit land themselves and typically attain secondary use rights through their husband following marriage.

Farm Type

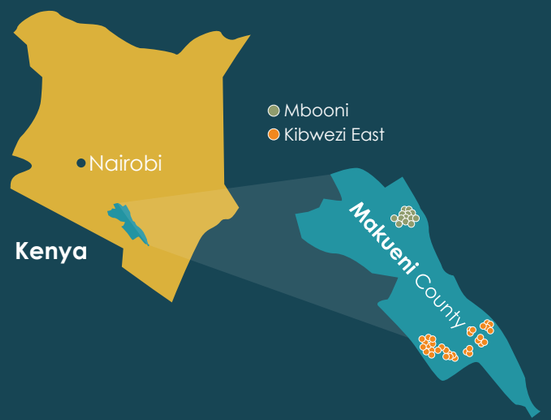
Small-scale rainfed agriculture dominates the area. Drought and crop failures are frequent due to increasingly erratic and unreliable rainfall.

Farm Size

Due to the subdivision of land and population growth, farms are small with an average farm size of 1.2 hectares (GoMC, 2018).

05.
Data collection

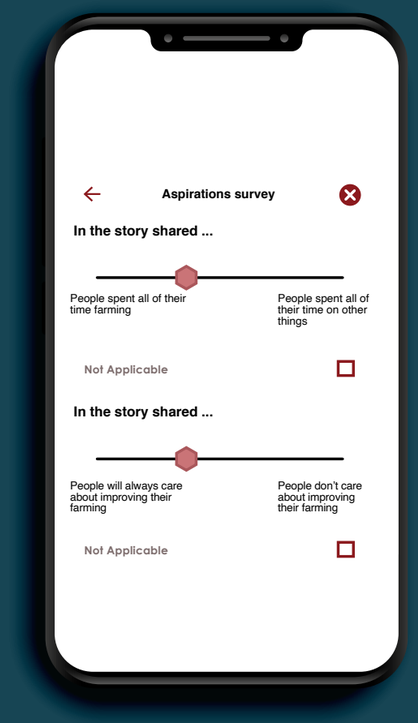
SURVEY LOCATIONS



Data consisted of 138 short aspirational narratives from 88 women and 50 men living in Makueni County (Kibwezi East and Mbooni constituencies). The narratives were supported by six focus group discussions (FGDs) and 12 semi-structured interviews, providing an opportunity to understand the social context within which aspirations are embedded.

Aspirations survey

The aspirations survey was conducted using SenseMaker®, a narrative-based survey tool. To capture individual's envisioned futures, respondents were asked: "Imagine your life in 10 years' time, tell a story about how you got to that point from this present day?". Respondents were then asked to interpret their stories or narratives using a set of predefined assessment questions. These self-assessment questions included the use of dyads, where respondents rate their narrative using a sliding-scale between two opposing statements (resulting in a score between 0 and 100).



Methodological innovation – applying the SenseMaker® tool:

A novel methodology was followed that incorporated a tool developed by Cognitive Edge, known as SenseMaker®. SenseMaker® is a survey tool that collects individual narratives and lets respondents interpret the narratives themselves (Mausch and Harris, 2020). The meta-analysis, combined with other quantitative data, assists in understanding complex changes in a community by revealing patterns in social dynamics across multiple interviews.

Focus group discussions:

The second phase of data collection involved two rounds of FGDs. In the first round of FGDs, an adapted version of the 'Ladder of Power and Freedom' exercise (Petesch et al., 2018) was used to explore recent changes in women's agency –the "ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999 p. 438). This involved asking participants to vote, in private, on which step of a five-step ladder best represented the majority of men and women in their community in terms of their current level of agency and that of five years ago (i.e. 2013), and then discussing the reasons for men's and women's movement, if any, up or down the ladder. The second round of FGDs was used to explore gender-specific migration trends and drivers and recent changes in opportunities in agriculture.

Semi-structured interviews:

Semi-structured individual interviews were also conducted with women from households with migrant members. Twelve women were purposively selected from project households to represent a range of different household situations, including women with migrant sons, husbands and daughters. These interviews covered similar topics to the FGDs but focused on women's personal experiences and those of migrant household members.

Key findings

Migration trends and drivers

- *Mainly young men with families migrate to earn an income in Nairobi or Mombasa.*
- *The number of people leaving is increasing due to poor rainfall and harsh farming conditions.*
- *Migration is viewed as a household livelihood strategy.*
- *The number of women who migrate is increasing but they are still in the minority.*
- *Women are discouraged from migrating due to gender norms and safety concerns.*
- *Men who migrate plan on returning in retirement.*

Men and women reported that migrants from their community tended to be younger adult men. To earn an additional income and support their families, they are leaving for jobs in cities or work as labourers on large farms.

Both men and women reported that the number of adult men leaving had increased over the past five years due to deteriorating climatic conditions and increasingly poor rainfall. Migration was viewed as part of a household strategy. The number of unmarried women leaving in search of work had also increased. However, women, and in particular those who are married, were said to have fewer opportunities to migrate and are expected to stay and look after the home and children.

Both men and women reported that most of the male migrants would return to the community in their retirement.



Reasons given for youth being disinterested in farming

"[Young people] think farming is not a prestigious and professional job"

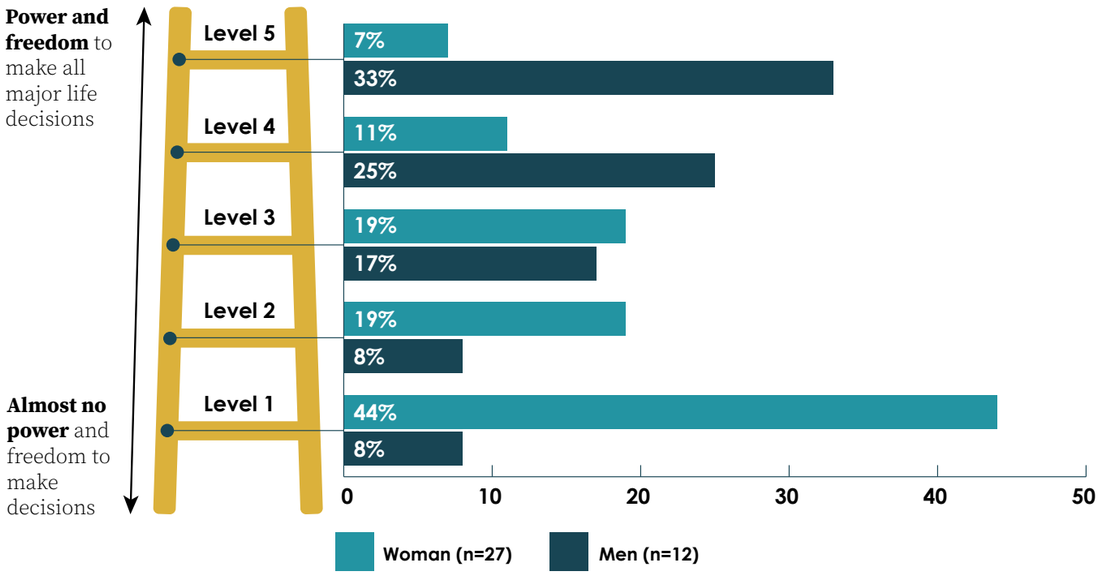
They "become lazy because of the [lack of] rain" and "discouraged because of the poor harvest"

"Anyone who has finished school is supposed to get a job"

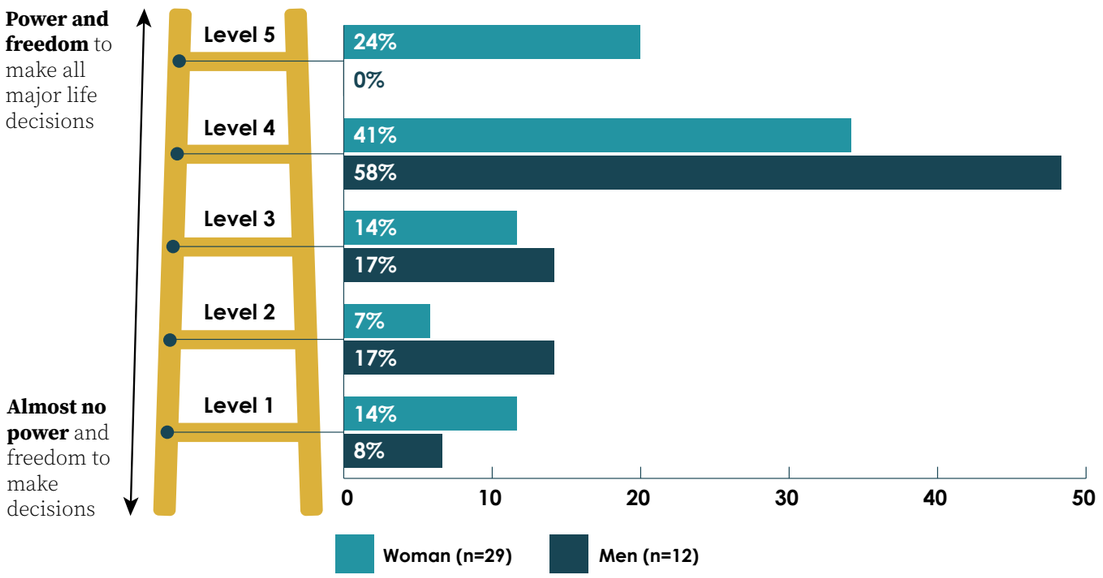
Photo: ©Hans Eiskonen - unsplash

Men's and women's agency and opportunities in agriculture

PAST (2013)



PRESENT (2018)



WOMEN

Women indicated a substantial increase in agency over the past five years due to an:

- Increased awareness of women's rights due to seminars and constitutional changes.
- The outmigration of men has given women more freedom to make decisions independently.
- Increase in women's involvement in agricultural projects and trainings.
- Age and position in the household further increase agency "mature people who can make decisions on their own" or widows.



MEN

Men indicated a small decrease in men's power and freedom in recent years. Their reasons mirrored those raised by the women. The men also acknowledged that women and children are better educated now and can offer valuable knowledge and ideas on how to improve and develop the family. Decisions are often discussed and made together as a household.



Photo: ©Kelvin Trautman

INCREASED AGENCY OR LACK OF CHOICES?

- Women interviewees believed that opportunities in agriculture had increased in recent years due to increased agricultural training and better knowledge of new farming practices. However, farming conditions were said to have worsened due to poor and unreliable rainfall.
- Women saw farming as a way to earn income and provide food for their families, and their plans for the future included gaining access to water for commercial production of vegetables, poultry farming and starting small shops to sell their produce.
- However, several women indicated that women's involvement and interest in farming is born out of necessity rather than choice. This implies that, while women's opportunities in agriculture are thought to be increasing, norms designating them as carers of the household and as vulnerable in urban settings, constrain their ability to explore opportunities outside of farming.



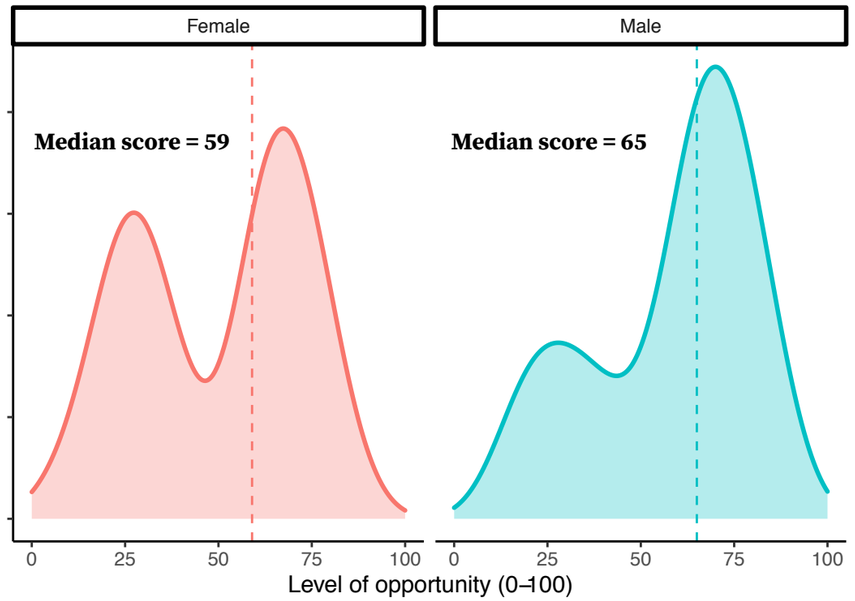
"There is an improvement. We have been trained in better methods of farming and have good varieties of seed favourable to this area, but the rains fail us". *- woman in Makueni County*

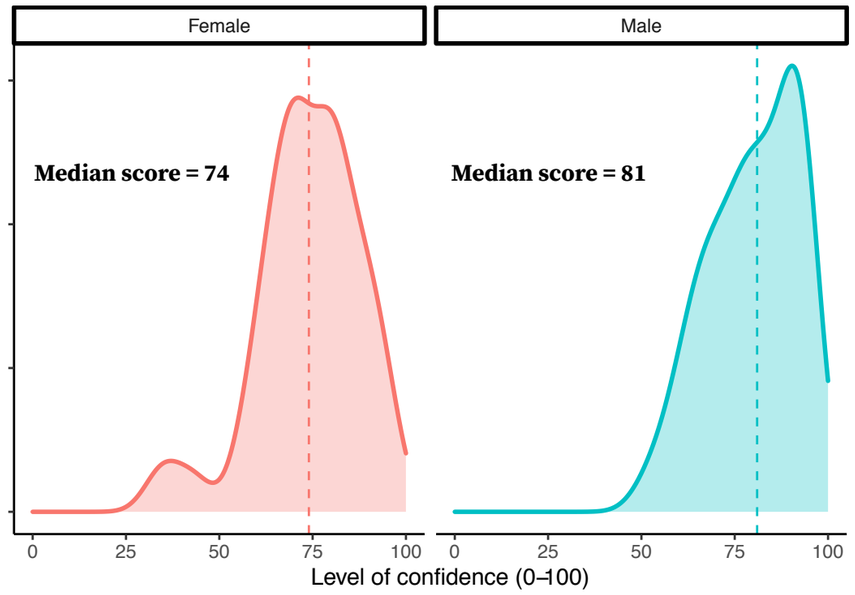
"Women farm because men move and leave the women and children behind. These women have no option but to work on their farms". *- woman in Makueni County*

Aspirations survey: men's and women's envisioned futures

- *Most men and women perceived their stories as positive.*
- *Women saw their world filled with fewer opportunities than men and were slightly less confident in achieving their goals.*
- *Women envisioned spending more of their time farming than men.*
- *Both genders cared about improving their farming.*
- *There were distinct trends in aspirational focus with age and gender.*
- *Men and women's aspirations diverge and reconverge with age.*
- *No men or women under 25 aspired to farm.*

Most men and women perceived their stories as positive (98%), however, women saw their world filled with fewer opportunities than men had and, although still high, were less confident in achieving their goals. Women also envisioned spending more of their time farming than men, yet both men and women indicated to a similar degree that they care about improving their farming, likely reflecting men's intentions to return to farming when they retire.





Men's and women's aspirations diverged and re-converged with age. While most women aged 25-35 aspired to invest in agriculture, men of the same age aspired to own businesses, find employment and saw farming as a largely secondary activity. Conversely, despite many women in this age group reporting that in addition to farming they currently look for casual work or have small businesses, they spoke of becoming "established" and "large-scale" farmers, with farming seen as a way of earning income.

At the age of 45-54 years, men return to farming in retirement and their aspirations on commercial production mirror those of similarly aged women:

"In the next ten years I want to buy tanks and store rainwater and start irrigation. I have already bought two that hold 10,000 litres and will add more soon. Currently I am a casual worker in Nairobi about to retire".

There was an increased focus on agricultural activities for men and women aged 35-44 years. Nevertheless, it was again women rather than men who emphasised commercialising their agricultural activities. Such findings challenge the notion that rural women are primarily interested in farming for home consumption.

Among older cohorts, both men's and women's aspirations coalesced towards agriculture with men over 45 years often looking to retire from their off-farm occupations and return to farming. Furthermore, unlike younger cohorts, it was primarily men within the over 55 age group who emphasised commercial production and wanting to sell their farm produce to "big markets", perhaps reflecting their return to farming following retirement.

While storytellers' farming aspirations were diverse, the specific activities mentioned by men and women did not significantly differ. For example, digging farm ponds or buying water tanks, planting mango trees, and acquiring more livestock or land. On the contrary, non-farming occupations and aspirations held by men and women were often stereotypically associated with their gender. For example, women aspired to own hair salons or clothing businesses while men aspired to own transportation businesses or to build rental apartments.

43% of men & women

over 25 mentioned wanting to educate their children and investing in farming was often seen as a way of earning money to do so, especially by women.

Non-occupational aspirations given by storytellers:

"I want to be a politician. I will achieve this by working hard in school and getting advice from my elders and also connect with the right people. I really want to improve the lives of my people". *– young man, 16-24 years.*

"In ten years time I want to educate my three children who are in high school up to university level and make sure that they secure good jobs". *– woman, 35-44 years.*





Photos: ©Kelvin Trautman

06.

What do the findings tell us?



Recognising intrahousehold heterogeneity of aspirations

- There is an apparent short-coming of aspirations research with a need to consider inter-household variation AND intra-household differences in aspirations.
- Livelihoods research usually focuses on the household as the unit of analysis and only the household head (often a man) is surveyed.
- BUT capturing the aspirations of only one household member is likely to provide a biased view of a household's desired trajectory.



Understanding intrahousehold roles and relations

- Household members often manage and own resources collectively and make decisions together.
- Diverging and converging aspirations with age likely reflect gender- and age-dependent divisions of labour and a negotiated strategy.
- Aspirations may be divergent but complementary (e.g., stepping up AND stepping out).



Changing opportunities, interests and capacities throughout life

- Specific events throughout life, such as finishing school; inheriting land; getting married; and having children reshape the opportunity spaces of both genders.
- There is an increased focus on farming among older age groups, particularly for men, reflecting their return to farming at retirement.
- Young men and women tend to have limited access to and control over land, and thus lack opportunities in farming.



Women's increasing agency and opportunities in agriculture

- In the absence of men and presence of norms restricting women's movement out of rural life, women are becoming more engaged in farm labour AND management.
- Women's participation in agricultural training has led to increased recognition of their capabilities and own confidence.
- Given their interest, enthusiasm and increasing agency, women are likely to be important catalysts of agricultural innovation and investment amid the increasing outmigration of men.

07.
Key recommendations

- If rural aspirations are to be used to target development efforts more effectively, researchers will need to consider the aspirations of multiple household members and how they interrelate and are mediated at the household level. Capturing the aspirations of multiple household members within surveys is likely to provide a more nuanced picture of a households desired trajectory.

- Attention should be paid to gendered and inter-generational roles and relations within the household. An important avenue for future research is explore to what extent aspirations are negotiated among household members and what this means in terms of different groups of women's actualized power to decide their own futures and that of their households.

- Attention should be paid to how men's and women's opportunity spaces change throughout life. This study provides only a snapshot of people's aspirations. Longitudinal studies could be used to track people's aspirations over time and how aspirations play out throughout life and with men's and women's changing circumstances and social identities.

- Narratives alone do not provide detail as to the realizability of people's aspirations. Given small farm sizes and marginal farming conditions, the financial returns to investments in farming may be limited. Combining narrative-based approaches, such as SenseMaker®, with more conventional socio-economic household surveys could prove more effective in informing the design of development efforts and identifying the barriers people face in attaining their aspired futures.

Capturing what drives the decision-making and aspirations of rural households will help design more effective policies and development initiatives that trigger positive, lasting change within the community.



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Authors: Mary Crossland, Ana Maria Paez Valencia, Tim Pagella, Kai Mausch, Dave Harris, Luke Dilley and Leigh Winowiecki

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For further information contact: Ana Maria Paez-Valencia
A.Paez-Valencia@cgiar.org

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United Nations Avenue, Gigiri, Nairobi, Kenya

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Restoration of degraded land for food security and poverty reduction in East Africa and the Sahel: taking successes in land restoration to scale.

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