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Rules, Norms, and Resistance: The Limits of Gender Equality in Tanzania's Coffee Sector

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Abstract Women are pivotal in the coffee industry but face systemic challenges that hinder their full participation in the value chain. Drawing on institutional work theory and the Women Empowerment Index in Agriculture (WEAI) framework, this study investigates how coffee value chain actors in Tanzania address these challenges and the extent to which their efforts contribute to women's empowerment. Research was conducted in four key coffee-growing districts: Mbozi, Mbinga, Rombo, and Kyerwa using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and field observations. Findings reveal that while strategies for education and support for women exist, there is insufficient focus on reconstructing discriminatory rules related to property rights, membership in coffee organizations, and income control. Consequently, women remain marginalized in resources access and economic participation. The study concludes that current efforts are insufficient to dismantle institutional barriers that perpetuate gender inequalities. Collaborative actions from the government and coffee sector actors are essential to challenge these barriers, enhance women's productivity, and improve household welfare, alongside the need for gender-responsive policies development and enforcement to address inequality in property rights and cooperative memberships.

Keywords: women empowerment; coffee; institutional roles; smallholder women farmers; Tanzania

Introduction

Women farmers are key drivers of agriculture growth in developing countries, holding significant potential for transformative change. Across the developing world, women constitute approximately 48 per cent of the agricultural workforce (FAO, 2020) and represent more than half of the farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa (UN Women, 2023). Women contribute between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of food production in low- and middle-income countries (Beltchika, 2022; Palacios-Lopez et al., 2017), playing critical roles in improving agricultural productivity, food security, and community livelihoods. Recognizing their contributions, global initiatives such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize gender equality and

women's empowerment, particularly in access to economic resources, land ownership, and decision making (United Nations, 2015).

Despite women's vast contribution and involvement in the agricultural sector and global efforts to ensure gender equality and women empowerment for decades, empirical evidence has shown that women throughout the developing world continue to face pervasive disadvantages (Malapit and Quisumbing, 2015; Zakaria, 2017). They have limited access to productive resources such as land, agricultural credit, agricultural extension services and have fewer economic opportunities and voice in decision making compared to their male counterparts (Akter et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2021; Kristjanson et al., 2017; Malapit et al., 2020; Quisumbing et al., 2019). Women are also disproportionately affected by climate change and have low adaptive capacity (Akter et al., 2017). Despite their substantial responsibilities in farming and household management, they are underrepresentation in farmer organizations that could support their socio-economic development and resilience (Akter et al., 2017; OECD, 2024; Saran et al., 2024). Studies conducted by Quisumbing et al. (2019) and Rubin et al. (2019) have shown that men predominantly control high-value cash crop enterprises including coffee production. These perpetuate gender inequalities that reduce women's productivity and well-being (Dietz et al., 2018). These inequalities hinder the agricultural sector's potential to promote inclusive economic growth, improve food security and create employment and business opportunities for women (Zakaria, 2017). Addressing these gender gaps and empowering women in agriculture production are keys for achieving the SDGs to promote gender equality and women empowerment, eradicate poverty and hunger.

In Tanzania, women constitute over 80 per cent of the agricultural labor force (Leavens et al., 2019; URT, 2016). Despite this, they face gender disparities rooted in discriminatory patriarchal systems and social norms that restrict their access to essential agricultural resources such as land, finance services, technologies, and extension services (URT, 2016). Men primarily dominate cash crop cultivation, particularly in the coffee industry, which is vital for rural employment and account for (FAO, 2023). Coffee, as one of Tanzania's primary agricultural export cash crops, contributes significantly to rural employment and income, accounting for 24 per cent of the country's exchange earnings and representing about 1.7 per cent to the total share of coffee production in the world (Kangile et al., 2021). Nearly 90 per cent of coffee is produced by some small family operations on 265,000 hectares of land, with women managing 19 per cent and 28 per cent of these farms and contributing up to 70 per cent of the labor (ICO, 2018; TCB, 2021).

However, the empirical evidence in Tanzania indicates that coffee is largely male-dominated, with over 70 per cent of coffee production, marketing and decision making over the coffee income is managed by men (Kangile et al., 2021; Komba, 2021; Manzanera-Ruiz et al., 2016; William, 2022). Female coffee farmers tend to earn less than men and are less likely to join cooperatives and face limited market opportunities, resources, and trainings (Howland et al., 2020; Kangile et al., 2021; Leavens et al.,

2019). Customary land ownership practices remain a significant barrier to women's access to land, with only 20 per cent of land in Tanzania is owned by women, who average 0.21–0.3 hectares compared to men's 0.61–0.84 hectares (FAO, 2023; ICO, 2018; Leavens et al., 2019). This limited access to productive resources hampers women's ability to secure credit, financial services and adopt new agricultural technologies, ultimately affecting the coffee sector productivity. Empowering women in coffee production and marketing could help close the gender gap and improve their coffee productivity, income, and household welfare. However, the steps and initiatives necessary to achieve this inequality in the coffee sector are not widely understood.

In recent years, the Government of Tanzania (GoT) has made some commitments to reduce gender disparities and empower women in agricultural sector, including in coffee production. This is evident in various policies and initiatives, such as the Tanzania Development Vision 2025, the Agricultural Policy of 2013, Agricultural Sector Development Strategy of the GoT (ASDS II) of 2015 and Tanzania Climate Smart Agriculture Programme (2015–2025). Furthermore, the Tanzania Agriculture and Food Security Investment Plan (TAFSIP) for the period 2011/12 to 2020/21 along with the National Strategy for Gender Development (FAO, 2023; URT, 2016) and the Tanzania Coffee Industry Development Strategy 2020–2025, all emphasize gender inclusion. As a result, the GoT in collaboration with development partners, international and local institutions have implemented interventions to boost women engagement in the coffee value chain, enhancing their contribution to income generation, food security, and climate resilience (FAO, 2023).

A growing body of evidence explores women's empowerment in agricultural and coffee value chains, focusing primarily on determinants of empowerment (Achandi et al., 2019; Quisumbing et al., 2023) and the effects of such empowerment on food security, nutrition, and household welfare (Lufuke and Tian, 2024; Madzorera et al., 2023; Masamha et al., 2018). A study by Seymour et al. (2016) Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania found a positive correlation between women's empowerment and their involvement in decision making regarding the adoption of improved varieties. Masamha et al. (2018) highlighted significant disempowerment in production, leadership and time within Tanzania's traditional food value chains. Programs aim at promoting participatory intra-household decision-making programs have shown promise in strengthening women's agency in south-west Tanzania's coffee communities (Lecoutere and Chu, 2024). Kangile et al. (2021) noted persistent gender imbalances in resource ownership and control as well as in the participation in the coffee supply chain. Yoshioka-Vargas et al. (2023) and Pelletier (2017) identified barriers to women's empowerment in the coffee sector, while Aku et al. (2023) have investigated the opportunities and constraints related to women empowerment in the cashew value chain Southern East Tanzania. Despite the extensive literature addressing women's empowerment in agriculture, particularly coffee production, there remains a notably lack of empirical evidence regarding the collaborative efforts among actors in the coffee value chain to address challenges faced by female farmers.

This study investigates how and to what extent actors in Tanzania's coffee value chain contribute to empowering female coffee farmers. Using Institutional Work theory and the WEAI, the study analyses the strategies employed in the coffee sector. The findings from this research contribute to the discourse on institutional work from a gender perspective, highlighting how actors in coffee value chain tackle challenges encountered faced by women in coffee farming. This understanding aims to boost women's participation in coffee production, productivity, and economic well-being, while also informing gender inclusive policies to address gender inequalities and promote women's empowerment in agriculture.

Theoretical background

Institutional work provides an essential theoretical framework to analyze and address the persistent issue of gendered agricultural practices, particularly in sectors like coffee farming where deeply ingrained social norms continue to disadvantage women. These practices arise from a largely unconscious cognitive background – norms and behaviors so entrenched in the fabric of everyday life that they are rarely questioned or noted by those who engage in them. Gendered agricultural roles, such as the division of labor in coffee farming or unequal access to resources, often remain hidden within the institutional structures that govern rural economies. Without effective strategies to deconstruct and challenge these practices, they persist, reinforcing the marginalization of women in agricultural systems.

In response to these limitations, the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) was introduced as a sector-specific measure that provides a nuanced view of women's empowerment in agriculture. Developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), the WEAI focuses on five domains: production, resources, income, leadership, and time. These domains provide insights into women's control over agricultural production, access to resources like land and equipment, household income distribution, participation in community organizations, and time allocated to various activities (Alkire et al., 2013). By focusing on these specific domains, the WEAI offers tool for policymakers and researchers a tool to tackle gender inequalities in agricultural sector.

The importance of institutional work theory comes into play precisely because it helps bring this 'unthought' cognitive background into view. Institutional work, particularly as articulated by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), categorizes the types of actions that actors take to either create, maintain, or disrupt institutions (Table 1). Gendered agricultural practices represent a clear example of institutional maintenance – these practices are sustained through embedded social norms, informal rules, and accepted behaviors. The theory provides a framework to typologize and analyze initiatives aimed at disrupting these norms, facilitating transformation by recognizing the role of institutions in shaping behavior. Without a theoretical lens like institutional

Types of Institutional Work	Strategy	Definition
Creating strategies	Advocacy	Mobilizing political, regulatory, and social support for institutional change via pressure or persuasion
	Defining	Construction of rule systems that establish roles and status hierarchies
	Vesting	Construction of rule systems that defines property rights
	Constructing identities	Establishing or changing the relationship between actors and the broader field, reshaping habitus, or institutional logic
	Changing Normative Associations	Re-making the connections between sets of practices and the moral and cultural foundations for those practices
	Constructing Normative Networks	Construction of interorganizational connections through which practices become normatively sanctioned and which form the relevant peer group with respect to compliance, monitoring and evaluation
	Mimicry	Connecting new practices to established and taken-for-granted practices and rules to ease adoption
	Theorizing	Developing causal or abstract narratives to justify or make sense of new practices.
	Educating	Inculcating skills and knowledge to support novel practices
Maintaining strategies	Enabling work	Maintaining institutional supports for practices, such as providing resources and establishing routines
	Policing	Monitoring to detect deviations from existing rules or common practices
	Detering/Deterrence	Establishing or threatening sanctions for deviation from established practices
	Valorizing and Demonizing	Praising or condemning behaviors that are seen as consistent or inconsistent with established practices
	Mythologizing	Mythologizing consists of storytelling about established institutions or practices to maintain their embeddedness in identities, habitus, or institutional logics
	Embedding and Routinizing	Building or maintaining routine, repeated, and habitual behaviors in support of established institutions and practices.
Disrupting Strategies	Disconnecting sanctions/rewards	Working through state apparatus to disconnect rewards and sanctions from some set of practices, technologies, or rules
	Disassociating moral foundations	Contesting existing moral, ethical, or political justifications for established practices.
	Undermining assumptions and beliefs	Contesting established, taken-for-granted understandings supporting existing practices and institutions

Table 1: Categories and types of institutional work.

Source: Lawrence and Suddaby (2006).

work, it becomes difficult to systematically identify and understand the efforts needed to transform these entrenched practices practiced by women in the coffee sector.

At the core of this relationship is the idea that gendered agricultural practices are not just arbitrary customs – they are part of a broader institutional structure that significantly shapes and constrains opportunities for women. Agricultural roles are often defined by implicit rules that determine who can access land, who controls income from crops, and who makes decisions within farming households and cooperatives. Institutional work provides the necessary vocabulary and framework to engage with these regulations, making them visible and open to critique. For instance, in coffee farming, where women perform much of the manual work but rarely control the income, is not simply a cultural artifact – it is an institutionalized practice that needs to be disrupted for meaningful empowerment to occur.

Furthermore, institutional work theory introduces the idea of ‘creating’ and ‘disrupting’ institutions, which are crucial when considering how to address gender inequality in agriculture. The ‘creating’ aspect encompasses initiatives aimed at establishing new systems, rules, and norms that promote equality, such as policies that grant women land ownership or equal access to agricultural training. These efforts are fundamental in reshaping the opportunity structures available to women. Conversely, the ‘disrupting’ aspect focuses on dismantling the discriminatory rules and norms that perpetuate gender inequality. In the context of gendered agricultural practices, disrupting means challenging the informal and formal institutions that marginalize women from decision-making roles or limit their economic power within the agricultural value chain.

While institutional work provides a clear framework for addressing these issues, the two perspectives – gendered practices and institutional work – are interdependent. The gendered division of labor and discriminatory practices in agriculture highlights the need for institutional work, as they reflect entrenched systems in need of change. Conversely, institutional work theory gain insight from examples like gendered agricultural practices to demonstrate how unconscious norms are sustained and how challenging them requires deliberate, structured action. The transformation of these practices requires more than policy changes; it demands a fundamental shift in institutional behaviors, making institutional work an indispensable tool for achieving gender equity in agriculture.

This theoretical framework outlines necessary actions and identifies key actors in addressing gendered practices, including women themselves, cooperatives, NGOs, and government entities. Institutional work allows us to map out the various stakeholders and their contributions to either sustaining or transforming the institutionalized norms. For instance, NGOs that promote female empowerment through agricultural training programs are engaging in ‘creating’ work by developing new norms for women’s participation in coffee production. At the same time, male-dominated cooperatives that deny women decision-making power are engaging in ‘maintaining’ work, reinforcing disparities.

In conclusion, the synergy between institutional work and gendered agricultural practices is essential for understanding and addressing gender inequality in sectors

like coffee farming. Gendered practices highlight the need for institutional work as a tool for deconstructing entrenched norms, while institutional work provides the framework for analyzing and transforming these practices. By making these implicit institutional forces explicit, and by categorizing the various types of efforts for change, institutional work theory offers a comprehensive approach to understanding how gendered inequalities in agriculture can be dismantled. The interplay of these perspectives shows that to empower women in agriculture, it is not enough to provide them with more resources; we must also challenge and change the institutions that structure their exclusion.

Materials and methods

This research was undertaken as part of the Paradoxes of Climate-Smart Coffee (PACSMAC) project across four selected coffee-growing districts of Tanzania; Mbinga, Mbozi, Rombo, and Kyerwa. These four districts were selected due to their high concentration of smallholder coffee farmers, regional variation in gender norms, and the presence of multi gender-targeted interventions by NGOs and government actors focused on climate resilience. This diversity provided a representative context for analyzing gender empowerment dynamics within the coffee value chain. The variation across these districts provided a rich comparative context for examining institutional dynamics and gender empowerment interventions within the coffee value chain. The study covered a total number of 32 villages and consisted of 2 distinct phases of data collection. The preliminary fieldwork, conducted in August and December 2022, served as an exploratory phase to refine the research questions, identify key actors, and inform the design of the main fieldwork. The primary data collection phase, conducted between March and October 2023.

A multi-method qualitative research design was employed, combining Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and field observations. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques based on their relevance to the coffee sector, their gender, and their engagement in value chain activities. These participants included female coffee farmers, village leaders, NGO representatives, cooperative officials, and government extension officers.

Discussions and interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached. Field assistants were trained in qualitative interviewing and ethical research practices to ensure data quality and consistency. The key informant interviews involved representatives from government agencies, NGOs, village leaders, Agricultural Marketing Cooperative Societies (AMCOS), female lead farmers, and members of women's organizations. These interviews, lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, focused on understanding the roles of different actors in gender empowerment, identifying challenges women face in coffee production, and outcomes of gender-related initiatives. A semi-structured interview guide ensured consistency while allowing flexibility to explore relevant themes. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were

conducted in all 32 villages, with separate sessions for men, women, and mixed youth groups to capture diverse perspectives. Each group consisted of 6–10 participants, and discussions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The discussions explored topics such as women's roles in coffee production, challenges to empowerment, and the perceived effectiveness of current initiatives.

Field observations complemented the interviews and discussions, providing contextual insights into farming practices, cooperative meetings, and training sessions. Observations focused on the participation of women in these activities and their interactions with other stakeholders. These real-time observations validated the data collected through interviews and FGDs, ensuring alignment between reported and observed behaviors. By integrating qualitative interviews, focus group discussions and field observations, the study enabled the triangulations of data collected from multiple sources, providing a more comprehensive understanding of gender empowerment and the effectiveness of institutional interventions in the coffee sector.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis with Nvivo 12 software. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to uncover recurring themes and variations across groups. The coding process was guided by three types of institutional work namely *creating*, *maintaining*, and *disrupting strategies*, alongside five domains of Empowerment (5DE) of WEAI: production, resources, income, leadership, and time. These domains were qualitatively adapted as thematic codes to explore empowerment-related narratives and institutional interventions within the coffee sector. The domains served as sensitizing concepts during the coding process, helping to identify key narratives related to empowerment and the institutional factors that shape them. This approach allowed us to examine not only the presence of empowerment indicators but also to explore participants' lived experiences and interpretations of empowerment. While the WEAI domains have primarily been used in quantitative studies to measure women's empowerment, our research adapts them for qualitative analysis to explore the nuanced and multifaceted nature of women's empowerment focusing on how women in agriculture experience and perceive empowerment across different socio-cultural and economic contexts. Through open-ended interviews and focus group discussion, this approach provided deeper insights into the subjective and lived experiences of women, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies. Additionally, the qualitative analysis of WEAI enhanced our understanding of how women negotiate power within household, communities and the marketplace, as well as how they address structural barriers.

Upon completing the coding process, findings were summarized, organized, and compiled into a cohesive narrative. These were then interpreted and compared with existing scholarly literature and theoretical frameworks to derive conclusions and contextualize the results. Ethical considerations were integral to every stage of the research process. Prior to data collection, verbal and written informed consent was obtained from all participants, including consent to record interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, their

right to withdraw at any point, and the intended use of the data. To protect confidentiality, identifying details were anonymized in transcripts and the final report.

Special care was taken to ensure gender-sensitive engagement, particularly in FGDs with women, to create safe, inclusive spaces for participants to speak freely about their experiences. Discussions were facilitated by trained female research assistants and researchers where appropriate. The research team also consulted local leaders to gain community entry and ensure that protocols aligned with local cultural norms. Despite challenges such as logistical constraints and deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms that limited women's participation in some contexts, the study's multi-phase approach, robust sampling design, and integration of multiple qualitative methods ensured a comprehensive and reliable analysis of gender empowerment within Tanzania's coffee value chain.

Results

Actors and their gender-related interventions

The findings highlight the active involvement of various actors at the local level to enhance the capacities of women farmers in coffee production and foster resilience to climate change, which disproportionately affects them. These actors include government organizations, e.g. Tanzania Coffee Board (TCB), Local Government Authorities (LGAs); NGOs, e.g. Solidaridad, Café Africa, Tanzania Women Association (TAWOCA), City Coffee; processors, e.g. Coffee Management Society (CMS), Mbinga and Mbozi Coffee Curing Companies (MCCC), and Dan and Associates Enterprises Limited (DAE Ltd); certifiers and financial institutions, as summarized in Table 2. These actors collaborative efforts to implement various coffee-related initiatives at the local level such as Coffee Partnership for Tanzania (2012–2016), *Kahawa ya Kesho* (Coffee of Tomorrow) (2018–2022), Passport for Coffee Project (PACE) (2020–2024), Smallholders Coffee Development Project (CODE-P) (2020–2024) in Southern Highlands, and the Sustainable Rejuvenation of Coffee Production Project in Western Tanzania (2019–2024). Key goals of these initiatives include promoting gender equality and women inclusion in coffee production and marketing, capacity building, and improving livelihoods and climate resilience. For instance, Café Africa, Tanzania Coffee Research Institute (TaCRI), Brac International, and Agricultural Non-State Actors Forum (ANSAF) collaborate to strengthen the capacity of smallholder coffee farmers, particularly women (over 50 per cent), in improving coffee production and quality coffee, income, processing and market access. Similarly, Solidaridad, TaCRI and Envirocare work together on the PACE project to improve gender relations and empower youth and women farmers in Southern Highlands.

The *Kahawa ya Kesho* project is a partnership between Catholic Relief Service (CRS) and Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung (HRNS), focused on diversifying livelihood

Type of Institution	Examples of institutions/actors	Role(s)
Government	Ministry of Agriculture, TCB, Local government authorities	e.g. Gender-related training and policies; preferential loans to women groups; training on coffee production and good agricultural practices; coffee seedlings provision to women groups
NGOs	e.g. Solidaridad, HNRS, Café Africa, City Coffee, Tylor Winch, TAWOCA, KIBOAVI, Vi agroforestry, Envirocare, Technoserve, MICO	Training to women (e.g. on sustainable and climate-resilient production, gender-related issues, financial literacy), formulation and strengthening women's economic groups, financial support, business development for women, provision of agricultural inputs, and market linkages for women's products,
Research	TaCRI	Provision of coffee seedlings to women groups, Training on coffee-related issues & Demo plots
Financial Institutions	e.g. BRAC International, Tanzania Agricultural Development Bank (TADB), the Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (CRDB)	Financial support and literacy to women groups
Processors/ Curing Companies	e.g. City Coffee, MCCOs, DAE Ltd, CMS	Training GAPs, female lead farmers, gender-related issues, pre and post-harvest credits, Job opportunities for women in coffee processing, coffee seedlings
Community organizations	AMCOS	Gender-related training, provision of incentives for female coffee farmers, income-generating activities for women
Certifiers	e.g. Fairtrade Africa, Sucafina Tanzania-Rainforest alliance, Coffee and Farmer Equity (C.A.F.E), the Common Code of Conduct (4C)	Promotion of gender inclusion in coffee production, provision of gender-related training, investment in community infrastructure & services

Table 2: Actors and their role in empowering women coffee farmers.

Source: Authors, (2023).

opportunities of 450 young women and men (ages 18–35) living in coffee-producing communities in Mbeya and Songwe regions. As part of the Coffee Farmer Alliances of Tanzania (CFAT) program (2013–2020), HNRS supported over 52,000 smallholder coffee farming households, with more than 46 per cent women participants. The program aimed to promote joint decision making in coffee-growing households, enhancing productivity, and strengthening farmer organizations. Furthermore, the Sustainable

Rejuvenation of Coffee Production Project in Western Tanzania, funded by Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) 2019–2024, was implemented by Café Africa in collaboration with Cooperative Unions in Kagera, TCB, and TaCRI, trained 22,250 coffee farmers, 30 per cent of whom are women, in sustainable, high-quality coffee production.

Through these initiatives, various organizations have launched initiatives such as training for women coffee farmers on topics like good agricultural practices, gender inclusivity, climate-smart agriculture, financial literacy, leadership, and entrepreneurship. Organizations such as TCB, Solidaridad, and TaCRI have been involved in supplying agricultural inputs such as climate-resilient, high-yield coffee varieties, while Solidaridad, HRNS, Technoserve, and Envirocare work to strengthen women's economic groups and advocating for their inclusion in coffee cooperatives. NGOs like HRNS and Solidaridad also offer financial support, linking women's groups to formal financial institutions and government for favorable loan access.

Moreover, [Table 3](#) presents the frequency of institutional work strategies in the data collected. Strategies frequently coded are highlighted in green, while less frequently and never coded strategies are highlighted in light red/red color. The number of references indicate how often interviewees mentioned practices aligned with each strategy in the FGDs and KIIs. The findings indicate that various actors have primarily focused on strategies that aimed at creating education for women (641 mentions), constructing women's identities (540 mentions), enabling work to support women (415), embedding/routinizing practices (339), and strengthening women's networks (324), All of which are significant in empowering women coffee farmers.

However, there was limited attention to strategies such as vesting, defining, deterring, and policing which focus on reshaping the rules and regulations that define ownership rights, identity, and membership boundaries in coffee organizations, and ensuring compliance with regulations. Additionally, we found no concrete descriptions of actors that directly work to disrupt institutions (such as communities and governments), or social-cultural norms and practices that sustain discrimination against women farmers. This suggests that while efforts largely aim to create agency among women in coffee production, there is lack of focus on changing discriminatory institutions that hinder the effective empowerment of women.

The findings also show a strong interconnections or complementarity between different strategies as indicated in [Figure 1](#). Core strategies such as educating, constructing identities, and enabling work serve as a foundation for others. For example, education has been identified as a basis for constructing the identities of many women. Training programs in coffee production, good agricultural practices, gender roles, leadership, and entrepreneurship skills have enabled many women to become coffee farmers, lead farmers, entrepreneurs, and leaders in farmer's organizations. Moreover, enabling work such as investments in community infrastructure and essential services like water and healthcare, alleviate women's time burdens, allowing them to engage more actively in coffee production.

Type of institutional work	Strategy	References
Creating Strategies	Educating	641
Creating Strategies	Constructing identities	540
Maintaining Strategies	Enabling work	415
Maintaining Strategies	Embedding and Routinizing	339
Creating Strategies	Constructing Normative Network	324
Creating Strategies	Theorizing	308
Creating Strategies	Advocacy	155
Maintaining Strategies	Policing	140
Creating Strategies	Mimicry	118
Creating Strategies	Changing Normative Associations	115
Disrupting Strategies	Undermining assumptions and beliefs	94
Creating Strategies	Defining	76
Creating Strategies	Vesting	40
Maintaining Strategies	Valorizing and Demonizing	25
Maintaining Strategies	Deterring/Deterrence	2
Maintaining Strategies	Mythologizing	0
Disrupting Strategies	Disconnecting sanctions/ rewards	0
Disrupting Strategies	Disassociating moral foundations	0

Table 3: Frequency of coded strategies to empower women farmers.

Source: Authors (2023).

Women empowerment strategies

Based on the findings, the following are the key strategies that have been highly identified to have significant impact on empowering women in various capacities. Table 4 provides a description of identified key strategies and how they have empowered female coffee farmers.

Figure 1: Absolute number of times two strategies within on interview.

	Enabling work	Policing	Detering/Deterrance	Valourizing and Demonizing	Mythologizing	Embedding and routinizing	Advocacy	Defining	Vesting	Constructing identities	Changing normative associations	Constructing normative networks	Mimicry	Theorising
Enabling work														
Policing	54													
Detering/Deterrance	2	2												
Valourizing and Demonizing	6	4	0											
Mythologizing	0	0	0	0										
Embedding and routinizing	91	58	2	6	0									
Advocacy	52	38	2	1	0	51								
Defining	37	30	2	2	0	40	25							
Vesting	26	18	1	2	0	22	17	22						
Constructing identities	105	62	2	4	0	99	63	48	29					
Changing normative associations	54	28	1	6	0	46	24	26	20	54				
Constructing normative networks	60	41	2	2	0	59	44	36	20	71	32			
Mimicry	55	34	1	5	0	49	23	17	15	54	34	31		
Theorising	89	56	2	5	0	84	57	39	23	101	46	63	48	
Educating	107	65	2	5	0	101	63	48	28	122	55	71	57	103

Source: Authors (2023).

Creating education and training programs

Organizations like Solidaridad, Café Africa, City Coffee, TAWOCA and HRNS are actively empowering women through educational and training opportunities to enhance their coffee farming skills. These organizations have conducted various training in good agricultural practices, climate smart practices, environmental conservation, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and gender sensitization programs. In an interview, a representative from TaCRI shared; ‘we have established several coffee nurseries and farmer field plots to trained coffee farmers, including women groups on good agricultural practices and how to manage their coffee farms’. These programs have equipped women with valuable skills and information, encouraging their active participation in coffee production and join different coffee

Actors' Strategies	Examples	Outcomes	Domain of Empowerment
Education and training	E.g. Training on GAPs, CSA, entrepreneurship & business skills, gender-related issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased women's knowledge on coffee farming - Self-confidence & influence over decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decision making over production - Membership in organizations
Constructing Identity of women	E.g. Training female farmers, entrepreneurs, gender roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve women status and respect within communities as female farmers, entrepreneurs, leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decision making over production - Membership and Leadership
Enabling work	E.g. Financial support, Trainings, CPUs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to finance - Increase women's ability to invest in resource for production - Reduced coffee processing at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to productive resources - Control over use of income & expenditure - Reduce time burden
Embedding/ routinizing	E.g. Continuous training on VSLA, GAPs, business skills and financial literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased knowledge & skills - Increased ability to invest in resources for production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to productive resources, - Decision making over production
Constructing normative network	E.g. Formulation of VSLAs, female farmer organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased access to financial resource information, trainings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to productive resources - Control over income and expenditure - Membership & leadership

Table 4: Actors Strategies and their impact on women's empowerment.

Source: Authors (2023).

groups, leading to increased coffee productivity and contributing to local economies.

Women who have been involved in these programs have expressed gratitude for the opportunities. One woman in a focus group discussion shared her experience, stating that

we have received training on coffee production, climate smart practices and good agricultural practices, which include training on management of coffee farms, how to apply agrochemicals to control pest and diseases, and post-harvest skills. The knowledge

and skills we have gained have greatly enhanced our understanding of coffee farming resulting in improved coffee productivity and quality, motivating many of us to actively engage in coffee production. (FGD with women, Mbinga, 2023)

Organizations like HRNS and Solidaridad offer specialized training for women to become lead farmers who educate others, thereby fostering self-empowerment and enhancing their community status. A female lead farmer from Myangayanga village noted, *‘I participated in training on coffee production, nursery management, and good agricultural practices. Now I proudly serve as a lead farmer within and outside my village’*.

Gender-focused training initiatives aim to raise awareness of gender roles, promote gender equality and encourage both genders’ involvement in the coffee value chain. For example, HRNS has implemented the Gender Household Approach to sensitize about gender roles in decision making within coffee-growing households. These programs have positively influencing men’s attitude, encouraging them to involve their wives in coffee production and marketing decisions. One youth participant in Iyula, Mbozi mentioned that, *‘training on gender roles from HRNS changed our perceptions of women in coffee production. We now see them as farming partners and not just laborers’*. Additionally, some men have started assisting their wives with household responsibilities and farming, allowing them more time to rest and income-generating activities. Gender change agents have emerged as role models and have played key role in disseminating knowledge within their communities. These trainings have enhanced women’s agency, self-confidence, and decision-making power at both household and community levels. However, some women noted that these programs primarily targeted women groups established by various organizations, leaving a significant number of women at a disadvantage. Additionally there are concerns about the limited expertise and availability of Agricultural Extension Officers in coffee-related matters, which affects their engagement with farmers.

Constructing normative networks

Various women networks such as Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), income-generating groups, and women focused coffee farming organizations, have been established by organizations, like Solidaridad, HRNS, Technoserve and Café Africa. These networks aim to improve financial access, agricultural skills, crop diversification, social capital and information sharing. By 2023, 75 VSLAs were established in Mbinga, Songwe and Mbeya benefiting over 2380 targeted women by the year 2023. As one Solidaridad representative noted, *‘We introduced VLSA to enable women and youth access to savings and loans services, which they can use to transform their production and improve their income’* (Representative from Solidaridad, Mbinga, 2023).

These networks have provided significant benefits to women coffee farmers, including access to savings and loans, business networking opportunities, information dissemination

and training. These resources have ultimately contributed to increased production, better quality, and more sustainable coffee supply, thereby improving the welfare of women coffee farmers and their families. Through the VSLAs, women have also been able to fund small businesses, invest in agricultural inputs and pay for their children's education.

Some AMCOS have adopted strategies to promote the inclusion of women in coffee cooperatives, by encouraging joint membership with their husbands or as sole members. An AMCOS leader shared,

In the past, the presence of women within the cooperative was very minimal. To address this, our AMCOS has adopted strategies like offering education through village meetings and providing financial incentives to women who sell at least 100 kilograms of coffee to the cooperative per season. (Interview with AMCOS Leader, Kamuli AMCOS, Kyerwa District, 2023)

This approach has led to increase female participation in cooperatives, providing access to resources such as agricultural inputs, market information, extension services and loans. However, interviews with AMCOS leaders indicate that women's representation still remains below 30 per cent of total membership. One leader of Ushiri AMCOS noted that, out of 1200 members, women make up only one quarter, and the rest are men. Women highlighted that membership criteria for joining AMCOS such as being the head of the household and having access to land, limit many women's ability to join cooperatives. One village leader interviewed in Iteera village shared, *'many women lack membership in coffee cooperatives, only a few have joint memberships with their spouses or joined after their husbands' death. The absence of land significantly hinders many women's ability to qualify for membership'* (A village government leader, Ushiri, Rombo District, 2023).

Enabling work

Enabling work involves maintaining institutional support by offering resources and creating structured routines to facilitate practices. Various organizations have supported women through economic empowerment programs, training and financial services. In partnership with Solidaridad, HRNS and Coffee cooperatives, the government, through TaCRI and the LGAs has been distributing high yielding and disease-resistant coffee seedlings and established coffee demonstration plots to educate farmers, including women on climate-smart farming practices. Solidaridad and TaCRI have aided women's groups establish coffee nurseries for income generation. A representative from Solidaridad stated,

We support women by supplying coffee seedlings and materials to establish their coffee nurseries for business. We have several women groups that operate their own coffee nurseries, selling seedlings to other farmers and thereby earning income. Provision of coffee seedlings to women has the potential to allow women to adapt to climate change but also boost their coffee productivity and income.

Financial institutions such as Brac International, and LGAs have provided loans to women's groups to invest in small businesses, agricultural inputs, and assets like land to expand their coffee business. For example, the Wapendanao Women Coffee Group in Kyerwa secured a loan of 21,000,000 Tanzanian shillings from the LGA which was used to purchase a Central Pulper Unit (CPU) for coffee processing. The village government provided land for the establishment of the facility, which is expected to reduce time spent processing coffee at home and contribute to their socio-economic empowerment.

The establishment of VSLAs has empowered many women by providing them with access to savings and loans, reducing socio-economic vulnerability and fulfilling their household requirements. These women have also been encouraged to open bank accounts, enhancing their financial management and independent. Many women have reinvested their VSLAs loans into agriculture, small businesses, livestock, and land for coffee cultivation and other food crops. An FGD participant from Myangayanga, Mbinga, shared

My life has changed because of coffee. I took out a loan from Muungano women's group to renovate my house and buy a motorcycle 'bodaboda' for transportation business. I now use the income from coffee sales and 'bodaboda' business to repay the loan. ... My bodaboda is also helping me to transport my coffee from the farm to the CPU station.

These forms of enabling work have enhanced women's development through self-employment, improving their income and livelihoods.

Constructing identities of women

Various organizations have helped reconstruct the identities of women engaged in coffee production through various grassroots initiatives. Training programs on coffee production, sustainable agriculture practices, and climate smart practices have empowered women to transition from laborers to skilled, self-sufficient coffee farmers. Some women have emerged as lead farmers and gender change agents, inspiring others to engage in coffee production. A female lead farmer from Mbinga (2023) noted, '*As a lead farmer, I have inspired many women to participate in coffee production. This journey has strengthened my confidence and earned me respect in my community*'.

Women groups, such as VSLAs, coffee groups and income-generating groups for women along with their connections to financial institutions, have granted many women access to financial resources, aiding their journey towards financial independence. The financial autonomy has enabled women to challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations that typically position them as secondary income earners and caretakers. Financial access has also enabled many women to invest in their small businesses, coffee business, small retail shops, poultry and livestock keeping, elevating their social identity from farmers to business women. One VSLA

member stated, *‘Financial access has enabled me to earn income and contribute to my family, but also to invest in my small business which has enabled me to gain respect and recognition in my community’*. Efforts to promote coffee farming as a joint family business and fostering greater inclusion of women in coffee cooperatives have strengthened their confidence and decision-making power. Apart from being female coffee producers, lead farmers, leaders in community and farmer’s organizations, and entrepreneurs, there is also a growing presence of women in coffee processing industries, however, they still occupy lower-status valued roles such as carrying, cleaning, drying and sorting coffee beans. Nevertheless, these opportunities have enabled women to boost their confidence, pride and income.

Embedding or routinizing

A number of organizations institutionalized monitoring practices for women’s empowerment. For instance, some AMCOS have established regular monitoring systems to encourage women’s participation in coffee production, using general assemblies as a platform to promote women’s involvement in decision making. Many AMCOS collaborate with the village government leaders during the village meetings to address coffee production issues and advocating for gender equality and women inclusion in coffee production. TCB, in partnership with TaCRI and district councils, has consistently distributed high yielding, disease-resistant coffee varietals, while Solidaridad and TaCRI have helped women’s coffee groups establish nurseries. A solidaridad representative shared, *‘We conduct monthly monitoring of our VSLA group and perform an annual review to assess the progress made, identify the challenges faced and the way forward’* (Interview with Solidaridad Official, 2023). Additionally, organizations like Café Africa and HRNS support coffee farmers including women in obtaining coffee certifications like Fairtrade and organic coffee by employing agricultural extension officers and coffee inspectors to regularly visit coffee farmers, ensure quality, and enable farmers to access premium prices.

Gender empowerment gaps

Despite the implementation of various empowerment strategies, there has been limited progress in challenging underlying assumptions, moral foundations and sanctions that sustain discrimination against women within the coffee value chain. Persistent inequalities especially in land ownership were highlighted by many women. Discriminatory customary laws and norms still consider the head of the household, typically men, as the sole land-owners, thereby denying women with no rights to land. One participant articulated women’s struggle with land ownership, stating

as rural women we face significant challenges regarding land ownership. Unlike men, women lack the rights to own land. Traditionally, when a woman gets married, she

loses her rights to own land, and inherit land from her parents. When we marry, the land we own becomes our husband's property. [A female participant in FGD with women, Igamba, Mbozi District]

Men in a mixed FGD, Kikukuru, Kyerwa, proudly mentioned that men are the owners of all productive resources including land. 'As the heads of the households, we are the rightful owners of all productive resources including land' Fewer than 10 per cent of women possess land ownership (KII with a village leader, Keni Village, Rombo District). This lack of land access not only hinders their ability to improve coffee production, join cooperatives and access agricultural inputs and loans leading to disempowerment. Evidence from various AMCOS visited indicates that men continue to dominate these organizations, with women constituting only 25–30 per cent of membership, with few in leadership roles. Without coordinated government efforts to reform these land access and cooperative's regulations and by-laws, gender equity remains inequitable.

Discriminatory social norms and practices were also evident in the management of coffee income. Despite women's significant labor contribution to coffee production and harvesting, men still retain control over coffee marketing and coffee incomes, leaving women with little influence in the process. One participant explained,

we have no right over the coffee income. Once the husband sells the coffee and receives the payment, he becomes unapproachable, and often withholds information about the earnings. Some even choose to move to their mistresses, returning home only when their pockets are empty. When questioned, they respond, "did you bring a coffee farm when I married you?". (Participant in FGD with women, Iteera village, Kyerwa)

Some women receive only household funds after coffee harvests, without the rights to ask about how much was earned from the coffee sale or the remaining income. One woman shared,

we are not involved in decisions about coffee income. Our responsibilities end when the coffee is harvested. When men receive the income, few share the amount with their wives. Most only give a small sum for household needs, and within a few days they claim the money is gone without revealing how much they received from sale. (FGD with women, Utiri Village, Mbinga District)

This lack of control over coffee income has led to instances of some women to secretly take coffee during the drying process and sell it to middlemen as a way to offset their labor contributions and meet personal requirements. One female lead farmer stated, '*the exclusion of women from coffee income has driven some women to secretly steal coffee during the drying process and sell it to middlemen, seeking to compensate for their labor and fulfill their needs*' (KII with a lead farmer, Kikukuru village, Kyerwa). As a result of limited access to coffee-related income, some women have lost interest in coffee cultivation and shifted their focus to other crops such as bananas and beans or become farm laborers.

Moreover, there is a resistance among many men to accept the financial independence of their wives, particularly in relation to their engagement in VSLAs and income-generating activities, fears a loss of respect and authority within the household. Some men frequently accuse their wives of neglecting their traditional responsibilities or feeling superior due to their financial autonomy. Some men have even abandoned household responsibilities, believing that women no longer require their support. This dynamic has led to increased marital tensions, breakdowns, and incidents of domestic violence. One man in FGD expressed that

I decided to divorce my wife after she joined the VSLA and started to earning some money, her behavior changed and she undermined my role as the head of the household. Sometime she would come home late, using her involvement in women's groups and VSLA as a justification.

This illustrates that the underlying assumptions, moral foundations and sanctions have not been largely disrupted.

Discussion and conclusion

This article critically evaluates the roles of various actors in empowering female coffee farmers in Tanzania, using an institutional work theory to analyze their strategies and impacts. We analyze how different actors work to address the challenges faced by women in the coffee sector and assess the impact of their initiatives on women's empowerment. The five domains of WEAI were utilized to guide the collection and analysis of qualitative data to gain in-depth understanding of the impact of actors' interventions on women's empowerment. The authors employed qualitative data gathered through interviews with actors in the coffee value chain, field observations and focus group discussions with women coffee farmers across four selected coffee-growing regions in Tanzania.

The findings reveal that government agencies, NGOs, financial institutions, certifying bodies, community organizations and processors are actively working to support women farmers. Their initiatives include education and awareness creation, strengthening of women's economic groups, construction of women's identities, provision of financial and agricultural inputs, market access, and enhancement of livelihoods opportunities, and strengthening women's resilience to climate change. The most frequently coded institutional work strategies for empowering women farmers include education creation, construction of women identities, enabling work to support women, embedding/routinizing and constructing women's networks (Table 2). These core strategies complement one another and serve as a foundation for other strategies. For instance, the results show the linkage between the provision of trainings and awareness programs to women farmers and the construction of identities of women within the community.

These core strategies have significantly empowered women farmers across several domains. Educational initiatives, particularly those focused on gender-specific issues, CSA and GAPs have enhanced women's bargaining power by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and resources needed to make life choices that improve their household welfare. Studies by Achandi et al. (2019) and Malapit et al. (2020) highlight the transformative potential of education and training for women's empowerment in agriculture. Enabling work strategies, such as financial assistance to women's groups, have improved access to loans, fostering business investments and agricultural inputs access. The distribution of coffee seedlings has further enabled many women to adapt to the impact change and improve their coffee production. These strategies have boosted women's income and self-sufficiency. As corroborated by Lecoutere and Chu (2024) who found that improving women's personal resources strengthen their bargaining power and agency. However, these strategies sometimes cause conflicts in some households, as some husbands restrict their wives' economic independence. This dynamic has also been noted by Leavens (2019) and Manzanera-Ruiz et al. (2016), underscoring the complexities of empowerment initiatives.

Establishing women's networks such as VSLAs and female farmer organizations appear to enhance women's access to savings and loans, business connections, and market information. These networks provide women with a platform to voice their opinions, influence decision-making and secure fund for productive investments. Additionally, women acquire essential knowledge and financial independence that boosting their confidence and autonomy. This aligns with the research by Achandi et al. (2019) which shows a positive link between group membership and women's empowerment. Likewise, Bilfield et al. (2020) affirm that women's formal involvement in agricultural institutions and cooperatives fosters agency and enhanced self-efficacy, and leadership, and gender equity awareness. In their findings, Bilfield et al. (2020) also highlight how various actors work in shaping women's identities through training on production, entrepreneurship, and leadership skills, leading some to become lead farmers and entrepreneurs, while others assume membership and leadership roles in coffee organizations.

Finally, embedding or routinizing women empowerment practices into regular activities significantly strengthen the empowerment of female coffee farmers. The findings show that many actors are committed to offer continuous support and training in GAPs, certification, entrepreneurship and leadership skills, benefiting women farmers in a long term.

However, despite these efforts, there is a lack of government attention to developing and implementing strategies to reconstruct and reinforce gender-specific rules and regulations concerning property rights and cooperative membership boundaries remain lacking. This oversight limits women's access to land for coffee cultivation and AMCOS membership criteria. This aligns with FAO (2023), which reports that laws guaranteeing equal property rights for women are often unenforced in rural Tanzania. Similarly, research by Anderson et al. (2021) and Malapit et al. (2020)

demonstrates that women have significantly less access to productive resources than men. This limits their visibility and participation in coffee value chain. Moreover, coffee cooperatives remain largely male-dominated, with women constituting less than 30 per cent of AMCOS membership, limiting their access to resources such as agricultural inputs, training, information and financial resources. Limited effort has been done to amend membership rules in coffee organizations. The lack of access to land and membership in coffee cooperative are among the significant factors contributing to women's disempowerment. This is consistent with OECD (2022) country report highlights that women's ownership of agricultural land is considerably lower than that men and that women are more likely to share ownership of agricultural land with their husbands than being sole owner. Quisumbing et al. (2023) further noted that due to the gender division of labor, men predominantly dominate production groups related to income generation, while women are largely focused on maintaining social networks, and civic and religious groups.

The findings reveal a lack of initiatives among actors that aim to challenge institutional structures, discriminatory practices and societal norms that perpetuate marginalization of women coffee farmers, particularly in areas such as resources access, cooperative membership, and coffee income management. Institutional work helps to categorize and understand these dynamics while highlighting the gaps in current efforts. Many programs focus on building women's capacities through education, access to resources, or entrepreneurship, but fail to address deeper, institutionalized barriers – such as land ownership laws or cultural norms around gender roles – that continue to limit women's full participation in agricultural value chains. Institutional work theory pushes us to recognize that true empowerment requires not just 'creating' new opportunities but also 'disrupting' the rules that prevent women from fully utilizing those opportunities. Similar issues are evident in other contexts, for example Aku et al. (2023) in southern Tanzania shows that despite the interventions to empower women in cashew processing, entrenched socio-cultural beliefs and customs continue to limit the ability of women to have control over key household resources such as land, income as well as their engagement in market-oriented activities. Mbuyita (2021) noted that men, often viewed as household headship, typically make financial decisions independently without consulting their wives who contribute in the farming activities or harvesting. Lecoutere and Chu (2024) highlight how patriarchal social norms and customs lead to unequal resource access, decision-making power.

Based on these findings, we conclude that the involvement of various actors in coffee sector and their gender-targeted initiatives have been a crucial role in empowering women coffee farmers. However, significant gaps persist in addressing institutional systems, practices and societal norms that continue to perpetuate discrimination and hinder women's full participation in coffee production, marketing and capitalize on the available opportunities. While initiatives such as education, women's economic groups and financial support provide critical assistance, they are insufficient on their own to drive substantial change. A more comprehensive approach

is required, one that not only focuses on individual capacity building but also challenges institutional structures, policies and societal norms that sustain gender inequality. Legal reforms, including land tenure and cooperative membership, along with enhanced access to financial resources, training, and gender-sensitive policies, are essential to ensure that women can fully participate in the coffee value chain, thereby improving their livelihoods and economic standing. We recommend targeted government actions, in collaboration with various actors across the coffee value chain, to strengthen and enforce laws that guarantee equal property rights for women, particularly in rural areas. The government should reform AMCOS membership criteria to ensure greater inclusivity and equal representation of women, particularly in decision making roles. Additionally, the government should introduce gender-sensitive policies within cooperatives to ensure women have equal access to training, financial resources, agricultural inputs and market opportunities. These measures will help to dismantle the barriers that hinder women's participation and contribution to their full empowerment in the coffee sector.

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