



Women's collective action in the shea sector in Mali

February 2013

Transformational change for women and their communities

Improving gender relations through women's collective action


GROW. SELL. THRIVE.
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP IN AGRICULTURAL MARKETS

Summary

The shea sector in Mali is fertile ground for women's collective action (WCA). Shea production, processing and marketing are almost entirely female-dominated activities, and, in the four villages studied for the WCA research, the shea sector has always been exclusively female. Furthermore, community involvement and different forms of collective action (CA) and solidarity are an age-old tradition in Koutiala *cercle*¹ in Mali, where women have long been accustomed to working together to undertake a host of group activities, helped by recent government policies that support women's engagement in CA groups.

Since the late 1990s, formally recognized associations and cooperatives have emerged out of pre-existing forms of community involvement in the area. NGOs and government

departments have taken advantage of international demand for a higher quality shea product to provide support to cooperatives for improvements to production and marketing techniques, as well as group capacity and sustainability. In the most successful WCA groups studied, these factors, along with good internal governance, strong leadership, and support from men and community authorities, have enabled the cooperatives to mature to a point where they can facilitate transformational change in women's lives. Indeed, the findings from Mali show that in the right conditions, the active participation of women in CA can empower individual women, thereby augmenting their decision-making power and influence within both the household and the community, contributing to lasting changes in gender relations.



Figure 1: Map of Koutiala cercle, Sikasso region, Mali

Background

Mali has one of the largest areas of shea trees in the ‘shea belt’ of western and central Africa. Shea resources in the country may amount to as many as 408.6 million trees, and national production is approximately 80,000 tonnes per year, compared to an estimated annual global production of between 610,000 and 650,000 tonnes.²

Shea producers in Mali have tended to sell shea nuts either raw or processed as butter. Over the last 20 years, opportunities to sell to overseas markets and to create added-value have led to the production of improved butter, which sells for a higher price than the traditional product. Traditionally, WCA groups were only involved in the process

of extracting the butter, but, as part of these innovations in the production and marketing of shea, groups are now involved in the purchase of the kernels, the extraction and preservation of the butter, and the handling and sale of the final product.

The WCA research was carried out in Koutiala *cercle* in Sikasso, a region in the south-east of the country near the border with Burkina Faso (see Figure 1). Environmental conditions in this area are highly favourable for the growth of shea trees, and shea butter production is a well-established activity. The key actors intervening in the sector in Koutiala are NGO Inter-Coopération Suisse and PAFA (Agricultural Sector Support Project), which is funded by CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency). There are also two very active women’s unions: COFERSA (Convergence of Rural Women for Food Sovereignty) and UFROAT (Union of Rural Women from West Africa and Chad).

Currently, 42 women’s cooperatives are active in the shea sector in Koutiala. The 27 groups surveyed during the WCA research consist almost entirely of women (96 per cent on average), while all four of the groups studied in-depth are women-dominated, with one or two men performing specific tasks.³ Three are formal cooperatives, while Bènkadi women’s association is an informal association in the process of registering as a cooperative (see Table 1 for more information). The four groups are at different levels of development, with Uyèlô cooperative in Kaniko outstripping the other groups in terms of individual and collective performance, quality and quantity of product, and engagement with the market; followed by Jigisèmè cooperative of women in N’Gountjina, Jèkadi cooperative of Sanogola women in Molobala, and Bènkadi women’s association in Koumbiri. This pattern was likewise borne out in terms of levels of empowerment and improved gender relations in the household and community.



Members of Uyèlô cooperative. Photo: Edmond Dembele

Table 1: WCA groups studied

Country	Mali
Region	Sikasso
District	Koutiala <i>cercle</i>
Sector	Shea
Existing types of WCA	Formal registered cooperatives; umbrella organizations and unions; savings and credit groups; informal associations

Uyèlô cooperative	
Year begun	Rooted in a series of CA groups, 1978–2004. Established as an association in 2004, registered as a cooperative in 2009
Type	Formal cooperative
Location	Kaniko village. Rural setting
Membership	157 women
Production	Collective production of improved shea products
Marketing	Collective marketing of improved shea products
Shea products	Improved shea butter, cream, laundry soap, toilet soap

Jigisèmè cooperative of women	
Year begun	Began as a savings and credit group in 1997, registered as a cooperative in 2010
Type	Formal cooperative
Location	N’Gountjina village. Rural setting
Membership	105 women, 2 men
Production	Individual production of traditional shea butter, collective production of improved shea butter
Marketing	Collective marketing of traditional and improved shea butter
Shea products	Traditional and improved shea butter

Jèkadi cooperative of Sanogola women	
Year begun	Rooted in traditional WCA groups
Type	Formal cooperative
Location	Molobala village. Rural setting
Membership	58 women
Production	Individual production of traditional shea butter, collective production of soap
Marketing	Collective soap marketing
Shea products	Specializes in making soap from traditional shea butter bought from members or externally

Bènkadi women’s association	
Year begun	Rooted in a long history of WCA from before Mali gained independence in 1960
Type	Informal association, in the process of registering as a formal cooperative
Location	Koumbiri village. Rural setting
Membership	60 women, 1 man
Production	Individual production of traditional shea butter
Marketing	Individual, but plan to market traditional shea butter collectively
Shea products	Shea nuts, traditional shea butter

Transformational change at the personal, household and community level

Maminè Sanogo, the Secretary General of Uyèlô in Kaniko (see p.8), explains that *“Today, every woman from the cooperative who is involved in shea butter production says that she derives significant revenues from it”*. Women in the CA groups surveyed earn approximately \$12 per year more from traditional butter sales than corresponding producers who are not members. Along with the sales of improved shea butter, this means earnings from shea products of 81 per cent more than women not in groups, translating to an increase in profit of \$20 per year. The transfer of improved techniques in shea butter production, processing and marketing to WCA members’ other income-generating activities can mean that these are also more remunerative. In the most mature cooperatives, Uyèlô and Jigisème, the entrepreneurial skills acquired through engagement in WCA around shea butter now inform women’s activities in various domains.

Linked to these increases in economic benefits, WCA members experience increased levels of empowerment in some key decision-making areas. However, this increase in empowerment is also associated with benefits of group membership other than income. These include: improved self-confidence through group participation and expansion of social networks; enhanced decision-making ability due to exposure to new ideas and increased knowledge; increased mobility through attending group meetings; the acquisition of new skills, which can be transferred to household management; and increased access to credit. Women from Uyèlô, for example, report feeling a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility as a result of their engagement in WCA, and now have the confidence to advise each other on household management. Maminè Sanogo also reports that women’s self-confidence and leadership skills have improved considerably since joining the cooperative. Overall, across the 27 groups surveyed, women members are significantly more empowered than non-members in terms of decision-making power over agricultural incomes, use of credit and freedom of movement (see Figure 2).

These changes, along with women’s increased ability to contribute to household costs, have positively influenced relations between husbands and wives, such that women in these groups now have more say within the household. The President of the cotton producers’ cooperative in N’Gountjina explains that the men in the village now believe that *“Women are an invaluable help to men when it comes to household management. So the woman should always be consulted on important decisions relating to the survival and future of the family”*. In Kaniko and Molobala, women members report that the timings of children’s weddings are no longer set by men without informing the mothers, as used to be the case, and women now contribute towards their daughters’ trousseaus. In the three most successful cooperatives studied in-depth, WCA members report that communication and respect between husbands and wives has improved significantly, while in Kaniko, joint decision-making is now the norm rather than the exception.

For the WCA groups in Kaniko and N’Gountjina, these factors, along with the success and increasing visibility of the women’s cooperatives, have also contributed to the transformation of gender relations at the community level. Male community members and authorities in these villages have an improved and extremely positive perception of women, and now regularly invite WCA members to consultations on community development. This improvement is also reflected in the support which they have given to the women’s cooperatives in both villages, outlined in more detail below. In Kaniko, the village chief has supported women to such an extent that other men refer to him as ‘the Women’s Village Chief’, while the village chief in N’Gountjina explains that *“Women are capable of undertaking the same activities as men and that is why I am working with the women’s cooperative and encouraging it in its activities”*. WCA groups likewise contribute to community development, as in Kaniko where Uyèlô has given money to the construction of the village school. This improvement in gender relations can also bring about greater levels of social cohesion: in Kaniko, the formation of Uyèlô has helped bring harmony to the community, which had been experiencing a period of social tension following the political changes in the country in the early 1990s.

A positive cooperative and policy environment

An environment favourable to women’s participation in both the shea sector and in CA helped women to develop groups which enabled their empowerment. The long-standing

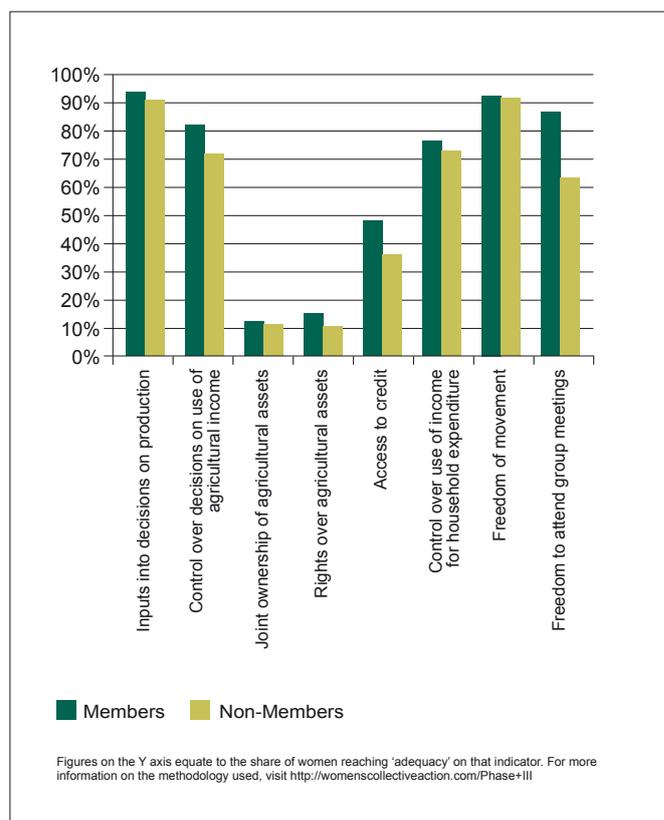


Figure 2: Adequacy in eight dimensions of empowerment for members and non-members in 27 women’s shea butter cooperatives in Koutiala, Mali.



The Executive Secretary of Jigisèmè cooperative shows a shea tree in her husband's field. Photo: Edmond Dembele

involvement of women in both shea cultivation and women-only community solidarity groups in Koutiala means that women do not face barriers to their involvement in the production and marketing of shea. Cooperatives which are run and managed solely by women and in which women control their own income are therefore entirely socially acceptable. The predominance of women-only groups is also beneficial, as the absence of men avoids gender inequities being replicated in group dynamics. In all of the groups studied, there was a clear principle of equality in terms of contributions to CA, and access to the benefits and advantages derived from it.

Favourable government policies also enable the formation of strong women's shea cooperatives. Cooperative laws and government programmes which began in the late 1990s gave new momentum to the conversion of farmers' organizations into cooperatives, which could gain legitimacy and attract more external support by acquiring legal status. Furthermore, cooperative law in Mali clearly states the principle of equitable access to equipment, services and training, as well as equitable allocation of resources and benefits generated through the cooperative. The 2006 Agricultural Orientation Law addressed the issue of gender equity within agricultural markets, and the government's technical departments – alongside NGOs and rural radio – have worked to raise awareness and educate the rural population concerning the importance of the advancement of women in development

and agriculture, and to actively encourage women's engagement in the shea sector.

Dynamic leadership and transparent governance

Transparent internal governance, strong leadership and the support of men and community authorities have added to this enabling environment in some of the groups studied, to create more mature groups where members experience a stronger sense of empowerment. In Uyèlô and Jigisèmè cooperatives, all important decisions are taken collectively in a general or board meeting after everyone has expressed their opinion, and any decisions taken are implemented immediately.

Strong yet accountable leadership has likewise been critical to these two cooperatives' advancement. Uyèlô and Jigisèmè have dynamic women leaders who mobilized members to start their respective groups and built cohesion within the cooperatives. Both women have benefited from extensive training and exposure to wider networks, and have previous experience of involvement in CA, and these factors have given them a better understanding of what is important for group development. Their skills, along with good connections and influence within their communities, have also enabled them to communicate effectively with community authorities and external actors in order to elicit interest in the groups and secure support for their activities.

Individual men and community authorities have also played influential roles in the success of these two cooperatives. Women are largely dependent on men for access to essential resources through land provision, either individually through husbands, or, for the three most successful groups that have begun to plant their own shea trees, from community authorities or well-established producer cooperatives. WCA groups are often also dependent on these structures for other important infrastructure: in N’Gountjina, the men’s cotton cooperative has allowed Jigisème to use its new literacy centre for meetings, and, in Kaniko, the Village Council has granted land for the building of Uyèlô’s headquarters and shop. Men also provide access to technical support, as in N’Gountjina where the cotton cooperative used revenues to purchase a mill for Jigisème. Furthermore, male community members are strongly supportive of their wives’ involvement in WCA and even ask other men to encourage their wives to join. The cotton cooperative in N’Gountjina, for example, raises the awareness of men whose wives have not yet joined Jigisèmè, while in Kaniko, the Village Council puts pressure on men to allow their wives to participate in Uyèlô’s activities. The women therefore enjoy a better quality of engagement, and benefit more fully from their involvement.

Key intervention strategies

Development actor interventions have improved the development of groups in ways that bring greater benefits to WCA members. The most successful group, Uyèlô, has received extensive external support. Inter-Coopération Suisse has provided credit, as well as numerous training opportunities designed to increase capacity and improve the understanding and control of operational process and management of CA. It has also given literacy training to improve the group’s organizational capacity. In addition, the NGO has taken measures to ensure that shea butter production is sustainable in the face of drought, by supporting Uyèlô to run a project obtaining land from village authorities for tree-plantation, as well as funding the planting and maintenance of shea trees.



Members of Uyèlô cooperative stand by the group’s containers of shea butter, which are waiting to be sold. Photo: Edmond Dembele

NGOs have also taken advantage of increasing market interest in shea butter from the international cosmetic industry since the 1990s, and provided support to improve production and marketing methods in the sector. An important factor in the development of Uyèlô has been the support it has received to improve its operations and activities in the value chain. Production of improved butter requires higher levels of technical knowledge and equipment, and Inter-Coopération Suisse has provided the group with modern equipment, including mills and processing machinery, as well as training in their use. It has also trained members in plantation and nut gathering methods, and the production of shea butter and soap.

Likewise, interventions have been vital in improving market placement of products for Uyèlô. Inter-Coopération Suisse has financed advertising on local radio channels to create awareness of improved shea butter, which is not a well-known product in the area. To overcome problems in reaching more distant markets, it provided access to sales outlets through UFROAT and COFERSA, thereby extending linkages between CA groups and developing marketing skills within these organizations. In addition, Inter-Coopération Suisse and PAFA have funded and facilitated the participation of group members in national and international commercial fairs, and encourage women members to take it in turns to attend trade fairs to ensure equal distribution of skills and experience. It is important to note, however, that like all of the groups studied Uyèlô continues to experience significant difficulties in securing market access for improved shea butter.

Lessons learned and recommendations for development practitioners

1. Take advantage of favourable market and policy environments.

Practitioners in Mali have built upon existing forms of women’s community involvement, and taken advantage of a female-dominated sector, market opportunities within that sector, and a cooperative and policy environment in which WCA can flourish. Through strategic technical and financial support, development actors have expanded members’ existing skills, knowledge and experience with WCA and shea production, and helped to establish more mature CA groups which can bring about transformational change for women.

External actors can recognize and build on favourable environments for the advancement of WCA groups and tailor interventions to make the most of the opportunities available. This requires a gender-aware analysis of existing market opportunities, and of existing CA groups and social networks and how they function, as well as the policy environment which supports them.

2. Develop strong, gender responsive and accountable leadership.

The WCA research has highlighted the importance of effective and accountable leadership in positive outcomes for WCA groups. Effective leadership relies heavily on personal skills, including the ability to mobilize others and establish networks; having a vision for group development; thinking beyond the short term; and prioritizing group above individual interests

(see Maminè Sanogo's story on p.8). While some of these qualities are the result of connections and influence within the community, appropriate training and exposure to networks can help develop crucial skills for effective, gender-responsive group leadership.

Practitioners should focus attention on identifying and fostering gender-responsive leadership, which is essential both to a group's development and for women to benefit from group participation. Gender-responsive leadership also requires incentives and accountability mechanisms, including broader group awareness of the responsibilities of leaders, to minimize the risk of benefits and influence being appropriated by particular members or sub-groups.

3. Engage with men and community leaders to consolidate support.

Sustained engagement with men can successfully overcome their resistance to their wives' engagement in CA. It can also facilitate women's involvement in decision-making and leadership, and improve support to WCA groups, e.g. through the allocation of land and infrastructure.

Development actor WCA interventions should be designed to ensure committed and continued engagement with men. Where men perceive the actual or potential benefits for the wider household and community of women in their households engaging in groups, they are more likely to facilitate participation and provide support.

4. Develop specific strategies to enable membership of marginalized women and address barriers to their participation.

Restrictions on time, finances, and access to land and resources are reported to prohibit women, to varying degrees, from participating successfully in CA groups. Group members tend to be older, married women, who can pass duties onto daughters-in-law, or younger wives in polygamous households, and who therefore have more time to attend meetings and take on leadership roles. Specific membership conditions can prevent certain categories of women from joining groups. Poverty can also restrict participation: women who are better-off have access to a larger number of shea trees in their husbands' fields. Leaders of the WCA groups in Mali tended to be well-connected women with a higher socio-economic status.

Development actors need to design interventions such that marginalized women can overcome these barriers. As the experience in Ethiopia shows, this approach can result in more inclusive models of change and can support the emergence of women leaders from diverse socio-economic groups. Removing restrictions on unmarried women's participation, allowing in-kind or labour payments of fees, and linking formal groups with less formal ones, are all possible approaches.

5. Improve marketing strategies.

Development actors have encouraged WCA shea groups to produce higher-quality, improved butter, but the limited local demand for this product, combined with a lack of access to market networks, affordable transport, and resources to attend international fairs have limited gains from higher value markets.

External actors should support groups in gaining greater access to more distant markets, as well as in improving their networks with other cooperatives and unions producing improved shea butter elsewhere, nationally or internationally. Targeted training should also be provided to improve marketing skills, market knowledge and bargaining power, which often women either lack or have not yet developed in a collective context.

6. Ensure sustainable skill transfer in marketing.

The most effective strategies of support in Mali involve the empowerment of women through their umbrella union organizations. With Inter-Coopération Suisse, WCA members plan and execute marketing strategies, and communicate directly with other women's groups and organizations. This strategy has led to a higher degree of awareness of the market environment and mutual development of marketing skills. It has also proved more effective than PAFA's approach, where a commercial agent has been employed to find market channels for Jèkadi's products, resulting in limited knowledge and skill transfer to WCA members.

Practitioners need to promote an active role for WCA leaders and members in engaging in new market environments in order to strengthen their capacities sustainably.

7. Safeguarding women's continued engagement in the sector.

Although the shea sector in Mali is dominated by women, particularly at lower levels of the value chain, as market opportunities expand or where market prices increase, this may result in men 'crowding in' and competing with women for resources or markets. According to WCA members interviewed for the research, in some areas more men have begun to collect shea nuts and may gain an advantage in the sector, especially as women usually only collect within a 3km radius of their village and are restricted by household workloads.

Development actors can strengthen women's organizations and leadership to safeguard against their displacement from the sector by, for example, protecting their collection rights and supporting increased mobility of women.

8. Ensure sustainability of the resource base.

Specific interventions in Mali have been adopted to ensure tree replanting, including developing shea plantations at local level, with land from community authorities; training women in planting techniques; and working with women and communities to ensure the sustainability of shea resources.

Development actors need to ensure that the natural resources on which the sector depends are maintained and renewed and that, in doing so, women retain their rights of access to and control of these resources.

Notes

1 A cercle is the second-level administrative division in Mali.

2 Ministry for the promotion of Women, Children and the Family (MPFEF) (2003) 'Stratégie de renforcement des capacités des femmes dans la filière de karité au Mali'.

3 S. Baden (2013) 'Women's collective action in African Agricultural Markets: The missing link for empowerment?'

Women in collective action: Maminè Sanogo

Commonly known as Maïmouna in her village, 50-year-old Maminè Sanogo has been key to the development and success of Uyelô cooperative in Kaniko.

Her education and passion for women's advancement enabled her to become involved in community development activities at an early stage. Since the age of 20 she has acted as a coordinator for numerous community development groups in her village, including those addressing sanitation, prenatal advice, women's literacy, malaria prevention, and adaptation to drought. She is now a member of several women's organizations at the regional, national and international levels. According to Maïmouna, the courses, trips and training opportunities which she has benefited from have allowed her *"not just to have confidence in myself, but to become a campaigner for the promotion of women"*.

Maïmouna was instrumental in setting up Uyelô women's cooperative in Kaniko and currently acts as its Secretary General. She recognizes the importance of engaging women in income-generating activities and believes that women's financial success gives them several advantages, including *"better respect from husbands, better social status in the community, and a strong contribution to social harmony in the village"*. It was for



Maminè Sanogo sits on her motorbike in Kaniko. Photo: Edmond Dembele

these reasons that she mobilized the women to organize themselves into one association and to train themselves to produce improved shea butter, which she knew from her training to be more profitable.

Maïmouna's personal qualities and skills have been indispensable to the success of the cooperative. She is aware that to be a good group leader she has to be cautious and safeguard the welfare of the group against personal interests. In 2009, the cooperative earned 1.5 million FCFA (\$3,000) at a commercial fair in Dakar, Senegal. The women were keen to divide the revenues between them; Maïmouna, however, was firm about the group saving the money. Three months later, a local development agent offered to equip the cooperative with an improved shea butter processing unit, and asked the members to contribute 2 million FCFA towards the cost. They used the takings from the commercial fair, and members provided the remaining 500,000 FCFA. Today, it is this unit which gives the cooperative its best butter and the women are grateful to Maïmouna for her foresight.

Maïmouna has also benefited personally from her involvement in the cooperative. The knowledge gained during the organization and management of the activities around improved shea butter production have allowed her to diversify her other income-generating activities and to increase her income. She has now bought a motorbike with her profits and farms an area of seven hectares on which she grows maize, peanuts, sesame and beans. Maïmouna feels that she has a good relationship with her husband, who supports and encourages her. Before owning a motorbike, it was her husband who transported her between villages so that she could undertake her various responsibilities.

Maïmouna is currently working to make shea butter production sustainable. Traditionally, shea trees reproduced themselves naturally, but due to periods of drought there are now not enough new trees. Maïmouna has worked with Inter-Coopération Suisse to design a shea tree plantation project. She has raised awareness among the men in her village and in many other villages in the surrounding area, persuading them to give plots of land to women. In her own community, the Village Chief provided three hectares of land, which today is covered by 350 shea trees tended by the women. Men in her village now support the women's shea cooperative in various ways and the Village Chief says that the future is in women's hands.

For more information

Visit Oxfam's Wiki on women's collective action at www.womenscollectiveaction.com

Written by Imogen Davies, WCA Learning and Communications Coordinator, Oxfam GB. Editor: Sally Baden, Oxfam GB. Researchers: Dr. Edmond Dembele, Maiga Lalla Mariam Haidara and Dr. Carine Pionetti.

The information in this case study is drawn from the final phase of the women's collective action research project. For further information on this phase, please see S. Baden (2013) 'Women's Collective Action in African Agricultural Markets: The missing link for empowerment?', available to download from <http://womenscollectiveaction.com/Phase+III>



OXFAM