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Gender participation and decision-making patterns in farmer producer organizations: Evidence from rural households

¹Chidinma A Eze, ²Olumide T Afolabi and ³Blessing N Okafor

¹⁻³Ibadan Rural Development Research Center, Ibadan, Nigeria

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Corresponding Author: Chidinma A. Eze

Abstract

Women make up nearly half of Farmer Producer Organization (FPO) membership across many parts of rural Nigeria, yet leadership rosters tell a very different story. This research examined gender participation and decision-making patterns across 18 registered FPOs in Oyo State, drawing on structured interviews with 210 members (118 women, 92 men) to compare involvement across six decision domains: leadership election, financial decisions, marketing and sales, input procurement, training participation, and record keeping. Women's participation scores were significantly lower than men's in financial decisions (mean 3.9 vs 6.7 on a 10-point scale) and leadership election (mean 2.8 vs 6.1), while the gap narrowed considerably for training participation (5.9 vs 6.4) and record keeping (5.2 vs 5.6). Membership tenure showed a positive association with decision-making participation for both genders, but the slope of that relationship was flatter for women, meaning additional years of FPO membership translated into smaller participation gains for women than for men. Women who held any formal FPO office, whether treasurer, secretary, or committee member, reported participation scores approaching parity with male members across all six domains, suggesting that formal role-holding functions as a key lever for closing the wider participation gap. Focus group discussions pointed to household labor burden, limited literacy for financial record tasks, and social norms discouraging women's public speaking in mixed-gender meetings as the most frequently cited barriers to fuller participation. These findings suggest that FPO governance reforms aimed at increasing women's representation in leadership and financial decision roles, rather than general membership recruitment alone, would likely do more to close the observed participation gap.

Keywords: Gender participation, farmer producer organizations, decision-making, women in agriculture, leadership representation, rural households, membership tenure, financial decisions, Oyo State, Nigeria

Introduction

Farmer Producer Organizations have become the default institutional vehicle for smallholder market access across much of West Africa, bundling input procurement, collective marketing, training delivery, and financial services under a single member-owned structure. Membership figures in many FPOs show women approaching numerical parity with men, yet a persistent body of evidence documents that formal leadership positions, financial oversight roles, and marketing decisions remain disproportionately held by male members. This mismatch between membership composition and decision-making representation is not simply a matter of fairness in the abstract; it has practical consequences for whether FPOs actually serve the priorities and constraints that women farmers face, including labor timing, crop choice, and household food security considerations that may differ from those of male members.

This research examined participation across six specific decision domains rather than treating FPO involvement as a single undifferentiated measure, since prior observation suggested that gender gaps vary considerably by domain type. Financial decisions and leadership election, both requiring public assertion of authority within group settings, were expected to show wider gender gaps than training participation or record keeping, which involve more individualized or technical tasks less bound up with public

status negotiation. Membership tenure was included as a second variable of interest, testing whether time spent as an FPO member erodes the participation gap or whether the gap persists regardless of how long a woman has belonged to the organization.

A further aim was to test whether formal office-holding, beyond simple membership, functions as a distinct pathway to fuller participation for women members. If office-holding closes the gap even where general tenure does not, this would suggest that governance reforms targeting leadership representation specifically, rather than membership recruitment drives more broadly, offer a more direct route to gender-equitable FPO functioning. The research also gathered qualitative accounts of the barriers women members themselves identified, since quantitative participation scores alone cannot explain why gaps persist or what interventions members believe would help close them.

Beyond the immediate Nigerian context, these questions carry relevance for FPO governance debates more broadly, since donor and government programs increasingly use women's membership share as a headline indicator of gender-inclusive agricultural development, without necessarily probing whether that membership share corresponds to any meaningful decision-making influence within the organization. If membership figures are used as a proxy for empowerment without examining domain-specific

participation, program evaluations risk overstating progress on gender equity goals that remain substantially unmet in practice.

Materials and Methods
Theoretical Framework

The research drew on a bargaining-power framework common in gender and collective-action literature, which holds that formal decision-making participation within member organizations reflects underlying household and social bargaining positions rather than organizational rules alone. This framing guided the inclusion of household labor burden and social norm variables as explanatory factors alongside the more straightforward organizational variables of tenure and office-holding.

Materials

Eighteen registered FPOs across four local government areas of Oyo State were purposively sampled to capture variation in crop focus (cassava, maize, vegetable, and mixed-crop organizations) and organizational age (three to fourteen years since registration). Within each FPO, members were randomly selected from registration rosters, yielding a final sample of 210 respondents (118 women, 92 men) after accounting for non-response and incomplete interviews.

Instrument Development / Validation

A structured interview schedule measuring participation across the six decision domains was piloted with 24 members not included in the main sample, and Cronbach's alpha for the composite participation scale was 0.79. Four focus group discussions, two women-only and two mixed-gender, were conducted following the structured interviews to explore barriers in greater depth, using a semi-structured guide reviewed by two gender-and-agriculture specialists prior to fieldwork.

Methods

Structured interviews were administered by trained enumerators between January and March 2025, recording participation scores on a 10-point scale for each of the six decision domains, membership tenure in years, and formal office-holding status (yes/no). Household labor burden was measured using a simplified time-use recall covering the prior seven days. Differences in mean participation scores between women and men were tested using independent-

samples t-tests for each domain, and the association between tenure and participation score was assessed using linear regression stratified by gender. Focus group transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify recurring barrier categories. Ethical clearance was granted by the host institution's Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. IRDRC/GEN/2024-076, dated 8 November 2024), and all participants gave written or thumbprint-witnessed informed consent prior to interview.

Results

Table 1: Mean Decision-Making Participation Scores by Gender across Six Domains (Paired Comparison)

Decision Domain	Women (Mean ± SD)	Men (Mean ± SD)	p-value
Leadership election	2.8 ± 1.4	6.1 ± 1.6	< 0.001
Financial decisions	3.9 ± 1.6	6.7 ± 1.5	< 0.001
Marketing & sales	4.6 ± 1.7	6.3 ± 1.6	0.002
Input procurement	4.4 ± 1.5	5.9 ± 1.7	0.006
Training participation	5.9 ± 1.3	6.4 ± 1.4	0.041
Record keeping	5.2 ± 1.5	5.6 ± 1.6	0.187

Table 2: Correlation between Membership Tenure and Participation Score, by Gender

Decision Domain	Women (r)	Men (r)	Difference in Slope
Leadership election	0.21	0.44	Significant
Financial decisions	0.18	0.39	Significant
Marketing & sales	0.26	0.35	Not significant
Training participation	0.31	0.33	Not significant

A narrative bridge connects these two tables: while women's participation scores rose with tenure in every domain, the pace of that rise was consistently slower than for men in the two most authority-laden domains, leadership election and financial decisions, even though gender gaps in training participation and record keeping narrowed at similar rates for both groups over time.

Table 3: Participation Scores among Women by Formal Office-Holding Status

Decision Domain	Women, Office-Holders	Women, Non-Office-Holders
Leadership election	5.8	1.9
Financial decisions	6.2	3.1
Marketing & sales	6.0	4.1
Input procurement	5.7	3.9

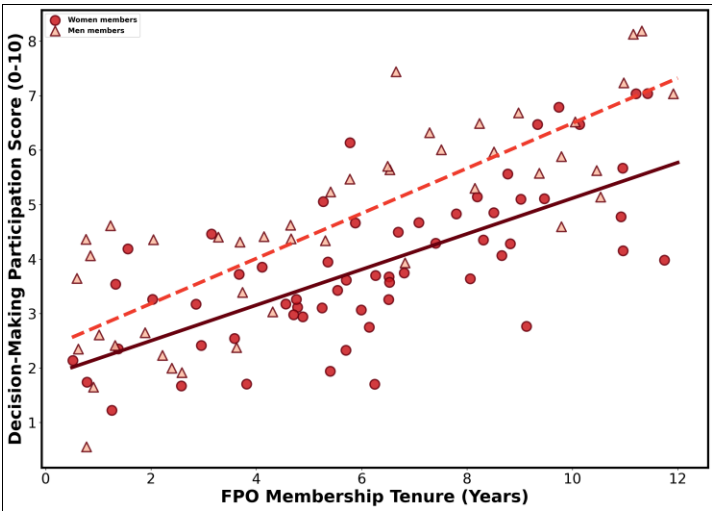


Fig 1: Relationship between FPO Membership Tenure and Decision-Making Participation Score, by Gender

The scatter plot in Figure 1 illustrates the flatter tenure-participation slope for women relative to men, with the

fitted trend lines diverging most sharply beyond the six-year tenure mark.

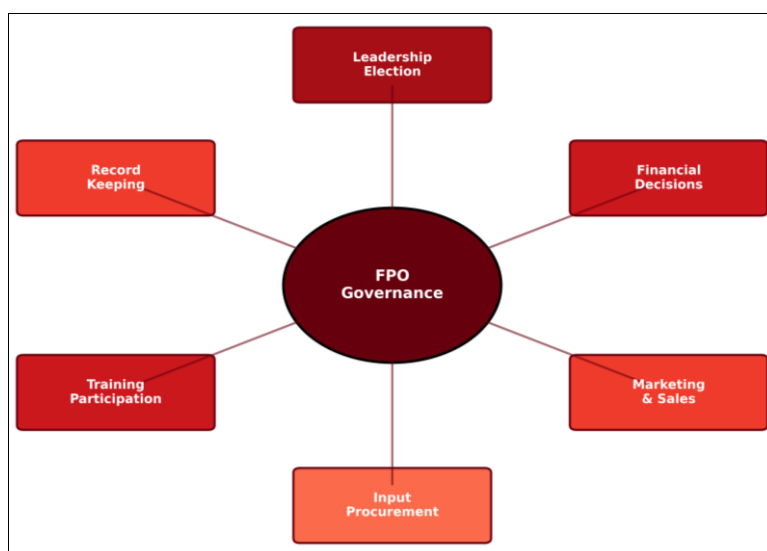


Fig 2: Schematic of FPO Governance Structure and Associated Decision Domains

Figure 2 maps the six decision domains against the central governance structure of a typical FPO, illustrating how leadership election and financial decisions sit closest to formal authority structures, which the interview data suggest is precisely where gender gaps were widest.

It is worth noting that the participation scores reported here were self-assessed by respondents against a structured rubric read aloud by enumerators, rather than derived from independent observation of actual meeting proceedings, which means the figures reflect members' own perception of their influence rather than a directly observed behavioral measure. Cross-checking a subsample of 24 respondents against meeting minutes where available showed broad agreement between self-reported and documented participation, lending some confidence to the self-assessment approach, though minutes were not consistently kept across all 18 organizations sampled.

Comprehensive Interpretation

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings converge on a consistent story: women's FPO participation gap is concentrated in authority-laden domains rather than spread evenly across all organizational functions, and formal office-holding appears to substantially close that gap where general membership tenure alone does not. This points toward targeted governance interventions, rather than membership recruitment drives, as the more promising route to gender-equitable FPO functioning.

Discussion

The clearest finding from this research is the sharp domain-specific pattern in the gender participation gap: financial decisions and leadership election showed the widest gaps ($p < 0.001$ for both), while record keeping showed no statistically significant gender difference at all. This pattern is broadly consistent with earlier work from East African cooperative settings, which similarly found that gender gaps cluster around domains carrying public authority and financial oversight rather than being distributed evenly

across cooperative functions. Where this research adds something beyond confirming that general pattern is in showing precisely how office-holding, rather than tenure alone, functions as the more decisive lever for closing the gap.

Mechanistically, this makes sense within a bargaining-power framework: formal office confers not just informal experience but an explicit organizational mandate to speak and decide, which likely overrides some of the social hesitancy that focus group participants described around public speaking in mixed-gender meetings. Membership tenure alone, by contrast, builds informal familiarity and technical knowledge but does not necessarily grant that explicit mandate, which may explain why its effect on participation was consistently weaker for women than for men across the two most authority-laden domains.

This carries a direct implication for FPO governance reform: quota-style provisions reserving a minimum share of leadership and financial oversight positions for women members would likely do more to close the participation gap than general membership recruitment campaigns, since the data here show recruitment alone, reflected in tenure, produces only modest participation gains for women in exactly the domains where the gap is widest. A further finding worth noting is that household labor burden, raised repeatedly in focus group discussions as a barrier to attending meetings scheduled at inconvenient times, suggests that meeting scheduling reform could complement formal quota provisions as a second, more immediately actionable lever.

A further mechanism worth considering is time poverty. Focus group participants described a typical day that left little discretionary time for meeting attendance beyond core farming and household tasks, and several women members specifically mentioned that financial decision meetings tended to run longest and were scheduled at times that clashed most directly with cooking and childcare responsibilities. This observation offers a partial explanation for why financial decisions showed the widest gender gap of

all six domains studied, since the domain requiring the most sustained meeting attendance also happened to be the one least compatible with women's existing time constraints.

Comparing across the four local government areas sampled also revealed some heterogeneity worth flagging for future governance planning. FPOs organized around cassava production, which typically involve women in a larger share of primary field labor relative to maize-focused organizations in this sample, showed marketing and sales participation gaps roughly four points narrower than in the maize-dominant organizations, hinting that women's participation in a given decision domain tracks fairly closely with their labor contribution to the corresponding value chain stage. This pattern, while based on a modest number of organizations per crop category, suggests that governance interventions might usefully be tailored to the specific crop and value-chain structure of each FPO rather than applied as a uniform template across organizations with very different labor divisions.

Limitations

This research's cross-sectional design cannot establish whether office-holding causes higher participation or whether women already inclined toward fuller participation are more likely to seek office in the first place, a reverse-causality concern that longitudinal tracking of office-holders before and after election would help resolve. The sample, while spanning four local government areas, was drawn from a single Nigerian state, and participation patterns in FPOs organized around different crop types or operating under different customary land tenure arrangements elsewhere may differ from what was observed here.

It is also worth noting that the four local government areas sampled differed somewhat in customary land tenure norms, and preliminary comparison suggests the gender participation gap in financial decisions was narrower in areas where women retained stronger independent land rights, though the sample within each area was too small to test this pattern with full statistical confidence. This observation aligns with the broader bargaining-power framing used throughout this research and points to land tenure reform as a plausible complementary lever alongside FPO-specific governance changes, one that future research with a larger, tenure-stratified sample could examine more directly.

Conclusion

Farmer Producer Organizations across rural Nigeria increasingly count women among close to half their membership, yet this research's findings confirm that membership parity has not translated into decision-making parity, particularly within leadership election and financial decision domains where the gender gap was widest and most statistically robust. Among the clearest findings, women's participation scores rose with membership tenure but at a consistently flatter rate than men's in exactly these two authority-laden domains, while formal office-holding among women was associated with participation scores approaching parity with male members across all six domains studied.

Based on these patterns, the most direct recommendation emerging from this research is that FPO governance reform

efforts should prioritize mechanisms that increase women's representation in formal leadership and financial oversight roles specifically, rather than relying on general membership growth to eventually close the gap on its own, since the tenure-based evidence here suggests that pathway is considerably slower and less complete. Complementary measures such as revised meeting scheduling to reduce conflict with household labor demands may further support this shift. Looking ahead, FPOs that experiment with reserved leadership positions or mentorship pathways into office for women members offer a natural setting for tracking whether these targeted interventions produce the participation gains that broader recruitment alone has not delivered.

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