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Local normative climate shaping agency and agricultural livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa

Patti Petesch,[1], Renee Bullock[2], Shelley Feldman,[3], Lone Badstue,[1], Anne Rietveld,[4], Wenda Bauchspies,[5], Adelbertus Kamanzi,[6], Amare Tegbaru,[2], and Jummai Yila[7]

[1]International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, CIMMYT
[2]International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, IITA
[3]Cornell University
[4]Bioversity International
[5]Michigan State University
[6]Virtual University of Uganda
[7]International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, ICRISAT

Abstract

We introduce the concept of local normative climate to improve understanding of community-level social processes that shape women's and men's sense of agency and capacities for taking important decisions, including in their agricultural livelihoods. The idea of normative climate is informed by feminist literature that addresses concerns for the contextual, fluid, and relational properties of gender norms. We apply normative climate to a qualitative examination of men's and women's assessments of decade-long changes in their decision-making capacity in two village case studies as well as comparatively with 24 village cases from seven sub-Saharan African countries. The case studies reveal how a normative climate is shaped by contextual influences that give rise to social processes where, for instance, changes in decision-making and agricultural opportunities may be perceived as empowering by only men in one village, and only by women in the other village. Comparative findings highlight how perceptions of agency are rooted in fluid normative expectations that evolve differently for women and men as they move through their life cycle and as local institutions and opportunities change.

***Key words*:** Gender norms, empowerment, qualitative methodology, sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

In this paper we introduce the concept of local normative climate to address concerns for the contextual and fluid ways in which gender norms affect women's and men's agency and livelihood roles. Gender norms comprise the "differential rules of conduct for women and men, including rules governing interactions *between* women and men" (Pearse and Connell, 2016, p. 35). By agency, we refer to an individual's capacity to take consequential decisions and actions that shape their life (Kabeer, 1999). Our focus on normative climate responds to a call in the gender literature for improved understanding of the "combination of contextual factors (such as legal discrimination, social norms, and gender based violence)" that constrain women's claims on resources and roles as decision makers (Campos and Gassier, 2017, p. 2).

While much of the empowerment literature has focused on the agency of women, we propose a focus on normative climate to account for conditions that influence both women and men, and gender relations among them. In this paper we introduce the literature that informs our understanding of normative climate, and then apply the concept to explore and compare how normative climates shape perceptions of agency and agricultural opportunities in 24 farming villages from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This dataset is part of the GENNOVATE (Enabling Gender Equality in Agricultural and Environmental Innovation) initiative featured in this special issue. Our analysis of normative influences on agency is framed by men's and women's own understandings and interpretations of their capacity to take important decisions in their lives and how this has changed over the past decade in their community. We present both context-specific and comparative findings that demonstrate the value of adding local normative climate to improve understanding of processes that engender differences in how women and men perceive and respond to opportunities and constraints in their lives.

The literature on gender norms and their interactions with agency

Significant gender inequalities characterize rural communities in the SSA region. There are, however, large differences among countries in the extent of these inequalities, with data indicating that gender differences are possibly larger in the West than the East. For example, a recent (LSMS-ISA) survey spanning nearly 32,000 households in six SSA countries finds that women overall contribute 40 percent of the labor for crop production, but with large variation by country and region: in Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda women provide more than half the agricultural labor, while in Nigeria and Niger this falls to 37 and 24 percent, respectively (Christiaensen, 2017). Moreover, there are regional differences within countries. For example, in Nigeria women's contribution to agricultural labor is 32 percent in the north and 51 percent in the south (ibid.). Further, review of 17 studies of land ownership and management finds that women are systematically disadvantaged, but, as above, this varies by region and country. For example, while one survey (LSMS-ISA) finds women's sole ownership of land as high as 31 percent among agricultural landowners in Malawi. This declines to 16 percent in Uganda, 15 percent in Tanzania, 8 percent in Niger, and just 3 percent in Nigeria (Doss, Quisumbing, and van den Bold, 2015, p. 21).

Although suggestive, this research fails to address the underlying determinants of these differences, including what we can learn by examining women's differential access to land and participation in agriculture in a particular context. Concerns for context have been raised as well in the measurement of women's agency and empowerment. A review of studies on women's empowerment by Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002, p. 18) concludes, for example, that community-level "contextual factors are often more important in determining women's empowerment and its outcomes than individual-level factors" (also see five-country study by Mason and Smith, 2003). They call for more empirical attention to the community level, "where institutional and normative structures … are most likely to affect women's empowerment" (ibid., p. 15). Similar calls are made in the field of gender and agriculture (Kristjanson et al., 2017; Seymour and Peterman, 2017; Peterman et al., 2011). By defining a conceptual approach that

emphasizes the influence of contextual factors on women's and men's resource control and decision making, we contribute to the large women's empowerment literature concerned with these processes (e.g. Alkire et al., 2013; Batliwala, 1993; Cornwall, 2016; Gammage, Kabeer, and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2016; Malhotra and Schuler, 2005; Narayan, 2005).

The concept of local normative climate builds on the recognition that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon and provides a primary framework for organizing social relations across societies (e.g. Ridgeway, 1997 and 2009). In particular, we were inspired by feminist theoretical contributions and empirical research that reveal how norms "move in multiple directions" to fluidly intersect with other local institutional processes in ways that often, but not always, advantage men's status and interests over women's (e.g. Pearse and Connell, 2016, p. 43; Ridgeway, 2009; Kabeer, 1999 and 2001; Muñoz Boudet, Petesch, and Turk, 2013).

Theoretical conceptions of norms

Cislaghi, Manji, and Heise (2018) sort the theoretical literature on social norms into two broad disciplinary streams. The first stream features social psychologists and behavioral economists who conceive of norms as operating primarily through people's beliefs about what others do and ought to do; and where beliefs are maintained by processes of social approval and disapproval among reference groups of individuals who interact frequently (ibid., p. 6; Bicchieri, 2006; Mackie et al., 2015). The second stream, on which this paper mainly draws, includes feminist theorists who work with notions of gender norms and gender roles to explain socially constructed rules that are "applied to groups constituted in the gender order—mainly to distinctions between women and men" (Pearse and Connell, 2016, p. 31).

The gender order features two sex-typed (or stereotypical) roles. The two roles embody "the characteristic pattern of status inequality in which the higher status group is perceived as more proactive and agentically competent and the lower status group is seen as more reactive and emotionally expressive" (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 149). Each role carries with it sets of norms and sanctioning practices associated with upholding the norms; however, there is latitude for how each role may be exercised (Portes, 2006). For example, it may be village norm that women remain silent during community meetings; and sanctioning practices for women who speak include disregarding them or making angry gestures and comments to put a stop to those who flout the rule. Thus, while in public a village woman may respect her gender role and avoid reputational harm by not airing her views at such a meeting; however, in private she may be able to persuade a male family member to take a concern of hers into the community meeting as their own. The fluid properties of norms enable a woman to comply with or negotiate and shape the practices that are typical and appropriate for her role and agentic capacity. Feminists have contributed important insights to this understanding by highlighting that individuals embody multiple gendered roles, such as wife, mother, and farmer, making for varying interests, tensions, and opportunities in the norms that one enacts.

In sub-Saharan Africa, it has been well established that women's farming roles are highly heterogeneous across the region as "gender roles and responsibilities are dynamic; in particular, they change with new economic circumstances" (Doss, 1999, p. iv). An analysis of GENNOVATE SSA cases affirms the diversity of women's farming roles (Petesch et al., 2017).

Sex-specific focus group members of poor women and men perceived a good female farmer as skilled and hardworking as she must manage family provisioning from home gardens and other sources, perform housework and care tasks, and labor on her husband's farm. The good male farmer also faces strong expectations of agricultural know-how and family provisioning. However, for men norms stress profits from farming and command of key agricultural resources such as land and tools—but little in the way of housework or care obligations. Such normative framings underpin rural gender hierarchies, as revealed in testimonies such as this one from a woman residing in a village of Ethiopia with highly restrictive norms for women: "Women are not farmers. They are their husbands' shadows. They work behind their husband. They support him. They do what he does but she is never considered the main farmer" (ibid., p. 25). Expectations of women to be farming in the shadows constrain the recognition and returns that they can garner from their farming, and discourage their economic agency.

Norms shape the context for but cannot determine human action. Both women and men struggle to overcome normative constraints in their lives. Norms governing the division of labor and resources in farming households are always sites of negotiation. Indeed, the gender and agriculture literature argues for the greater influence of African women relative to women of other regions due to their significant agricultural roles (Boserup, 1970), and documents their efforts to resist or thwart processes that marginalize them from economic opportunities and that give men claims on their labor and resources (e.g. Freele, 2011; Kandiyoti, 1988).

Most theories about how norms function concur that they are bounded by context and operate among individuals often interacting with one another. Women in some villages of SSA, for instance, risk social ridicule should they interact independently with a male extension agent or attend an agricultural training, while in other villages women can access these resources without normative constraint (Petesch et al., 2017). Many experts on social norms emphasize how norms are held in place because we believe that others conform to and value these societal expectations and perceive that our own social approval hinges on compliance. Our notion of local normative climate stresses the highly contextual and fluid processes by which norms shape gender roles and power relations.

Gender norms as topics of agency

Discussion of gender norms in measuring women's agency and empowerment is longstanding, with Kabeer (1999) especially noteworthy in signaling the importance of norms and context for their meaningful interpretation. Processes of empowerment include those "who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability" (Kabeer, 2001, p. 19). An assessment of a woman's agency over managing her crop sales, for instance, requires understanding the everyday livelihood roles of women and men in the village. A woman who endeavors to sell vegetables in the village market where only men are sellers will have to exercise her agentic capacity to challenge this norm. Should this woman achieve a market presence, she may potentially become an empowering role model who expands the choices and opportunities perceived by other women and families in her community.

Our methodological approach, which we discuss next, builds on a World Bank global study of norms and agency interactions in nearly 100 urban and rural communities (Muñoz Boudet,

Petesch, and Turk, 2013). To explain the fluid ways in which norms operate, the authors distinguish between processes of normative relaxation and change (ibid., p. 54). With relaxation, norms become less restrictive to accommodate the realities that communities are dynamic and women and men often withdraw from complying with confining social rules as they carry out their daily lives. Yet, these practices may not be valued or confer recognition, and may be subject to sanctions. The perception that women are not farmers or only farm in men's shadows illustrate these processes of relaxation where women labor but are not recognized as farmers. To present a context of normative change, the authors discuss a village in Tanzania where the local economy has diversified and both male and female focus groups testify to how over the past decade local women have become visible and successful leaders in farming and in the civic life of their village (ibid., p. 150-2).

Indeed, there is evidence of women's growing labor market participation across the SSA region, which is being driven by forces that include rising costs of living, male labor migration, improved access to public services, and legal reforms (Evans, 2017; World Bank, 2011). Additionally, women's roles as decision makers are increasing in the private sphere (e.g. Jackson, 2014). Women's changing roles are in part products of development processes that have disadvantaged men's livelihoods, including in rural economies, and contributed to men's "peripatetic" provider roles and relations with their families (ibid., p. 12; Amuyunzu-Nyamongo and Francis, 2006; Evans, 2016, Silberschmidt, 2001). Women have had little choice but to increase their participation as income earners. One manifestation of these processes appears to be wider trends of women-headed households, which now constitute one-in-four of the SSA region's households (Milazzo and van de Walle, 2015). These households, moreover, are experiencing *faster* poverty reduction than male-headed households (ibid.).

Akin to the processes by which women conform to and resist dictates that call for their submission and domesticity, in varied ways groups of men also uphold and withdraw from norms of masculinity that associate them with dominance of women and provisioning roles. In many parts of SSA, and elsewhere, local economies provide limited pathways for men to achieve economic independence, a condition widely seen to define manhood and to enable men to form their own family and acquire status and a decision-making role (Barker and Ricardo 2005; Amuyunzu-Nyamongo and Francis, 2006). In other words, men too are constrained by and struggle in "a system of stereotypic conventions that leave them unable to live the lives to which they believe they are entitled" (Kimmel, 2000, p. 93). The burdens for men who rely on arduous and insecure farm labor to provide for their families are also a type of gendered vulnerability, which some men resist (Jackson, 1999a).

As noted earlier, normative change can result from changes in people's misperceptions of what others do and approve of, as well as changes in institutions and power relations (Cislaghi, Manji, and Heise, 2018). While Ridgeway uses the notion of "rules of gender" rather than gender norms, her contributions (e.g. 2009) demonstrate how subconscious stereotypical beliefs condition social interactions, how the frequency and intimacy of interactions between the sexes differentiate these social processes from other social group interactions, and how these processes contribute to variability in institutional structures and their discriminatory practices. Playing

fields for women and men to exercise agency in their lives are not level, but constantly shifting. Both women and men access different sets of norms as "discursive resources" to negotiate their interests and needs, providing "the ground for the resistance and agency which constantly reformulates the 'rules' of social life" (Jackson, 1998, p. 80; ibid., 2014; Sewell, 1999). It is these relational, fluid, and contextual processes that inform our concept of local normative climate.

Methodology

This paper introduces and applies the concept of local normative climate to improve understanding of the influence of gender norms on processes of how men and women exercise agency and innovate in their rural livelihoods. The analysis draws on a set of 24 case studies from the larger GENNOVATE research initiative.

GENNOVATE is concerned with how gender norms and agency interact to advance or impede processes of innovation and technology adoption in agriculture and resource management across different contexts. The first two papers in this special issue discuss GENNOVATE's conceptual framing (Badstue et al., 2018) and field methodology (Petesch, Badstue, and Prain, 2018). Here we review the GENNOVATE cases and data collection and analysis procedures used in our study of normative climate.

Sample

Our sample contains 12 case studies situated in the West of the SSA region, and 12 in the East (Table 1). The case studies are based on GENNOVATE's global sampling framework, which applied principles of maximum diversity sampling to introduce variance in the case studies on levels of economic dynamism and of gender gaps in assets and capacities. The cases are a subsample of 137 GENNOVATE cases. The variability of characteristics among the research communities, including in the macro contexts in which they are situated, helps to establish a strong foundation for making analytic arguments about the relevance and generalizability of patterns identified (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014).

Table 1. Sample of 24 SSA case studies

SSA region	*Country*	*# Case studies*	*Gender Inequality Index Rank (out of 188 countries)***
West	Mali	5	156
	Niger	3	157
	Nigeria	4	n/a
East	Burundi	2	184
	DR Congo*	1	141
	Kenya	2	135
	Rwanda	1	84
	Tanzania	4	129
	Uganda	2	121

*For simplicity we pooled the single case in the central region, DR Congo, with the 11 cases in the East.

**The UNDP Gender Inequality Index measures the gap between women and men in education, the economy, and political empowerment (seehttp://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii).

The sample provides strong variance in economic, agro-ecological, religious, and security contexts. Thirteen of the cases are classified as sites of low economic dynamism relative to their surrounding sub-national regions, with the remaining contexts providing more active and competitive local economies, including for marketing agricultural produce. Dryland conditions characterize nine study villages in the West, and the remaining are in humid and semi-humid zones. The communities are Christian in the East and Muslim in the West (except this reverses for one case in the East and three in the West).[i] Key informants report local experiences with violent political strife over the past decade in roughly half of the villages spread widely across the sample; only Uganda did not have at least one conflict-affected village. Seventeen of the cases are characterized as having greater gender inequalities relative to their surrounding sub-national regions, as measured by larger gender gaps in primary school completion and women in local elected political positions. Polygyny is common in nine study villages sampled in the West, and three in the East.

Data collection and analysis

GENNOVATE's data collection tools are inspired by participatory methods that enable women and men individually and together with others in their community, to reflect on and interpret their own lives and experiences. This paper mainly draws from the data gathered from two focus group instruments, each of which was repeated once in a research village in order to ensure same-sex groups. The first focus group instrument reached poor women and men, and the second middle-class women and men (for a total of four focus groups in each case). Each group contained eight to 10 participants who ranged in age from 22 to 55. The paper also includes data from focus groups conducted with youth (ages 16 to 24) and key informant interviews (with both genders) to construct a profile based on demographic, social, economic, agricultural, and political information about the case. With strong advance coordination and support from a hired community organizer, most teams completed the fieldwork for a case within one week.

Informed consent procedures required members of the field team to begin each data collection activity by reading aloud a short written explanation of the purpose of the study and the particular instrument. The statement indicates that participation in the study is voluntary and confidential, and that those who agree to participate in a focus group or interview may choose not to answer any question or to end their participation at any time. Facilitators also explain that they cannot promise any direct benefit to the community or any individual from the research. Field teams are trained to convey this information, to solicit questions, and to check that participants understand.[ii]

Discussions of a Ladder of Power and Freedom provided one of the means that we explored normative influences on perceptions of agency. The ladder tool enables local people to assess and reflect on their own changes in decision-making capacities over a ten-year period. Inspired by Sen (1999) and Kabeer (1999), we use the better-known terms of "power and freedom" for discussions with villagers about their sense of agency, and we anchor our questions in

consequential decisions that shape one's life path. The exercise is conducted with the middle socio-economic groups rather than the poorest or best-off sectors. Typically, middle-class groups perceive a more fluid normative environment compared with poorer social groups (e.g. Muñoz Boudet, Petesch, and Turk, 2013; Gelfand Harrington and Jackson, 2017); however, testimonies from poor women and men about their agricultural roles, opportunities, and experiences also informed this analysis. We discuss the ladder tool in some detail because the numerical and narrative data that it generates made a valuable contribution to both the contextual and comparative applications of the concept of local normative climate. As women and men explain the levels of agency for their own gender in the village, their testimonies reveal some of the expressions of agency that are normative for the women and men in their local context.

The Ladder of Power and Freedom exercise opens the focus group and involves just four questions. Showing a picture of a simple five-step ladder, facilitators ask focus groups members to consider the extent to which the majority of the men in their community (if a men's focus group, or the majority of local women if a women's group) have the capacity to make their own decisions about important affairs in their life, such as "where they will work or whether they will start or end a relationship with a person of the opposite sex" (Kabeer, 1999). A ranking of step 5 indicates great power and freedom (and step 1 very little power and freedom) to make these consequential decisions. Focus group members anonymously rank their gender on small slips of paper, which are posted on the ladder visual and discussed. The rankings and discussion are then repeated to capture perceptions of power and freedom a decade ago (recall issues discussed in Petesch et al., 2018). A summary statistic (change in perceived agency = mean step now – mean step 10 years ago) is generated to compare perceptions of change on the ladder among focus groups. A positive summary statistic indicates perceptions of increased decision-making capacities.

For analysis of normative influences on local agricultural livelihoods and decisions, we draw mainly from the four middle class and poor focus group discussions. The groups discuss local men's and women's agricultural roles; new agricultural technologies, practices, networks, and learning opportunities; and household decision-making processes related to local agricultural livelihoods and women's resource control. Our work with the focus group data was enriched by information gathered from the other instruments.

The findings are the result of collaborative data management, sharing, and analysis among co-authors. For example, transcripts required a common format, and as data were collected in local languages, each transcript was translated into English in the same format and systematically reviewed by the principal investigator.[iii] We applied four analysis procedures: systematic content analysis of the narrative evidence from the focus groups with a set of 30 common questions; authors' independent analyses of their own cases; analysis with GENNOVATE's coded narrative dataset (discussed in Petesch et al., 2018); and comparative work with ladder summary statistics and other numerical data gathered from pre-coded questions to key informants and focus groups.

As part of the GENNOVATE collaboration, a training session and ongoing mentoring by senior anthropologists on the team emphasized concern for reflexivity and for how our position as

external researchers shapes the kind of data gathered, as well as our understandings and interpretations of the meanings and experiences that men and women convey to explain their sense of agency and the social conventions of their villages. While all external researchers face limitations, we also recognize that when compared to long-term ethnographic approaches, rapid data collection methodologies may fail to register the ways in which subaltern groups might resist, challenge, and sometimes alter oppressive structures (Jackson, 2002; Scott, 1985). To mitigate some of these limitations, the GENNOVATE dataset provided diverse opportunities to triangulate testimonies about the factors and processes that women and men themselves identify as enabling and constraining power and freedom in their lives. By spotlighting two case studies, we present participant testimonies to incorporate some "of the uniqueness of particular places and times, cultural specificity, and historical background" (Jackson, 2002, p. 504).

Results

Case studies of normative climates

By local normative climate we refer to the prevailing set of gender norms in a community, and how they are interacting with other dynamics in that context to differentially shape women's and men's sense of agency and opportunities in their lives. In this section we apply our concept of local normative climate to an analysis of two case studies, and in the following section we engage the 24 cases comparatively. The first case is in the Oyo State of Nigeria, and the second in Kenya's Western Region. The normative climates in the case studies differ significantly. The Nigeria case presents a climate that discourages women's agency, but encourages men's agency. In the second case, these dynamics are reversed. We explore each case to reveal the contextual influences on women's and men's conceptions and interpretations of their agency and livelihood roles and decisions. In different ways these cases challenge some assumptions in the literature about women's and men's agency.

Enterprising Yoruba women with limited agency

Ilu Titun (a pseudonym) is a village of 2,500 residents in Oyo State. Both Ilu Titun's women and men cultivate maize, cassava, and vegetables, with much of the produce directed toward self-provisioning rather than market sales due to poor road conditions. The village hosts a primary school and a health clinic but lacks irrigation and electricity. Most households rely on a local river for water. Focus group participants report primarily Yoruba heritage and some Igbo, and are mainly Christian, although several Muslims joined the focus groups. Villagers are polygynous, live in extended families, and share meals where husbands are typically served first followed by children and then women.

In Ilu Titun, women are deeply engaged with their local economy, with diverse flexible norms supporting their economic participation. By comparison, however, the men of Ilu Titun express a greater sense of empowerment and testify to satisfaction with their farming opportunities and with various restrictive norms that privilege their status.

Many village norms undergird women's initiatives to provision for their family. Women of Ilu Titun move about the village independently, cultivate improved maize and cassava varieties, and

vend in the village's weekly market. While women have never been elected to local office, one woman represents market women in village meetings and formal occasions. Local inheritance practices provide for wives to receive equal shares of their husband's inheritance to pass on to their children, regardless of the number of children. Women participate in agricultural extension opportunities and learn of new technologies and practices; however, one woman, a 55-year-old widow and farmer, cautioned, "We women don't really have time for such. We are really busy."

Relative to most SSA contexts, Yoruba culture has historically been encouraging of women's economic participation. Yoruba women customarily enjoy more property rights than women from other ethnic groups of Nigeria and elsewhere in the SSA region, and they "are expected to earn an income of their own from which a substantial proportion of household expenses may be met" (Aluko, 2015, p. 60). Scholars caution, however, that women's economic activities have not yet translated into more gender-equitable relations and decision making, even for women residing in urban centers (e.g. Aluko, 2015; van Staveren and Olasuno Odebode, 2007; Forsythe, Posthumus and Martinet al., 2016). Our data largely confirm this.

In discussing women, members of the poor men's focus group shared that a good woman farmer of their village "must be able to carry out some basic farming activities such as planting and, at the same time, perform her domestic chores," and "must know how to process her farm produce such as cassava into garri, maize into pap, and yam into yam flour, and so forth." Women corroborate these expectations of heavy domestic and agricultural work burdens, which, for instance, include providing labor on their husband's plots before they plant their own. Their diverse farming and marketing activities help them to manage household food security and cash needs, strategies that reduce risks from crop failures and market uncertainties (Forsythe, 2016).

Yet, despite significant contributions to their households, focus group members surprisingly describe these industrious village women as having climbed from the bottom step up to merely step 2 of their Ladder of Power and Freedom. One woman explains that compared to a decade ago she now earns more and is able to meet the needs for all five of her children. Other women, however, stress that they have little authority to make decisions. "My husband restricts my freedom to make major decisions because he is head of the home and I have to respect him for peace to reign," explains a 50-year-old trader. Another woman, also age 50 and a trader, adds that women cannot "really have a say . . . when you are not contributing much." These testimonies depict a local normative climate that generally marginalizes local women and fails to acknowledge their role in family maintenance.

Within the focus group, the only participants who report that they exercise independent decision-making are either widowed or separated. Normative expectations are often different for widows compared to married women, and this can enable them to be household heads and earn economic status (Potash, 1986).

The men's focus group of Ilu Titun on average reports climbing from step 2 to 3 on the Ladder of Power and Freedom and conceive of their agency mainly in relation to their roles as accomplished farmers. A 55-year-old farmer and father of five prompted nods of agreement from other focus group members with this explanation:

> *Most of us made a lot of profit from sales of our produce, and this has given us some level of freedom to do what we want.* Ko sowo, ko sagbara*, meaning there is no power without money.*

While women convey a sense of limited opportunities for their agri-businesses in the village's weekly market, men have access to trucks, which enables them to sell their produce in a market outside the village where they can fetch higher prices. "Men are meant to travel far and not women," relates the village head (male key informant) when explaining the two markets.

Indeed, the two markets provide a certain perspective on the sharp rebukes elicited by our question to the focus groups of poor women and men about their views of gender equality. One woman, a 49-year-old trader and farmer immediately retorts that they had "nothing like equality." In the men's group, the question about gender equality triggers a passionate justification for women's lower position, highlighting underlying anxieties about the fluidity of norms:

> *Participant 1: Equality between men and women is a very bad thing especially in Yoruba land and particularly in this community. Women are supposed to be under men in everything. God has made men their heads, and that simply means men and women cannot be equal in any way. (45-year-old male farmer)*
>
> *Participant 2: We believe that the women themselves know we can't be equal. They become very rude and disrespectful when they have freedom. (45-year-old male farmer)*

Together, both men bond over displaying their power over women using their belief structures, revealing how norms, including religious beliefs, define which issues can legitimately be bargained over and which fall in the arena of the uncontestable.

Certainly, Ilu Titun's fertile soils and skilled women and men farmers and traders represent significant assets; yet, the village's confining norms, remoteness, and lack of services impede women's access to and control of resources that might enable a stronger sense of agency. Given normative pressure to maintain strict gender hierarchies, such as through religion and community sanctions, the local agricultural economy is experienced very differently by the men and women of the village. In Ilu Titun strongly patriarchal gender relations continue to constrain women's benefits from their considerable economic roles.

To be sure, some gender norms are more fluid in Ilu Titun, while others are restrictive and mediate against cooperative forms of gender relations and women's decision making and resource accumulation. In the face of such complexity, the data from the Ladder of Power and Freedom provide helpful indications about men's and women's perceptions of how the normative climate is affecting their sense of opportunities and barriers. For women, the climate mostly discourages them from bettering their lives, while men's reports are more favorable as their circumstances secure their power in the gender hierarchy.

Despairing Luhya men

Our second case, Amatuma (pseudonym) from Kenya, illustrates a difficult normative climate where the local economy is transitioning in ways that men perceive as disadvantageous to their livelihoods, and which they register as a descent on their Ladder of Power and Freedom. However, local women report rising power and freedom, and describe how they assumed new household roles and livelihood activities in order to pull their families through difficult times. These challenging community circumstances often prove deeply stressful on gender relations and exact a great toll on men, but they also drive a relaxation of gender norms for women's roles (e.g. Petesch, 2018).

With a population of 2,000, Amatuma is located in Vihiga County in western Kenya. The village is characterized as peri-urban and enjoys good road access to Kisumu, a port city. Poverty levels are relatively high, very few people reach secondary school, and there is competition for resources due to the area's dense population. Farmers mainly cultivate maize intercropped with beans under rainfed conditions. Key innovations include improved breeds for dairy and hybrid maize varieties. Most Amatuma residents belong to a Maragolis subgroup of Luhya, are Christian, and speak Luhya, Swahili, and other dialects. Polygynous practices have declined over the last decade and now nuclear households are the most common. Patrifocal practices are common, in which wives leave their birthplace to live with their husbands. Close family relations extend to wider kinship groups; and women often develop enduring relationships with their husband's family. Lineage is patrilineal, and bride price commonly practiced (Wakesho Mwagae, 2013). Many testimonies in our data speak to the emergence of new norms that are supportive of women's growing roles in their community; however, observations from Amatuma's men and women indicate the persistence of restrictive norms that prescribe men's dominance over women and their significant provisioning role. For example, a 42-year-old farmer in the men's focus group expresses aspirations for the young women of the village to be educated and "join groups and participate in development"; however, another 52-year-old farmer in the group cautions that young women also "need to understand and accept that they are number two, and not the head of the family."

Yet, women and men alike describe a local context that makes it very difficult for men to fulfill their gender-ascribed roles. For example, middle class men register a decline on their Ladder of Power and Freedom from step 3 to just below it. To explain this trend, men speak of frustrations with joblessness and decreased access to land which have undermined their potential to earn income. Urbanization, changes in inheritance practices, and an increasing population put pressure on land and decrease the size of men's agricultural plots. Study participants report a decline in parents sharing plots and providing land titles to guarantee ownership of the plots to their children. "We don't have title deeds for our small pieces of land," states a 30-year-old single male farmer in the focus group, "and we don't have a voice." Another man, a-55 year-old widower and farmer, adds that because of these conditions, "We are like squatters."

Both women and men report problems of men's alcohol abuse and infidelity, and associate these with the causes and consequences of the village's difficult economic circumstances. According to our female key informant, a community leader, an astonishing *half* of Amatuma's households are headed by women, a phenomenon she explains accordingly:

> *There is a crisis in this area. Men are dying at a fast rate! Women are then the heads of the home. I think it is because men have become lazy and women have practiced their skills and perfected it. Men just idle around and indulge in alcohol. A good number of families are broken, and we also have a high number of widows.*

Among several ethnic groups of western Kenya, including the Luhya and the Luo, a widow may be considered married under customary dictates and is expected to remain part of her husband's family, or she may be forced to leave and surrender claims to family assets. Women who resist this practice may face challenges that include raising children alone, landlessness and economic exploitation, social stigma, and a denial of rights to remarry men of their choice (Miruka, Nathan, and Obongo, 2015). In some cases where women sustain close relations with their extended family, for instance, widows may be able to retain resources (e.g. Gwako, 1998). Our data offer a scenario of women heading their own households and where gender norms are relaxing in ways that support their pursuit of farming opportunities. Across the wider set of cases, women who run their own household typically rank their agency high, and attribute this to their need to make decisions and provide for their family.

In contrast to the men's descent on the ladder, women perceive they have moved from step 2 up to step 3. The women—all 10 of whom report farming occupations, and eight identifying additional jobs in trading, hairdressing, and tailoring—explain that they would have climbed higher but for the many constraints they face. The women mention barriers such as land scarcity and struggles with poverty. They lament lacking the knowledge, finance, and training necessary for them to adopt "expert farming techniques" such as crop rotation and measures to combat rodents. A 45-year-old farmer in the focus group identifies inadequate support from husbands and other women in the village as additional barriers they face: "In marriage there are hindrances too, because when a woman has an idea, the man opposes them so they can't get started." Another in the group, a 46- year-old farmer and vendor of business clothes, strongly agrees that finding help is difficult and elaborates that a savings "merry-go-round [rotating credit group] . . . can only stand when other women support them."

When asked to reflect on the reasons for climbing their ladder, these women acknowledge how their lives have changed and how their family's expectations of them changed as well. "Ten years ago women were just housewives with nothing to do," states the farmer and clothing vendor. As these women shoulder heavy household work burdens, by "nothing to do" they are echoing the Yoruba women's perceptions that they were not contributing the kind of work that is deemed to have value and affords them recognition and resources. A 50-year-old farmer explains that in the past women could not progress because husbands, in-laws, and other family members "were not for the idea that a woman should work." Now, women are often identified as the "developers" in the household by men and women alike, which is a sign of their changing roles as farmers and entrepreneurs who provide for their families. Explaining the climb on the ladder, a 46-year-old farmer shares:

> *Back then women were less informed, but today we attend seminars like this one so you find that [now] women even can keep cattle for milk produce, which gives them cash.*

Amatuma's focus groups with poor men and women largely express support for the notion of gender equality. A 46-year-old male farmer in the men's group considers equality good because both boys and girls "get the same levels of education"; similarly, a 52-year-old male farmer remarks, "Nowadays we have male and female judges in the low courts." However, a vocal minority among the men is unconvinced, with a 32-year-old male farmer suggesting that gender equality puts a man at risk for being "despised by women." Nevertheless, testimonies reveal that men continue to exert a considerable degree of authority within intra-household relations.

As indicated in their diverging ladder data on power and freedom, with men falling and women climbing, the normative climate may fuel highly gendered coping strategies, such as women becoming known as developers and playing vital roles in leading households, and men withdrawing their labor and turning to antisocial behavior, including alcoholism. Social and economic changes in this case are having profound consequences for family structure and wellbeing where men's fears and anxieties are reflected in worries about being despised by women (also see Amuyunzu-Nyamongo and Francis, 2006; Silberschmidt, 2001).

The two cases illuminate the variability in how gender norms operate to shape women's and men's lives. In Amatuma, a flowering of more equitable norms for women's economic participation is deemed to be empowering by local women. In the case of Ilu Titun, women observe limited agency despite their longer engagement with commercial farming and trading and the presence of many norms that support this. Simultaneously, testimonies from both cases reveal a persistence of patriarchal norms underpinning men's dominance and claims on resources; however, land and job scarcity in Amatuma is making for a normative climate that is more disabling than enabling for men's sense of power and freedom. In both contexts, gender relations are marked by stress and uneasy cooperation.

Comparative findings on local normative climates

In this section we draw on all 24 cases in order to present a comparative application of the concept of local normative climate. Due to limited space, we focus mainly on the Ladder of Power and Freedom rankings and discussions for this analysis. The ladder data help to reveal people's sense of agency and capacities for making decisions in their lives, as well as important gender differences in how they perceive and negotiate their local normative climate. The larger comparative perspective masks local norms, but is useful for highlighting regularities, such as the effects of life cycle transitions on both women's and men's agency, and how economic conditions are an overriding concern for men. To illuminate our comparative findings meaningfully, we draw on specific examples from our in-depth cases.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the 48 ladder summary statistics on power and freedom for two time periods across a decade to assess change. Women displayed more upward mobility than men, while men begin and end at higher positions on the ladder than women. Broadly, these patterns seemingly reflect, on the one hand, men's established dominant position in the community and the reality that they have been decision makers for generations; while the women's rankings speak to their changing roles over the past decade, changes which they

generally deem to be giving them greater power and freedom to take important decisions in their lives.

Figure 1. Median rankings on five-step Ladder of Power and Freedom for the majority of men and women in the study villages. Now and 10 years ago (48 focus groups)

These general patterns obscure variability in the ladder rankings. In half of the cases, both women's and men's ladders show some degree of upward movement, as in Ilu Titun. Seven cases reveal perceptions of static or falling power and freedom for men, while women show positive movement regarding their agency and decision making, as in Amatuma. Space prevented us from presenting one of the five cases where women express being stuck or falling on their ladder, whereas the men's ladders show climbing. Downward or static ladder trends raise red flags because they typically indicate that there are hardships affecting a substantial segment of the community. This is especially evident given that some amount of upward movement (rather than descent) is to be expected due in part to normative life cycle processes which make it common for men and women to perceive greater power and freedom over the course of a decade of their adult lives.[iv]

Across the cases, the ladder of power and freedom discourse most often centered on concerns about household relations, which include men's and women's changing positions, roles, and relations as they move through different life stages. Figure 2 highlights that women often conceive of their power and freedom, first and foremost, in relation to their husbands and to their domestic roles. When their agency ranking is high, women often attribute this to their husband's support, and when it is low they often refer to norms that require strict deference to their spouse. This is consistent with arguments that women, first, derive a strong sense of purpose in their domestic roles, and second, that men and household gender relations exercise important influences on the extent to which women perceive agency in their lives (Jackson, 2014 and

1999). Women's sense of agency in our cases also focuses on their livelihood roles, issues that we return to below.

Figure 2. Common topics in the discourse about village men's and women's positions and movements on their Ladder of Power and Freedom (48 focus groups, GENNOVATE coded dataset from 24 case studies)

The men who volunteered reasons for their ladder rankings mainly express agency in relation to their role as household heads, fathers, and successful farmers. Unlike women, men seldom mentioned their spouse in their ladder discourse. It is also notable that men proved much less talkative than women about their ladder rankings. When men do speak up, it is often about step 4, although most men register that their position is best expressed at step 3. Rather than in relation to their spouse, men typically conceive of their power and freedom in relation to other men in their family and community. Relations among men are also relations of power, and men hold one another to normative codes of masculinity in their social context; and they (quietly) signal that they are breaking norms for local men when they position themselves at the lower rungs of the ladder or perceive that they are stuck or falling.

Men's and women's explanations for ladder movements differ in ways that are highly normative. Men, for instance, often associate their empowerment with the life cycle transition of moving from living under the authority of their father (or parents) and other elders to forming their own families. Women sometimes express this key transition—from father's to husband's household as a period of limited agency or even disempowerment. In the Amatuma case, men express frustrations that include parents not providing them with agricultural land or titles, resources which define manhood for many rural men. With great regularity, men express limited or declining agency on their ladder when they have yet to assume or cannot exercise strong household authority and provide substantially for their families. We saw these dynamics not only in the case from Kenya, but also in Burundi, DR Congo, Niger, and Tanzania—i.e. cases that spanned eastern and western regions of SSA.

By comparison, norms for women are in greater flux. Women are more likely, although not consistently, to express a sense of growing power and freedom. They often relate their sense of increased agency to experiencing a more harmonious or supportive relationship with their spouse, to ensuring the wellbeing of their children, and to undertaking new livelihood or savings activities which enable them to meet the food security and cash needs of the household. When women percieve their movements on the ladder as constrained to steps 1 and 2, or when they descend on the ladder, their narratives often refer to restrictive normative prescriptions regarding their submissive positions, restricted mobility and time, housework and care obligations, and scarce access to assets and income-earning outlets. "Tough men like my husband don't give me freedom to make decisions," explains a 50-year-old farmer and mother of six from Ilu Titun. Unlike men who can refer to commonly accepted norms of masculinity, women who pursue new goals for themselves and their families often must negotiate, contest, or flout different norms that restrict their freedoms.

Yet, as women persistently press on the norms that constrain their endeavors to manage their households and better their livelihoods, men strive to uphold norms that privilege their position over women and to which they perceive to be entitled, making for ongoing tensions in gender relations. Men's key gatekeeper roles in women's capacities to innovate in their agricultural livelihoods is a key message emerging from analysis of 336 semi-structured interviews in 19 countries (Badstue et al., 2018a, this special issue). Where women observe climbing and reaching above step 3, their narratives typically attest to norms that are more accomodating of their agency. Sometimes, as Amatuma reveals, women and men testify to beneficial *change* in local norms, such as the greater acceptability of women to work for pay or to learn about and innovate with new agricultural practices or marketing activities.

Unfortunately, women who describe upward climbing and a more flexible normative climate do not necessarily reside in places that provide an adequate context for a type of empowering process that fuels more gender-equitable local level institutions and greater wellbeing. The data generated by the power and freedom ladder activity offer a useful entry point for assessing the local normative climate and its role in highly variable processes of exercising agency and strengthening rural livelihoods. Where ladder rankings reach step 3 or higher, women's and men's narratives more consistently speak to a sense of effective agency, self-confidence, and gains in wellbeing than when individuals are climbing or trapped at the two bottom steps. As the ladder data is at the community level, where local women are reaching step 3, gender norms are also likely to be evolving in ways that are more supportive of their agency, but the fluidity of norms always make such assessments challenging. What we learn from the ladder exercise is that the local normative climate is highly variable, and gender norms have differing effects on men's and women's perceptions of opportunities for exercisig agency and innovating in their rural livelihoods.

Discussion and concluding reflections

The conceptual approach used here reveals how a normative climate is shaped by diverse contextual influences that give rise to social processes where, for instance, local agricultural

opportunities are only perceived as empowering for men in Ilu Titun, and only by women in Amatuma. Comparative findings highlight how perceptions of decision-making capacities are rooted in fluid normative expectations that evolve differently for women and men as they move through their life cycle. Normative expectations and opportunities for women and men to be effective decision makers are continuously changing.

In the larger set of cases, we found extensive evidence of women expressing perceptions of empowerment, and of negotiating the confining norms that have constrained their ability to be visible and effective decision makers. But, in the face of their growing agentic capacity and many other changes in their communities, norms that establish men's dominance over women and the significance of men's provider role have been more stable. The more limited fluidity of male norms is important in helping us to understand how the unevenness of change contributes to local level social processes that take emotional tolls on women and men, fuel stress in gender relations, and impede the normative changes that would enable faster transitions to gender equality.

Our data also make evident that the fluidity of norms contributes to heterogeneity in the processes affecting women's and men's perceptions of their agency. Based on extant literature on the variability of women's agricultural labor and landholdings, we expected to find more restrictive norms in the western SSA cases, and that this would dampen women's ladder ratings and give rise to substantively different narrative discourses about how their capacities for exercising decisions, including in their livelihoods, have changed over time. However, we found instead some evidence of more restrictive norms in the West, but a regional analytic framework did not provide a meaningful fit for some of our cases. In Ilu Titun, for instance, local norms enabled women to be very mobile, employ new seed technologies, and engage in agri-processing and vending, while some contexts in the West constrained women's livelihood activities.

We thus concluded that a notion of "local normative climate" would provide a useful conceptual approach because it helps to convey the diversity of interactions between norms and agency as revealed in our data. Importantly, the concept shifts attention away from focusing on women and their roles and influence in specific domains and decisions of their lives, as is common in many measures of empowerment, to focus instead on the fluid set of norms that weigh on both gender roles and relations. This enabled us to explore how different norms hold tight, relax, or change in the same context, and to be attentive to the variability of these processes on the ground. We could also reveal tensions, contradictions, and opportunities that arise from the fluidity of norms, such as expectations that women should only participate in the local market while men can access the distant one, or that women can sometimes become known as the developers of their community.

Significantly, as the Amatuma example shows, men's agency is deeply conditioned by local economic conditions. A local normative climate that contributes to emasculating men and their sense of hope contributes to processes that fuel greater rural economic inequality. These processes also make women's counter-stereotypical emotional grit and developmental drive all the more important—as the Amatuma women are finding greater room to maneuver and diversify their livelihoods in these same challenging economic conditions. These dynamics put

the burden on women to assume greater economic responsibility on top of their many other gender-ascribed responsibilities to maintain the family.

Exploring men's and women's ladder testimonies offers insights into the relational properties of community-level gender norms that contribute to the persistence of gender inequalities. In Ilu Titun, men aggressively held one another to account as their community's leaders. Rather than classifying communities based on the restrictiveness of specific norms or levels of agency, notions of inclusion and exclusion appear more appropriate. An inclusive climate refers to contexts where *both* men and women are encouraged or supported to undertake important decisions in their lives and to climb up to step 3 or higher on their ladders. By contrast, an excluding normative climate describes more typical cases where *either* men or women perceive their local context to limit their capacities to shape consequential areas of their lives. They register this as a lower step or a descent on the ladder.

The ladder method provided a valuable tool for applying the concept of local normative climate. The notion of a ladder offers study participants a simple and yet flexible construct for expressing their capacities to be decision makers, and how they perceive these capacities to be changing. The four ladder questions and ranking activities are relatively easy to incorporate into other instruments and, with training, to use in focus groups or semi-structured interviews. The narrative and numerical evidence generated then provides for some contextualized and comparative analysis of normative influences on agency.

Findings from the paper suggest varied opportunities for the concept of local normative climate, ladder method, and our collaboration with villagers to inspire and inform other research and development initiatives that aim to strengthen local people's capacities to remove barriers to their agricultural livelihoods. The concept draws attention to whether a context is encouraging *both* women and men to be visible and empowered decision makers, and highlights the fluid and relational ways in which gender norms and agency interact on the ground.

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Endnotes

[i] The roster data for the cases often indicate community members who did not belong to the majority faith.

[ii] Signed consent was not considered appropriate for many of the research contexts due to concerns for limited literacy and local customs and norms.

[iii] The conversion of field notes into English requires skilled field teams. For example, translation of the Mali and Niger data into French and English from local languages was a multi-layered process that involved multi-lingual and bi-cultural team members well versed in translating between two or more languages. The interviews and focus groups were all done in local languages with notes typically taken in French. English translations were done later by members of the field team. In converting the data from local language to a European language if an appropriate translation was not found, it remained in local language. The team discussed word choices and meanings of the final transcripts to ensure that the English translations where as accurate a representation as possible of what was said by the respondents. The research team was experienced in the challenge of collecting and translating cross-cultural research data and was confident that the translations are appropriate and reflect the comments of the participants (Temple and Young 2004; Halai 2007).

[iv] A study (World Bank, 2014), which applied a similar in Niger, discusses how men's and women's different ages and household roles shape their agency, concluding that: "As both men and women age, they gain respect, prestige, and power over their juniors. Older women thus command labor and capital in ways that their junior counterparts cannot" (ibid., p. 10).