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Exploring changing dynamics in subsistence farming: narratives of women farmers in Western Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Despite the great potential that small-scale farming holds, there remain widespread impediments to the adoption of economically and environmentally sustainable agricultural practices. Of particular interest to this discourse are poor women who live off ecologically fragile lands. In addition, while these women hold the primary responsibility for household food production, their ability to fully leverage the land on which they subsist remains attenuated. Using an institutional framework, this qualitative study explored the experiences of women engaged in subsistence farming in western Kenya by interviewing women engaged in subsistence farming (n=41), community gatekeepers and local government officials (n=15). The study's central emergent theme indicated that farming decision-making was informed by women's agricultural knowledge, socio-cultural obligations, their kinship ties, and services provided by both government and non-governmental agencies. As society has changed, the socio-cultural rules which were once designed to secure generational wealth have become untenable for women, youth, and other minoritized groups. This, coupled by weak interventions in the public and private sector and the changing ecology has increased the fragility of subsistence farming. Social work practitioners working with small-scale farmers in the region should consider the implications these factors have on clients' ability to engage in viable agricultural activities.

KEY TERMS: *changing environment, institutions, Kenya, subsistence farming, sub-Saharan Africa, women*

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INTRODUCTION

With the enactment of the United Nations (UN) Global 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is widespread interest in the roles that subsistence and small-scale commercial farming enterprises could play in guaranteeing food security, ending poverty, as well as addressing climate change. Of particular interest in the sustainable agricultural practices discourse are poor women who work and live off ecologically fragile lands and who are especially susceptible to economic disenfranchisement. Inaccessible financial intermediaries, and lack of income generating opportunities stymie their ability to accumulate and leverage means of production in the agricultural sector. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), cultural norms which regulate women's access to capital intensive assets, including the very land they subsist on, heighten economic vulnerability. Addressing poverty among land-fragile women therefore requires a multidimensional approach that targets these overlapping deprivations. Advancing our understanding of the role formal institutions (such as banks and credit facilities) and informal institutions (socio-cultural norms and mores) play in the decision making and functioning of vulnerable populations is especially important considering that social work is a profession committed to the implementation of indigenous and culturally responsive interventions. Using an institutional lens and qualitative approaches, this present study explores the ways in which formal and informal institutions interact to inform the lived experiences of women engaged in sustainable subsistence and small-scale commercial farming in western Kenya. Specifically, the study, (i) identified and explored the salient institutional factors (socio-cultural, legal, and economic) informing women's land-tenure rights in Kenya, and (ii) examined the influence these factors have on decision making around land utilization at the household and community levels.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE REVIEW

Women and farming

Subsistence and small-scale commercial farming play a crucial role in food security, ending poverty, as well as addressing climate change (Anibaldi, Rundle-Thiele, David & Roemer, 2021; Jerneck & Olsson, 2013; Sachs, 2015). Despite the great potential that small scale farming holds, there still are widespread impediments to the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices (Anibaldi *et al*., 2021). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, women have a key responsibility in the production and distribution of food (FAO, 2023). However, attenuated land-rights negatively impacts their ability to make land-use decisions and increase the likelihood of engaging in poor farming practices, ultimately resulting in environmental degradation (Kenya Land Alliance, 2018; UNDP, 2012; World Bank, 2012). This in turn compromises household food security given reduced access to nutritious foods year-round. In Kenya, it is estimated that women contribute 89% of all subsistence farm labor yet hold only 10.3% of land title deeds. Ownership rates are even lower in ecologically fragile regions such as western Kenya where women hold between 1% to 8.7% of land titles (Busia County, nd; County of Siaya, nd). When individuals cannot fully actualize ownership of capital-intensive assets such as land, and motorized farm equipment, they are less likely to engage in activities designed to leverage and preserve these assets (Page-Adams & Sherraden, 1997; Quan, 2006). It is not surprising therefore that a farmer with tenuous land rights is less likely to invest in regenerative and sustainable farming practices (Asrat, Belay, & Hamito, 2004; Muatha, Otieno & Nyikal, 2017; Yegbemey, Yabi, Tovignan, Gantoli & Kokoye, 2013).

Theoretical frameworks

In the anti-poverty literature and Asset Theory in particular, institutions are crucial in the accumulation, preservation, and leveraging of household wealth (Beverly *et al*., 2008; Kagotho, 2019). Institutions are the rules and policies that shape human interactions (Casson, Della Giusta & Kambhampati, 2010), and are broadly classified as formal (statutory laws, policies, governance structures) and informal (customary laws, social norms and mores). In Kenya, progressive formal institutions, and informal institutions (which are oftentimes regarded as restrictive and regressive) play a significant role in the economic functioning of communities. The relationship between formal and informal institutions can be one of competition (where rules incentive actors to violate one or the other), or congruence (where institutions co-exist and or have compatible outcomes) (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). The different ways through which formal and institutions incentivize behavior is in part what informs the complexities women face in leveraging capital-intensive assets such as land. In Kenya, partiality towards customary law in land adjudication stems from the strong connection communities have with ancestral kinship ties. This, coupled with the complexity of navigating 75 laws governing land matters and prohibitive costs of accessing formal government and legal services increases the barriers women face in land matters (Kagotho, Bunger & Wagner, 2016; Kenya Land Alliance & FIDA-Kenya, n.d.). It is not surprising therefore that even as county governments in western Kenya accelerate issuance of land title deeds, women and youth still lag in land ownership (Busia County, nd; County Government of Vihiga, 2018; County of Siaya, nd).

Researchers have employed different theories and models to investigate the structural and individual level factors that inform regenerative and environmentally sustainable farming practices in Africa, including the theory

of planned behavior (TPB) (Anibaldi et al., 2021; Mutyasira, Hoag, & Pendell, 2018), the Livelihood Platforms Approach (LAP) model, (Anibaldi *et al*., 2021; Brown, Nuberg & Llewellyn, 2019), and the Diffusion of Innovation theory (Anibaldi *et al*., 2021). (Anibaldi *et al*., 2021). Mutyasira *et al*., (2018), (2018) applied the Theory of Planned Behavior among smallholder farmers in the Ethiopian highlands to investigate adoption of sustainable agricultural practices. They conclude that adoption of sustainable agricultural practices can be bolstered through a combination of economic and psycho-social interventions. Focusing on perspectives of community leaders and extension officers and applying a Livelihood Platform Approach (LPA) framework, Anibaldi *et al*. (2021), report that the adoption of conservation agriculture has also been low among the smallholder, subsistence farming communities. From the examples enumerated above, we see that researchers have used a wide range of theoretical perspectives to examine the farming practices by subsistence farmers, with seeming agreement that there are still widespread constraints and impediments on the uptake of sustainable farming practices. Informed by these theoretical perspectives, this study explored the ways in which institutions and interpersonal factors impact women's ability to engage in subsistence farming in western Kenya.

METHODS

Research site. —The study was conducted in western Kenya, where a growing population coupled with prohibitive land transfer costs has resulted in an increased number of land sub-divisions, which also tend to be informal and undocumented in nature. The average land parcel in the region is therefore well below what is considered to be economically viable and significantly smaller than the national average land holding of 2.5 hectares (Busia County, nd; County of Siaya, nd; Kisumu County, nd).

Convenience sampling was used to identify and recruit study participants. Three distinct groups of participants were enrolled in the study (i) women engaged in subsistence farming (n=41), (ii) community gatekeepers (n=12), and (iii) local government officials. (n=3). While the study's main focus was on women's firsthand recounting of farming experiences, data from key informants, i.e., gatekeepers and other government officials was intended to triangulate their narratives. Therefore, gatekeepers with knowledge on the formal institutions that inform women's participation in subsistence farming were invited to participate. Six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with women currently engaged in farming on family or communally held land. FGD questions revolved around land ownership, and women's autonomy in land use decisions. Participant observations and field notes were used as a triangulation strategy to document farming practices in the region. Farm observations and field notes were used to make meaning from women's narratives. Data was collected in several languages—Luo, Kiswahili, and/or English. With their consent, interviews were audio recorded and a professional company hired to transcribe, translate, and back-translate the data. To establish trustworthiness, several strategies were built into the research process including triangulation of data sources, team coding, code-recode strategies, and reflexivity.

Research ethics. – The study received human subjects' approval from the Ohio State University and research permits from the Kenyan government. Ethical standards were observed throughout the study including in the analysis and data storage phases. Participants were consented prior to their interviews and received a copy of the consent form for their records.

Data analysis. —An iterative process of data analysis was conducted using AtlasTI (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2016), and the paper and pencil method. First, deductive preliminary codes were assigned to segments of data that described perspectives of gendered agricultural practices. Next, code mapping was conducted on these first cycle of codes to organize them into meaningful categories. Finally theoretical coding was used to identify emerging themes from the data (Saldaña, 2021).

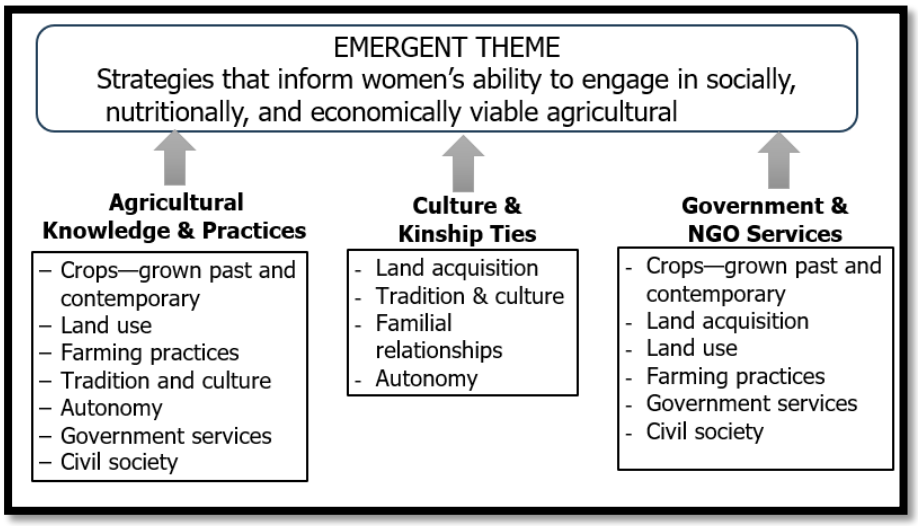
Research team. —This multidisciplinary team of researchers are of Kenyan ancestry and the second and third authors are indigenous to western Kenya. Throughout the data collection and analysis process the team engaged in consultation and reflexive review of how their professional and personal social identities (age, gender, education status, transnationalism, etc.) informed their positionality in the study. The first author has an established body of scholarship on the role institutions play in women's ability to accumulate, leverage, and preserve household assets. As such, she relied heavily on her knowledge of theory and literature to inform study design, analysis, and interpretation. As an educator in the natural sciences, the second author was instrumental in helping to make meaning of women's narratives as they related to the changing climate and ecosystem. Finally, because the first two authors identify as transnational scholars, the study was anchored on the third author's knowledge of the culture, norms, and values of the research setting.

RESULTS

Women enrolled in the focus groups (n= 41) ranged in age from 32-77 years (Mean=50, Standard Deviation=13.1). Approximately 61% reported no education or some primary education while 19.5% had a high school or higher education. Approximately 60% were married or living together as married. This present manuscript focuses on a key emergent theme, i.e., factors that are integral to women's ability to engage in socially, nutritionally, and economically viable agricultural activities. We examine the three distinct categories (and their

constituent sub-categories and codes) from which this theme was abstracted, namely: (1) agricultural knowledge and farming practices, (2) culture and kinship ties, and (3) government and non-governmental agricultural services. See table for a summary of the categories and codes that informed this theme. In this section, focus group discussions are denoted as FGD and key informant interviews as KII.

Figure 1 Emergent theme, categories, and sample codes



Category 1: Agricultural knowledge and farming practices

In this section participants detail how women's access to land and farming knowledge informs economic and nutritional wellbeing. Women are the generational custodians of the land on which their families subsist. There are two forms of land holdings, ancestral land which is commonly sub-divided among male hires, and lease holdings which women rent annually. Ancestral land holdings are small with quarter and half acre land parcels the two most cited land sizes. It is also on these small parcels where the family *boma* (homestead) is constructed. To augment production, families lease pieces of land at approximately KES 1500 to KES 6000 annually.

Farming communities have for years developed alongside and been shaped with the natural environment. Contemporary farming practices such as the over-cultivation of ever decreasing land holdings, and unsustainable strategies such as monocropping have become a major driver of environmental degradation. Women recognize the benefits inherent in drawing on indigenous knowledge to augment contemporary farming practices. However, as participants note, this indigenous knowledge remains largely undocumented resulting in gaps around indigenous food systems, "*the older women have a lot of knowledge in terms of what was there and what is not and what is now." KII06*

Alongside changing farming practices, women note differences in the types of crops cultivated by their mothers and grandparents. This generational change in crops cultivated is attributed to: (i) diminishing land holdings, (ii) changing rainfall levels, (iii) poor soil quality, and (iv) production constraints. This woman recalls farming practices that are no longer viable due to a changing ecology.

> *I: What is the difference between current type farming compared to the type of farming when you were a young girl?*
>
> *R: There is a big difference because the soil was fertile, we did large-scale farming, there was no fertilizer input, very good harvest, we used cow manure FGD 2*

Land access and farm practices. The importance of women's land access and food security is established in these narratives. Women's narratives around farming alternate between supporting the nutrition and economic needs of their households, functions which are significantly intertwined. Women's ability to make decisions about what to grow and when to grow is integral to keeping their families well nourished. "*If you do not have ownership of land, it interferes with production" KII012.* This participant discusses how land size compromises what she can grow: "*Lack of enough lands is what makes it impossible to plant things like cassava. Because cassava takes long and that will need me to hire land for three years for it to be ready." FGD 1.*

Further exacerbating production issues is the inability to title land to individuals which then impacts stewardship over the land. In fact, in only one instance did a woman in the focus groups identify as a titled landowner. Secure

property rights are a cornerstone of the modern agricultural economy and without a land title, households are unable to leverage their farm holdings. This quotation illustrate how access to titled land provides individuals with the confidence to invest and expand land use.

> *One of the land laws is that you should have a title deed for your piece of land, it gives you assurance that the land belongs to you and that you are the beneficiary of that land. FGD2*

Category II: Culture and kinship ties

In this section, women and key informants discuss the unwritten rules embedded in women's everyday life and the ways through which these ties inform their access to land and farming decision making. Informal institutions such as culture and customary laws modify interpersonal interactions and relationships. Participants examine the duality of kinship ties. On the one hand a source of social and economic security but ties that can equally stifle economic functioning. When it comes to capital intensive assets such as land for example, families tolerate traditional customary rules despite the obstacles they create, because of the anticipation of future (socio-economic) reciprocity and support.

> *The men say today we'll plant for example maize or cotton and once the cotton is done, the woman will labor in the farm up to the harvesting period. When it comes to collection of money, men are the ones who collect. KII05*

However, these gender restrictive customary norms are gradually changing due to factors such as population growth, the penetration of religious organizations, and progressive laws for instance. This is illustrated in the ways through which women strategically push back against some of these land rules either through informal support networks or aligning with non-governmental organizations.

Women and land tenure arrangements.

Family relationships are integral in determining land access and use, which is not surprising given the rules of primogeniture that inform the local culture. Women speak of family relationships that are supportive of activities that help them achieve their dual nutritional and economic support roles. However, participants do acknowledge a changing environment with women reporting greater autonomy in land access and land use when compared to generations before them. Indeed, 35 of the 41 women enrolled in these focus groups reported making all decisions on the crops grown on their family farms. Therefore, while tensions may still exist at the household level where land allocation is concerned, women report more leeway in determining farm strategies including crop rotation.

While women do not enjoy full rights over ancestral land (such as the ability to sub-divide it among their children or leveraging it as collateral for loans), widowed women do report more autonomy over their land as compared to their currently married peers. In other words, widows speak to greater self-actualization over ancestral land use including land leasing decisions. Finally, while women report autonomy in decisions around what crops to grow, cultural and familial obligations continue to prevent women's participation in transaction-based or capital-intensive actions.

> *For example, a widow cannot… she cannot say that today I want to sell a piece of land that belongs to my husband. That is when the brothers will now come in and they will say they are the ones with the say. They sit down and they are the ones who can allow you to sell. And you then declare the proceeds, which in most cases some of them [brothers] also demand to get even if it was meant for something important like school fee. KII05*

Women as agents of their own futures.

While women's historical marginalization is articulated in these narratives, they are however not passive recipients of these constraints and have consistently and strategically pushed against these socio-cultural restrictions. In this example, this religious leader tells of women pushing back against cultural laws that required a male relative to inherit (marry) a kin's widow:

> *You know sometimes it is just overwhelming for them (women) because they do not have an alternative. Because you find a woman may not be willing to be inherited but when you find that the brothers-in-law, even the children want the woman to be inherited. …there are women who have a strong faith because when you have all this pressure from your children, the brothers-in-law and all that, you must be strong, and a person of faith. And just recently here a woman came to me. The husband just passed on some few months ago and I even buried the husband. She came to me and told me there was somebody who wanted to inherit her. She came to me a few weeks ago.* KII020

The discussion above is a good illustration of the gradual erosion of some facets of customary laws which also extends to laws related to farming and planting. Ancestral and cultural dictates passed on through word of mouth and adjudicated through older family members seems to trump contemporary land needs. Even when the rules established by the progenitor who first acquired formal ownership of the land are unfavorable to family wellbeing, there seems to be reluctance to opposing or amending those rules. This does not, however, mean that these rules are static. With changing population dynamics and economic realities, it is understood that customary laws such as those governing land use and access no longer serve the primary intended function of social and economic security. Families understand or have experienced firsthand how detrimental these cultural rules are on the wellbeing of the most vulnerable.

Category III: Interfacing with government and non-governmental services

A nation's development trajectory is influenced by the quality of its formal institutions. This section presents a synthesis of narratives on how women interface with both government and civil society to bolster agricultural production. Data illustrates several bottlenecks faced in successful small-scale farming including few public extension services, poor dissemination of farming best practices, complex and cost prohibitive land title processes, and inaccessible markets. To address these service gaps, civil society has partnered with communities.

Government support services.

Agriculture is a devolved government function and extension support is now under the purview of the county governments. Devolution was intended to bring government services closer to the people and to allow for more context specific supports. As this current government agricultural officer describes, county level supports such as extension officers are available to address farmers' needs:

> *R: The extension officers mostly go to the farmer and so more do they visit when there is need.*
> *I: Who determines the need?*
> *R: The farmer…. KII04*

It should be noted that there is a divergence between data collected from women's focus groups and that of key informant in-depth interviews around women's experiences. A majority of these participants speak of a decline in contact between farmers and extension officers. This disconnect of extension services is of concern given the high number of subsistence farmers in this region. This prevailing situation is attributed to declining agricultural workforce, county level economic constraints, and rent seeking.

> *And if you go to look for them [agricultural officers] they tell you, "Give us transport." It's more so like just 50 shillings…they want you to pay them a compensation, I think that is absurd. KII02*

Furthermore, women argue that this lack of government oversight in local farming practices has resulted in ecologically harmful practices including poor cultivation practices and cultivation on riparian lands. The narrowing of extension services means that farmers no longer benefit from community education on emerging and promising farming strategies: "*Back in the days I used to see agricultural officers coming to the field and talking to farmers advising on the advantages of planting some crops. … We don't have open minds, meaning there is no one to educate the farmer." FGD 6* The only support available is when farmers themselves determine a need on their farms, or when NGOs fill the gap.

Non-governmental supports.

Participants mention a diverse range of non-governmental organizations—including religious, interest and professional affinity groups, social enterprises, and international human service organizations. They go on to describe the multiple ways through which NGOs help them address impediments to farming. This includes strategies to increase farmers' resilience including increased access to credit, using economies of scale to market crops, and value addition to enhance farmer produce.

Participants do identify drawbacks when there is over-reliance on private industry providers in the local agricultural sector. Women and key informants discuss are the costs of participating in interventions associated with non-governmental providers, which they describe as being exploitative and non-responsive to local context. In the following quotation for instance, women describe the fallout from adopting farming strategies that had not previously taken into consideration local nutritional needs.

> *When the [social enterprise] came, being a business, they convinced farmers and we believed that their maze is best. Right now, we stopped planting cassava, sorghum that we used for ugali. We have ventured into maize farming only. It's affecting us as farmers because we don't have stock for cassava and*

sorghum, and nobody comes to teach us on what to plant. So, they businessmen have made our land be a land of hunger because the maize is light and gets finished up so fast… FGD 6

DISCUSSION

The quotations above illustrate the key emergent theme, which centered on women's participation in viable agricultural activities as informed by their (i) agricultural knowledge and practices, (ii) cultural and social expectations, and (iii) the availability of public and private supports structures. While women hold the primary responsibility for household food production, their ability to fully leverage the land on which they subsist remains attenuated (Onyalo, 2019). As society has changed with expanding commercial opportunities, cultural rules which were once designed to secure generational wealth have become untenable for women, youth, and other minoritized groups. Indeed, literature has identified the deleterious consequences of these tenuous land arrangements including the increased use of destructive ecological practices among small-scale farmers (Adamtey et al., 2016; Willy & Wawuda, 2014). Contemporary statutory law coupled by increased financial pressures are in turn slowly loosening the constraints that were previously imposed by customary rules on women and other vulnerable groups. This study highlights the ambiguity characterized by institutions that while co-evolving remains at odds with each other.

Land governance and security is such a fundamental piece in the development discourse it is addressed across five Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically goals related to poverty, hunger, gender equality, sustainable development, and life on land. Kenya's commitment to food security is articulated in the constitution and anchored across multiple governmental policies and programs that address food security, land access, and women empowerment concerns (KIPPRA, 2019). While government supports directly target barriers to women's economic development including those engaged in the agri-economic sector, these data offer an illustration of how food policies and regulations are misaligned with the realities of women charged with supporting household nutritional and economic needs. Both focus group and key informant data points to a lack of extension services supports in the subsistent sector (Langat, 2020; Munyao, 2024). The absence of extension services at the grassroot level is the consequence of shifting national food policies which have over the years prioritized cash crops and large commercial ventures in the food security discourse at the expense of subsistence farmers (Government of Kenya, 2012). The resulting access and support gaps are addressed and have been filled by civil society including religious and non-governmental organizations. These organizations act as the interface between women and local food policies and regulations, the market, and cultural norms and rules. There are numerous examples throughout the focus groups and key informant interviews, where viewed in their entirety, the patchwork supports offered by civil society do indeed address the multiple dimensions needed to create an enabling small-scale farming environment. There are drawbacks though when there is over-reliance on private service providers in the local agricultural sector. Unlike taxpayer funded services that are locally established and institutionalized, private organizations which are driven by implementation timelines tend to have a more temporary footprint and time-limited interventions that are not taken to scale. These data support the marshaling of government services back towards supporting small scale farmers. Indeed, supporting subsistence farmers is one of the most effective food security strategies available to governments.

Implications for social work practice

This section examines these findings by contextualizing them within the realities of social work practice in Kenya and the region at large. Practice and policy implications are informed by participant recommendations. Decision making in subsistence agriculture involves a complex interplay of interpersonal and structural factors. As previously discussed, families contend with gendered and regressive land use rules, inadequate and uncoordinated government, and non-governmental support. Moving forward, supports should be structured in ways that acknowledge women's intersectional realities.

Social work practitioners in both the public and private arena are charged with working towards a more egalitarian society by helping communities re-imagine and re-structure regressive cultural norms and mores. Women's economic inequities are complex and rooted in multiple interpersonal and structural factors including socio-cultural determinants, financial, political, and environmental. In these data, key informants provide several examples of instances when non-governmental organizations have protected the economic rights of widows in this region including engaging in community education and sensitization activities. Given the private sector's role in facilitating women's access to cost-prohibitive legal mechanisms and navigating social constraints, practitioners engaged in this work should be well versed in how local institutions (both formal and informal) have co-evolved to inform women's lived experiences. Social work educators in the sub-field of rural social work and community practice have a critical role to play in supporting nascent social workers in this field. Information on the laws that govern women's access to family assets, including those governing marriage, matrimonial property, and family land should be considered in the curriculum.

What is also evident from these narratives is that kinship networks cannot be overlooked, as these remain an important resource in helping subsistence farmers buffer economic shocks, and expanding means of production (Asadullah & Kambhampati, 2021; Smit & Wandel, 2006). The role of family is fundamental in small-scale agricultural settings where generational knowledge transfer, labor allocation, and a connection to culture and tradition are key to resilient and sustainable food systems. Practitioners working in rural settings should consider a range of interventions aimed at enhancing the functioning of families dealing with the challenges related to subsistence farming. For instance, studies show that women's wellbeing is enhanced when economic decisions are undertaken jointly with their spouse (Fernandez, Della Giusta, & Kambhampati, 2015), social work practitioners should therefore pay particular attention to family level interventions that support intra and inter-household decision making. These include mechanisms to support open communication, compromise, and collaborative decision making at the household level. Furthermore, even as practitioners acknowledge and respect generational family hierarchies, social workers should however not shy away from engaging in emancipatory intervention frameworks to support women's role in subsistence farming.

These findings also have implications for social work scholars in the asset building, preservation, and leveraging field. While the role of informal institutions is well articulated in the development field (Casson et al., 2010), to our knowledge, statistical modeling in the social work literature that includes elements such as culture, corruption, social and religious norms is emergent at best. Acknowledging these informal institutions can help the field better account for the constraints women face and thereby improve the design of community-level interventions. Addressing gaps in our understanding of how informal institutions such as corruption and cultural laws (Kagotho et al., 2016) impact women's everyday experiences is especially important given the field's commitment for culturally responsive models and practices (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019).First, marshaling government services back towards supporting small scale farmers is seen as a solution to addressing these land access and utilization barriers. Indeed, supporting subsistence farmers is one of the most effective food security strategies available to governments. In addition, women need governmental supports, structured in ways that acknowledge how the mechanisms of intersectionality function and supports that do not undermine their ability to meet their household needs.

Strengths and limitations

These findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, while data triangulation through engagement with diverse stakeholders and use of multiple data collection methods was a hallmark of this study, the small sample size limits generalizability of the results of the entire western region of Kenya. Second, given the peculiarities of informal institutions which could differ across tribes, counties, and other geopolitical configurations, future studies are needed to explore the regional nuances which inform women's farming experiences. Despite these limitations, this study offers a grassroots perspective on small scale farming and has presented regionally targeted practice and policy recommendations to support women's wellbeing. Given the points of divergence presented in narratives more so between women and key informants, future studies should map the complementary and competitive nature of these institutions.

CONCLUSION

Using qualitative approaches, this study explored women's experiences as subsistence farmers living at the convergence of formal and informal institutions. These data provide a contextualized view of women engaged in subsistence farming in western Kenya. Findings are in line with prior regional findings that while women hold the primary responsibility for food production, their ability to fully leverage the land they subsist on remains stymied. When viewed through an institutional lens, these narratives further highlight the tensions that exist between informal institutions (cultural norms and rules) and formal institutions (statutory laws and regulations) in relation to women in agriculture. Finally, participants speak to the public and non-governmental agricultural supports available to women in the region and the varied experiences when engaging with state and non-state actors. Social workers engaged in practice with female subsistence farmers in the region should consider the implications these written and unwritten rules have on clients' wellbeing.

DISCLOSURES

Disclosure statement: The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement: Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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