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**Patriarchal Shadows: Gendered Power Relations, Food Production, and Livelihood Struggles among Female-Headed Households in Mbarara District, Southwestern Uganda**

By

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate gender dynamics and how their implications on food production, livelihood issues in female headed households in Mbarara District, Uganda. The contention of the study is that female-headed households in sub-Saharan Africa are frequently portrayed as uniformly disadvantaged, yet the specific mechanisms through which gendered power relations shape food production and broader livelihoods remain insufficiently explored from an intersectional, multi-voice qualitative perspective. Drawing on in-depth interviews with ten key informants (KIs), twelve female household heads (FHHs), and five focus group discussions (FGDs) comprising 40 participants in total, this study employs reflexive thematic analysis informed by Connell's Power Relations Theory and Scoones' Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) to examine how patriarchal norms, resource control, and decision-making dynamics affect agricultural and socioeconomic outcomes among female-headed households in Mbarara District, rural Southwestern Uganda. Findings reveal a "production-control paradox": women perform the majority of agricultural labour but have limited authority over land, crop choices, and harvest proceeds due to the persistent influence of male kin and extended family structures. This disjuncture perpetuates food insecurity, dietary monotony, economic precariousness, and psychosocial stress. A novel contribution of this study is the foregrounding of women's own voices alongside institutional perspectives, which reveals significant divergences between policy narratives and lived experience. The study demonstrates that food production mediates the relationship between gendered power relations and livelihoods, and that equitable intra-household collaboration, even within patriarchal settings, can substantially mitigate vulnerability. The article argues for gender-transformative interventions that go beyond resource access to address the deeply embedded cultural and institutional barriers constraining women's agency in agrarian systems.

**Keywords:** Gendered power relations; female-headed households; food production; socioeconomic livelihoods; Sustainable Livelihood Approach; Uganda; sub-Saharan Africa

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## **1. Introduction**

Globally, women constitute approximately 41% of the global agrifood workforce, yet they continue to face a persistent 24% land productivity gap and represent less than 20% of agricultural landholders worldwide (FAO, 2026; Marta Anguera, 2026). These systemic inequalities are most acutely felt in Sub-Saharan Africa, where female-headed households make up nearly 30% of rural populations and experience disproportionate levels of poverty, food insecurity, and resource exclusion (Doss et al., 2018; UBOS, 2022). Uganda mirrors these disparities: while women contribute up to 80% of subsistence farming labour, they control only a fraction of land and agricultural income, and female-headed households experience a poverty rate 10 percentage points higher than male-headed ones (Nabukeera, 2024; UBOS, 2022; UBOS, 2024). What is more challenging is not resource scarcity, rather, deeply entrenched gendered power relations that govern access to, control over, and benefits from productive assets at household level in the Ugandan context (Mpiira et al., 2024; Ndagire, 2021).

Despite growing scholarly and policy interest, most existing studies have either quantitatively documented gendered productivity and land-rights gaps (Ndagire, 2021; Rwangire & Muriisa, 2021) or relied exclusively on institutional and community-level informants, thereby inadvertently silencing the voices of women most directly affected (Kabeer, Razavi, & Rodgers, 2021; Nansubuga & Atwiine, 2025). To move beyond these institutional perceptions and capture the internal mechanics of the household, this study seeks to address several fundamental questions: How do patriarchal norms manifest in intra-household negotiations over land, crop selection, and harvest disposal? In what ways do family members of the extended side and male kin continue to exert influence even when a woman is formally the household head? And crucially, how do these dynamics look from the perspective of the women living them, as distinct from the perceptions of officials and NGO workers?

This article addresses these questions through a qualitative multi-source exploration of female-headed households in Mbarara District, Southwestern Uganda, a region where customary patrilineal land tenure and patriarchal social structures remain intact. Unlike previous work in this setting, the study deliberately triangulates three evidence streams: key informant interviews with officials and community leaders (n=10); in-depth individual interviews with female household heads (n=12); and focus group discussions with female heads alongside community stakeholders (n=5 FGDs, 8 members each). This methodological pluralism allows the study to interrogate convergences and divergences between official discourse and lived experience, a critical methodological contribution.

The study is grounded theoretically in Connell (2013, 2020) Power Relations Theory, which illuminates how hegemonic masculinity structures resource governance, and in Scoones (1998, 2015) Sustainable Livelihood Approach, which maps livelihood assets and

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outcomes in relation to vulnerability contexts. By foregrounding food production as a mediating domain, the article moves beyond describing constraints to elucidating the pathways through which power relations shape livelihood resilience and vulnerability and the spaces in which women exercise agency despite structural disadvantage.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite progressive national frameworks such as the Uganda National Land Policy (2013) and the Land Amendment Act (2010), FHHs in rural Southwestern Uganda remain trapped in an acute state of socio-agricultural precarity. While women supply up to 80% of subsistence agricultural labor, their nominal position as household heads rarely translates into autonomous executive control over productive assets due to the overbearing structural influence of male kin, in-laws, and traditional patrilineal inheritance customs (FAO, 2026; Nabukeera, 2024). This systemic disconnect manifests in a stark “production-control paradox,” wherein women bear the comprehensive physical burden of farming but are structurally barred from making critical decisions regarding land development, crop choice, credit acquisition, and the distribution of harvest revenue (Nansubuga & Atwiine, 2025).

The empirical problem is further compounded by a critical gap in contemporary agrarian scholarship. Existing literature predominantly relies on macro-level quantitative documentation of productivity deficits or heavily weights institutional and community-leader narratives, effectively silencing the nuanced, first-person lived experiences of the women experiencing this dispossession (Mpiira et al., 2024; Ndagire, 2021). Consequently, there is an incomplete understanding of the internal micropolitics of rural households and the specific relational mechanisms through which patriarchal norms actively subvert a woman’s formal headship (Kabeer et al., 2021). Without granular, multi-voice qualitative interrogation into how these overlapping power dynamics mediate resource access, agrarian systems will continue to suffer from chronic food insecurity, seasonal dietary monotony, and psychosocial vulnerability. This study directly addresses this empirical omission by triangulating the institutional narratives of community actors with the direct voices of female household heads, thereby exposing the hidden frictions between official policy discourse and the realities of agrarian survival in Mbarara District.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Connell's Power Relations Theory**

Connell's (2013, 2020) theory of gender and power posits that societies are structured by a gender order that privileges hegemonic masculinity, subordinating femininities and non-hegemonic masculinities. Power operates not only through overt coercion but also through institutional practices, cultural norms, and taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate gender roles (Agarwal, 2011; Kabeer, 1999). In agrarian contexts, this manifests in male dominance over land inheritance, decision-making, and the commercialization of farm produce, while women are assigned reproductive and subsistence roles (Connell, 2020; Kabeer, 2021).

Notably, Connell's framework rejects a monolithic view of patriarchy; instead, it highlights intersectional variation and the possibility of resistance and negotiation. For female-headed households, this lens reveals how women may nominally head households but still navigate a system where male relatives, in-laws, adult sons, clan leaders, retain significant influence over productive assets. The concept of 'patriarchal dividend' is particularly useful: men collectively benefit from structural advantage even when individual

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men do not consciously enforce patriarchal norms (Connell, 2020). This has direct implications for development interventions, which often target individual behaviour without disrupting structural arrangements.

## **2.2 Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA)**

The SLA, as advanced by Scoones (1998, 2015), emphasizes that sustainable livelihoods depend on access to five capitals: natural, financial, human, social, and physical. It also underscores the role of vulnerability contexts (trends, shocks, seasonality) and transforming structures and processes (institutions, policies, cultural norms). While the original Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) was frequently critiqued for its focus on household-level assets while overlooking internal social hierarchies (Scoones, 1998, 2015), recent scholarly iterations argue for a more 'politicized' framework. This evolution emphasizes the integration of gender and power analysis to uncover how intra-household dynamics determine the actual mobilization of livelihood capitals (Natarajan et al., 2022; Razavi, 2009). By incorporating feminist political ecology and gendered power theories, modern livelihoods research can better explain why the mere presence of assets does not guarantee equitable livelihood outcomes for women (Mohammed, Khonje, & Qaim, 2025; Annan et al., 2021).

Combining these two frameworks enables a holistic understanding of how SLA provides the material basis for analysing livelihood capital and outcomes, while Power Relations Theory explains the gendered mechanisms that mediate access and control. The integration is particularly valuable for capturing the paradox at the heart of this study, which is, women's high labour input paired with low decision-making authority at household level.

## **3. Research Design and Methods**

### **3.1 Study Area**

The study was conducted in Mbarara District, Southwestern Uganda, a predominantly rural area characterized by a mixture of crop cultivation particularly bananas, millet, beans, maize, cassava, coffee among others and livestock keeping particularly cattle and poultry. The population is mainly Banyankore, whose customary land tenure system is patrilineal, with inheritance passing through male lines. According to the 2020 National Development Plan, approximately 25.8% of households in the district are female-headed (Mbarara District Local Government, 2020; National Planning Authority, 2020; UBOS, 2020). The district comprises six sub-counties and several town councils, providing a mix of peri-urban and deeper rural settings that enabled purposive geographic diversity in participant selection (Mbarara District Local Government, 2020).

### **3.2 Research Design**

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative design, drawing on feminist standpoint epistemology, which holds that knowledge is socially situated and that the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly women, constitute a valid and important epistemic starting point (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Rolin, 2012). The design deliberately seeks to centre women's voices rather than rely solely on institutional intermediaries. This approach is consistent with calls for transformative qualitative research in development studies that challenges rather than reproduces existing power hierarchies (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Qualitative data were collected through three complementary methods:

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**(a) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 key informants purposively selected for their institutional knowledge of household dynamics and community development. Informants included sub-county Community Development Officers (3), local council leaders (3), representatives of civil society organizations working on gender and livelihoods (3), and a district technical officer from the Probation and Social Welfare Department (1). KIIs captured official and community-level perspectives on the structural dimensions of gendered power.

**(b) In-Depth Interviews with Female Household Heads (FHHs):** Twelve female household heads were individually interviewed using a separate, in-depth interview guide specifically designed to elicit personal narratives of lived experience. Participants were purposively sampled to represent variation in household headship status (widowed, divorced/separated, single/never-married), age group, sub-county, and number of years as household head. This diversity was intentional: the study aimed to examine whether and how experiences varied across these axes rather than presenting female household heads as a homogeneous category (Razavi, 2009). Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted at participants' homesteads or in a private space of their choosing.

**(c) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Five FGDs, each comprising eight members, were conducted across five sub-counties of Mbarara District. FGD compositions were deliberately varied: FGD 1 brought together widowed female heads; FGD 2 comprised divorced and separated female heads; FGD 3 focused on young and single female heads; FGD 4 combined female household heads with community development officers to facilitate dialogue across different positionalities; and FGD 5 included female household heads alongside local council leaders. This compositional diversity enabled comparative analysis of themes across different social positions and experience types. Each FGD lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.

All interviews and FGDs were conducted in Runyankore, the local language, with a trained research assistant facilitating translation where necessary. Sessions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were subsequently translated into English for analysis. Fieldwork was conducted between March and December 2024.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was employed following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), an updated iteration that foregrounds the researcher's active role in constructing, not merely identifying, themes. Initial codes were generated from all three data streams, then iteratively grouped into sub-themes and overarching themes. The analysis was simultaneously deductive guided by the theoretical frameworks of Connell and Scoones as earlier cited and inductive allowing emergent patterns, particularly those from the FHH interviews, to complement and occasionally challenge key informant narratives. Data from the three sources were analysed both separately and comparatively, enabling assessment of convergence and divergence as guided by Farmer et al. (2006).

Member-checking was conducted with three female household heads and one community development officer to enhance credibility. Negative case analysis was incorporated and instances where female heads reported positive outcomes or challenged dominant patterns were actively sought and incorporated into the thematic structure rather

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than treated as outliers. The final thematic structure was refined through peer debriefing with academic supervisors and co-authors.

### **3.5 Positionality**

Qualitative integrity was maintained through ongoing reflexivity, acknowledging that the researcher is never a neutral observer but is deeply situated within the social context (Berger, 2015). The research team's 'insider-outsider' status through sharing the linguistic and ethnic heritage of the Mbarara community while maintaining academic distance, helped build rapport and uncover deeper meanings in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, this shared identity also required 'reflexive monitoring' to ensure that personal assumptions did not overshadow the participants' actual voices as emphasized by Finlay (2002). Recognizing that the lead researcher's male gender could influence power dynamics during interviews with female heads of households (FHH), a female research assistant was present for all sessions. This intentional balancing of gender roles helped create a 'safe space' of trust, reducing social desirability bias and ensuring a more authentic representation of women's lived experiences (Harding, 1991).

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### 3.6 Participant Profiles

Table 1 presents an overview of all study participants across the three data collection methods.

**Table 1: Participant Profiles**

| Code    | Participant Category               | Age/Years of Experience | Location              | Date       |
|---------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| KI 001  | District Community Dev. Officer    | Exp. 14 yrs             | Mbarara District HQ   | March 2024 |
| KI 002  | CSO Representative (Gender)        | Exp. 9 yrs              | Mbarara Town          | March 2024 |
| KI 003  | Local Council Leader (LC III)      | Exp. 7 yrs              | Rubaya Sub-county     | March 2024 |
| KI 004  | Local Council Leader (LC II)       | Exp. 5 yrs              | Kashare Sub-county    | March 2024 |
| KI 005  | CSO Officer (Livelihoods)          | Exp. 11 yrs             | Mbarara Town          | March 2024 |
| KI 006  | Sub-County CDO                     | Exp. 8 yrs              | Rwampara Sub-county   | March 2024 |
| KI 007  | CSO Representative (Women)         | Exp. 6 yrs              | Mbarara Town          | March 2024 |
| KI 008  | Sub-County CDO                     | Exp. 10 yrs             | Nyamitanga Sub-county | March 2024 |
| KI 009  | Probation & Social Welfare Officer | Exp. 13 yrs             | Mbarara District HQ   | March 2024 |
| KI 010  | Local Council Leader (LC I)        | Exp. 4 yrs              | Biharwe Sub-county    | April 2024 |
| FHH 001 | Female Household Head (Widow)      | 52 yrs                  | Rubaya Sub-county     | April 2024 |
| FHH 002 | Female Household Head (Widow)      | 47 yrs                  | Kashare Sub-county    | April 2024 |
| FHH 003 | Female Household Head (Divorced)   | 38 yrs                  | Rwampara Sub-county   | April 2024 |
| FHH 004 | Female Household Head (Widow)      | 61 yrs                  | Rubaya Sub-county     | April 2024 |
| FHH 005 | Female Household Head (Single)     | 34 yrs                  | Nyamitanga Sub-county | April 2024 |
| FHH 006 | Female Household Head (Divorced)   | 43 yrs                  | Biharwe Sub-county    | April 2024 |
| FHH 007 | Female Household Head (Widow)      | 55 yrs                  | Kashare Sub-county    | April 2024 |
| FHH 008 | Female Household Head (Widow)      | 49 yrs                  | Rwampara Sub-county   | April 2024 |
| FHH 009 | Female Household Head (Separated)  | 41 yrs                  | Rubaya Sub-county     | April 2024 |
| FHH 010 | Female Household Head (Widow)      | 58 yrs                  | Nyamitanga Sub-county | April 2024 |

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|         |                                       |                         |                       |            |
|---------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| FHH 011 | Female Household Head (Single)        | 30 yrs                  | Biharwe Sub-county    | April 2024 |
| FHH 012 | Female Household Head (Divorced)      | 45 yrs                  | Kashare Sub-county    | April 2024 |
| FGD 1   | FGD - Widowed female heads            | Avg. 51 yrs (8 members) | Rubaya Sub-county     | April 2024 |
| FGD 2   | FGD - Divorced/separated female heads | Avg. 39 yrs (8 members) | Kashare Sub-county    | April 2024 |
| FGD 3   | FGD - Young/single female heads       | Avg. 33 yrs (8 members) | Rwampara Sub-county   | April 2024 |
| FGD 4   | FGD - Mixed female heads + CDOs       | Mixed ages (8 members)  | Nyamitanga Sub-county | April 2024 |
| FGD 5   | FGD - Female heads + LC leaders       | Mixed ages (8 members)  | Biharwe Sub-county    | April 2024 |

**Source: Field Data 2025**

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

The study received ethical approval from the Mbarara University Research Ethics Committee (MUST-REC/No. 14/03-23) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST/SS/4782). All participants provided informed written consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given the sensitive nature of discussions around intra-household conflict, economic deprivation, and psychosocial stress, a referral protocol was established: participants exhibiting signs of acute distress were referred to the district social welfare officer. Pseudonyms (KI 001-010; FHH 001-012; FGD 1-5) are used throughout to protect anonymity.

## **4. Findings**

Five major themes emerged from the integrated analysis of key informant interviews, female household head interviews, and focus group discussions: (1) constrained resource access and patriarchal control; (2) gendered labour and the decision-making paradox; (3) food insecurity and dietary precarity; (4) psychosocial strains and relational resilience; and (5) institutional gaps and community-level enablers. Table 2 presents the thematic structure and its theoretical linkages.

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**Table 2: Thematic Structure, Sub-Themes, and Theoretical Linkages**

| Theme                                                | Sub-themes                                                                   | Sources                | Theoretical Link                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Constrained Resource Access & Patriarchal Control | Land tenure insecurity; credit exclusion; male kin oversight; son succession | KIs, FHHs, FGD 1, 4, 5 | Connell - patriarchal dividend; SLA - natural capital |
| 2. Gendered Labour & Decision-Making Paradox         | Labour-control disjuncture; crop choice restrictions; harvest appropriation  | KIs, FHHs, FGD 1, 2, 3 | Connell - hegemonic masculinity; Agarwal's bargaining |
| 3. Food Insecurity & Dietary Precarity               | Seasonal hunger; dietary monotony; post-harvest losses; school feeding gaps  | KIs, FHHs, FGD 2, 3, 5 | SLA - vulnerability context; seasonality              |
| 4. Psychosocial Strains & Relational Resilience      | Emotional burden; stigma; self-help networks; collective agency              | KIs, FHHs, FGD 3, 4    | Kabeer - social capital; Connell - resistance         |
| 5. Institutional Gaps & Community-Level Enablers     | Policy failure; NGO gaps; LC mediation; women's group efficacy               | KIs, FGD 4, 5          | SLA - transforming structures; institutional capital  |

**Source: Field Data 2025**

Illustrative verbatim quotations from all three data streams are integrated throughout, with source codes appended to each quotation. The layering of perspectives from officials (KIs), individual women (FHHs), and collective discussions (FGDs) enables a richer and more nuanced portrayal of the phenomena under study.

#### **4.1 Constrained Resource Access and Patriarchal Control**

Across all three data sources, the most consistent and pervasive finding concerned the mechanisms through which women's access to, and more critically the control over land and other productive resources remained constrained despite their formal status as household heads. The institutional accounts from key informants and the collective narratives in FGDs provided important structural context, while the individual interviews with female household heads added the irreplaceable texture of daily lived experience.

##### **4.1.1 Institutional and Community Perspectives**

The key informants offered structural explanations for resource constraints rooted in customary land tenure and kinship systems. A Community Development Officer explained:

When the male head dies, the extended family members tend to elect one of their own as the overseer of the property of the deceased... This strips authority from the female head. This happens until the oldest son grows to fit in the shoes of his father (KI 009).

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A district leader situated this practice within the broader cultural framework:

Culturally, when a man dies, the kinsmen remain with a say on his property. Though it is virtually known that the property belongs to the wife and his children, the extended family plays a key role in controlling the affairs (KI 003)

A CSO representative drew attention to the way patriarchal authority is perpetuated through sons as they mature:

In most female-headed households, when adult sons grow, they assume the position previously held by their fathers. The mother cannot make any decision in the home without consulting them, especially if it includes anything to do with land and other assets like livestock (KI 002).

FGD 4 (mixed female heads and CDOs) produced a particularly revealing exchange. When a CDO suggested that women "have rights under the Land Act," several female participants pushed back vigorously, with one stating:

The law is there on paper. But when the in-laws come and tell you to leave the land, what do you do? Who will enforce that law for you in the village? You have to have connections and money to win this case (FGD 4, Member 3).

This tension between formal rights and their practical enforcement is a gap consistently highlighted across FGDs and points to a critical institutional failure that official accounts often understate.

#### **4.1.2 Women's Own Narratives: The Texture of Dispossession**

The individual interviews with female household heads provided rich first-person accounts of how resource constraints were encountered on a daily basis. A 52-year-old widow described the immediate aftermath of her husband's death:

A few after burying my husband; his young brother came to the house and told me I should not plant anything on the lower field that it belonged to their clan. I had planted that field for twelve years. I knew every part of that piece of land. But I could say nothing for fear of what would follow (FHH 001).

A 47-year-old widow recounted how the threat of eviction shaped her daily decisions:

I have never improved that house, even though it leaks badly, because I fear that if I invest in it, they [in-laws] will take it and say I was making it for them. So, I live in it as it is. What is mine, I keep simple, hoping that when my children grow and become empowered, they will take control of everything. (FHH 002).

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A divorced woman aged 38 articulated the gendered double-bind with particular clarity:

When I was with my husband, the land was his and us as family. When I left him, the land went back to his people and I went empty handed. Now I rent a small garden from a neighbour to grow food for my kids. I grow just enough for the children and the surplus is sold to get basic needs and school fees. I hear he married another woman, and no longer wants to know anything about us (FHH 003).

For some women, the constraint was less acute because they had adult children who provided buffer support. A 61-year-old widow noted:

My son who works in Kampala sends some money at every end of month. He also made it clear to the uncles that this land is mine. Because of him, I have peace and I am sure no one can touch the family land. But many of my neighbours are not so lucky. They have no one to speak for them. Their extended families under look them mainly because of poverty and vulnerability (FHH 004).

This qualification underscores that resource security for female heads is often mediated by social capital, particularly relationships with educated or economically well to do adult children, rather than by formal rights alone. FGD 1 (widowed female heads) similarly surfaced the role of social support networks, with one participant noting that the women who fared best were those "with someone in their corner," whether a supportive son, a sympathetic LC leader, or an active women's group.

Across the interviews, the inability to offer land as collateral was a recurring material consequence of tenure insecurity. As FHH 005 (34-year-old single head) explained:

Some months ago, I went to the SACCO, which I am a member to borrow money for buying and paying workers that were going to help in bush clearing. They asked for land title or guarantor. I have neither. My land is not titled, and who will guarantee a woman like me? I came back empty-handed. They advised that we make a group of 12 women and we guarantee each other through group guarantee loan scheme. The money they give here cannot help because they are too little (FHH 005).

FGD 5 (female heads and LC leaders) surfaced an important counter-narrative where two LC leaders acknowledged that in cases where they personally intervened to protect women's land rights, outcomes improved. However, other members noted that such interventions were the exception rather than the rule and depended heavily on the individual disposition of the leader.

#### **4.2 Gendered Labour and the Decision-Making Paradox**

The second major theme concerns the structural disjuncture between women's labour contributions and their authority over agricultural decisions and outputs, what this paper terms the 'production-control paradox.'

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#### **4.2.1 Labour Burdens: Official Accounts**

A district technical officer described a labour landscape in which women had become the de facto agricultural workforce:

In this community, it is less likely to find males involved in farming. Most men, especially the youths, are in other activities like boda boda riding, brick making, and petty trading. Farming has been left in the hands of women... For that matter, females are in charge of ensuring that resources necessary for food production are in place, of which resources are not readily available (KI 006).

A local council leader acknowledged the paradox in post-harvest control:

In as much as when the head of the family (male) dies, the widow automatically takes over, the rights to control everything are limited. For instance, in most families, she cannot sell or do major developments on the land like commercial agriculture without the knowledge of the extended family (KI 010).

#### **4.2.2 Women's Experiences of the Labour-Control Disjuncture**

The female household heads provided vivid accounts of how this paradox was enacted in their daily lives. A 43-year-old divorced woman described the harvest season with controlled frustration:

I plant, I weed, I harvest. Then when the beans are ready, my brother-in-law comes and says he is 'helping' me to sell. He takes the money to keep it 'safe.' I see very little of it. My children's school fees are always late because the money that should come to me goes elsewhere (FHH 006).

A 55-year-old widow described how she had learned to navigate the system through strategic concealment:

I sell some of the groundnuts quietly, before the men hear the harvest is done. I keep that money in the church savings group. It is the only money that is truly mine. Without that small trick, I would have nothing (FHH 007).

A 49-year-old widow reflected on how the loss of decision-making authority affected her long-term agricultural planning:

I wanted to grow passion fruit. I had seen women in the next village making good money from it. But my late husband's brothers said it is not our crop; our crop is millet and bananas as Banyankore families. So, I grow millet and bananas, and my children find themselves with little choices of food. It's once in a while that I can buy alternative foods that we don't grow at home (FHH 008)

FGD 2 (divorced and separated female heads) produced an intense discussion on this theme. Participants collectively described a pattern in which male kin's interference intensified

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precisely at the moment of harvest, the point at which labour converts to income. One participant summarized:

They leave you to dig in the sun and suffer the hard labour all alone. When you are sweating, nobody comes to give you a helping hand. When the maize is ripe and the prices are good, suddenly everyone is your family again (FGD 2, Member 5).

FGD 3 (young and single female heads) surfaced a generational dimension: younger women reported slightly more flexibility in crop choice and market engagement than older widows, which they attributed partly to having fewer male relatives asserting customary claims. However, they also faced greater social scrutiny regarding their moral character, which constrained their market participation.

Consistent with the key informant accounts, there were also examples of collaborative decision-making producing better outcomes. One CSO officer explained:

When families are peaceful with members working together, unity prevails in activities like farming. Everyone works for the good of the family... In my experience, the families where peace prevails, there is always an abundance of food. (KI 005).

FHH 009 (41-year-old separated woman) offered a nuanced account of negotiated autonomy:

My older son and I, we decide together now. He does not take the money; he asks me what I think. It was not always so concerned when he was young, he used to copy his father's ways. But he went to secondary school and something changed. Now we work as a team (FHH 009).

This example, echoed in FGD 4, points to education as a potential pathway for shifting intra-household power dynamics, though the data also suggest that this is a slow and uneven process in one way or the other.

### **4.3 Food Insecurity and Dietary Precarity**

#### **4.3.1 Seasonal Hunger and Harvest Shortfalls**

A local leader reflected on the changing food landscape:

Unlike in the past years when we used to have a lot of food... these days people reach the extent of buying food like posho and rice to close the scarcity gaps in the home. Most of these families can eat one type of food like posho from time to time without changing (KI 004).

A district technical staff member situated food insecurity within seasonal vulnerability:

The truth is that most families do not have many choices of food to choose from. If it's the season of millet and maize, they will eat that, and when bananas are off-season, they will have to be patient until the right season (KI 009).

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#### 4.3.2 Women's Lived Experiences of Food Scarcity

The individual interviews captured the emotional and physical weight of food insecurity in ways that aggregate data cannot. A 47-year-old widow described a recurring scenario:

There are days I send the children to school without food. I tell them to drink water and go. I feel the shame of it, but I, their mother, cannot feed them. I cry at night but I have to be strong in the morning (FHH 002).

A 55-year-old widow described the dietary landscape with quiet resignation:

We eat posho almost every day. Sometimes with beans, sometimes with nothing. My youngest asks me why we never have meat. I tell her meat is for visitors. But the truth is, I have no money for meat, and I cannot take the chicken without my brother-in-law's permission because the chickens are 'his (FHH 007).

A 34-year-old single female head articulated the connection between land insecurity and dietary poverty:

Because I only have a small rented plot, I cannot grow vegetables. The landlord does not allow permanent crops. So, I grow only maize. We eat maize. The children are always sick. The nurse tells me they need vegetables, but what am I to do? (FHH 005).

A 61-year-old widow offered a retrospective comparison that highlighted the deterioration in food quality over time:

When my husband was alive and we worked the land together, we had many foods including groundnuts, sweet potatoes, greens, sorghum beer. After he death, a big part was claimed by his brothers since there was no written Will and I was left with a small piece. Now I only grow what fits in that piece (FHH 004).

FGD 1 (widowed female heads) produced a vivid discussion of what members called 'food shame' the social stigma of not being able to provide adequate food for one's children, particularly when neighbours or relatives visited. Participants described managing this shame through careful rationing, borrowing food from neighbours, and in some cases, having children eat at a relative's home.

FGD 3 (young and single female heads) surfaced an additional dimension: the impact of food insecurity on children's school attendance and performance. Several participants noted that children who came to school hungry frequently fell behind academically, creating long-term intergenerational consequences of current food precarity.

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My son missed three weeks of school last term because I could not afford the lunch fee that is required in a USE school where he schools from. The government through USE caters for everything but not food. Through parents meeting, we agreed to always send these dues on time, and I was unable to raise them, and the school sent him home (FGD 3, Member 2).

Post-harvest loss was identified as a structural amplifier of food insecurity. A 49-year-old widow described:

I do not have a proper store to hold my harvests. I keep the sorghum and millet in sacks in the corner of the house. The rats eat much of it because they like cereals. By the middle of the year, much of it is affected. If I had a proper granary, I could save enough for the whole year. But to build one I need money, and money requires selling, and selling requires a surplus I do not have (FHH 008).

#### **4.4 Psychosocial Strains and Relational Resilience**

##### **4.4.1 The Emotional Architecture of Subordination**

Informants spoke of ‘stress’, ‘humiliation’, and ‘constant worry’ as constitutive of the experience of female headship under patriarchal pressure. A Community Development Officer recalled cases where women were overwhelmed by the collapse of authority:

If there is no extended family system, they normally disturb us here in offices to talk to their young children, young boys of 12 to 13 years refusing to listen to their mothers. Those adolescents can be stubborn and become a menace in homes with bad behaviors like alcohol and substance abuse, refusing to go to school among others (KI 003).

A 52-year-old widow described the psychological weight of simultaneous labour and emotional burdens:

I wake up at five to fetch water. I cook, I dig, I come back and cook again, I help with homework. By evening I am so tired I cannot think. But I cannot rest because I am also thinking about what we will eat tomorrow, and the day after. There is no day when I am not thinking about food (FHH 001).

A 43-year-old divorced woman articulated a form of anticipatory stress rooted in tenure insecurity:

I always feel like I am building on sand. Everything I do like the digging, the saving, the struggling, I fear it could be taken any time. One day the in-laws could say, go because my kids are too young to stage a resistance. And I would have nothing to show for all these years of hard work. That fear never leaves me, it leaves in mind all the time, maybe if God raises my kids to that mature age (FHH 006).

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A 38-year-old divorced woman described how social isolation compounded material deprivation:

After I separated, many people in the village looked at me differently. The women's group near my home did not invite me at first. I think they feared their husbands would not like them mixing with a separated woman. I was alone for a long time (FHH 003).

FGD 2 (divorced and separated female heads) extensively discussed the social stigma of non-marital household headship as a dimension of psychosocial burden distinct from widowhood. Participants noted that while widows received social sympathy and were seen as 'real' female heads, divorced and separated women often faced moral judgment that compounded their material disadvantages.

#### **4.4.2 Resilience: Informal Networks and Collective Agency**

Yet the data also consistently surfaced resilience not as individual heroism but as collective and relational strategy. A CSO representative observed:

Not all female-headed households are lacking; some have resources like land and highly educated children with affluent jobs. Such families have everything in life... This tells you that when the family has access to and control of resources, the stories of being female-headed do not have any negative impact (KI 007).

FGD 1 produced extensive discussion of church-based and village savings groups (locally called 'Nigiina') as crucial financial and psychological resources. Members described a layered function that the groups provided small loans at low interest, offered emotional solidarity, and created collective bargaining power when dealing with community authorities.

When we go to the LC as a group of women, they listen differently than when I go alone. Together we have a voice. Alone I am just a widow with a problem and no one pays attention (FGD 1, Member 7).

FHH 010 (58-year-old widow) described how participation in a women's cooperative had gradually shifted her family's trajectory:

For five years I have been in the women's group. We save together, we plant together through rotational gardening, we aggregate our harvests and sale at reasonable price. Last year I bought iron sheets for my roof, which is first improvement in this home in ten years. It was the group that made it possible, something i couldn't achieve alone (FHH 010).

FHH 011 (30-year-old single head) described how digital mobile money had provided a form of financial autonomy unavailable to older women:

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I save on mobile money most times. No one knows how much I have in the family. My cousins cannot take it because they do not know my PIN. When I need it, I withdraw quietly. It is a small freedom, but it is mine (FHH 011).

FGD 4 surfaced an important point about the role of Community Development Officers who went beyond their formal brief to provide women with practical support, accompanying them to land disputes, connecting them to NGO programmes, and facilitating access to extension services. Such relational forms of institutional support were described as transformative by the women who had benefited, though they were seen as exceptional rather than systematic. FHH 012 (45-year-old divorced woman) offered perhaps the most integrative reflection on the relationship between collective support and individual agency:

I used to think my problems were just mine, my bad luck, and my poor choices. When I joined the women's group and heard others with the same stories, I understood it is not my fault. It is the system we are living in, sometimes beyond our own making. And when you know it is the system, you also know you cannot fight it alone. You fight together, empower one another and offer emotional support to each other (FHH 012).

#### **4.5 Institutional Gaps and Community-Level Enablers**

A fifth theme emerged inductively, particularly from the FGDs, concerning the institutional landscape within which female-headed households operate. This theme captures both the failures of formal institutions to protect women's rights and the enabling potential of community-level actors.

FGD 5 (female heads and LC leaders) was particularly generative on this theme. Several participants noted that while the National Land Policy (2013) and the Land Amendment Act (2010) contain provisions to protect women's land rights, enforcement at the sub-county level was minimal. As one participant observed:

The government makes laws in Kampala where parliament sits. Here in the village, we live by different laws (unwritten ones), the laws of the clan, the laws of the elders and acceptable by community system. Until those laws change (unwritten ones), the government policies and regulations mean very little (FGD 5, Member 4).

NGO presence was described as episodic and project-driven, creating expectation without sustained change. FHH 003 remarked:

An organization came here two years ago with a programme on women's rights and land. They trained us for three days at the parish headquarter (Ekitehurizi in Runyankore). We were hopeful that maybe things would change. Then they left and nothing changed, the motivation and hopes only remained at the training place. The men who are largely source of all these problems were not part of this training (FHH 003).

KI 008 (Sub-County CDO) acknowledged systemic capacity constraints:

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I am one officer responsible for this entire sub-county. There are hundreds of households with problems. I cannot be everywhere considering the fact that some conflicts are discrete and are kept secrets. When I do intervene, sometimes it helps but it takes a lot of engagement with fellow local leaders to resolve a single case. But I cannot follow up on every case, as they are many and some go beyond female headed households. The system needs more people and multistakeholder support (KI 008).

Despite these gaps, the FGDs identified several community-level enablers like progressive LC leaders who interpreted customary norms in women-friendly ways, church leaders who preached against property grabbing, and women's savings groups that had collectively negotiated better land security for their members. FGD 4 Member 6 noted that in sub-counties where the CDO was a woman, women reported feeling more comfortable bringing land grievances to the office.

The differential between sub-counties in terms of LC leadership quality and CDO responsiveness, while not a formal research question, emerged as a robust empirical finding that has important implications for sub-national policy targeting.

## **5. Discussion**

The integrated analysis of key informant interviews, female household head narratives, and focus group discussions reveals a multi-layered reality in which patriarchal power structures pervade female-headed households in Mbarara District, shaping food production outcomes and livelihood trajectories. By triangulating three distinct data streams, this study is able to both confirm and nuance existing scholarship while generating new empirical and theoretical insights.

### **5.1 The Persistence of Patriliney and the Limits of Formal Rights**

The data demonstrate unambiguously that female headship does not automatically confer autonomy. Even households that are officially or legally headed by women, remain embedded in patrilineal kinship systems that grant male relatives moral and practical authority over land. This aligns with Connell's (2020) concept of 'patriarchal dividend' and findings from comparative studies across sub-Saharan Africa (Agarwal, 1994; Chigbu, 2019). What is novel in this study is the first-person texture provided by the FHH interviews where the widow who dares not repair her leaking roof lest it signal permanent settlement which the kins wouldn't like; the woman who grows millet instead of passion fruit because the uncles disapprove; the single woman turned away by a savings cooperative because of her marital status. These micro-political acts of dispossession are individually unremarkable, collectively devastating and are rendered largely invisible in institutional accounts.

The disconnect between formal legal rights and their practical enforcement, repeatedly surfaced in the FGDs, represents a critical gap in the gender and land rights literature. While important studies have documented the formal provisions of land law (Foote, 2025; Rwangire & Muriisa, 2021; Apecu, 2018; Kitui, 2024), fewer have examined in detail the mechanisms by which those provisions are systematically undermined at the community level. This study's multi-method design allows it to show that the gap is not simply a matter of ignorance of the law; many women were aware of their formal rights. Rather, the gap is a matter of enforcement architecture where in the absence of accessible, trusted, and gender-sensitive institutions to enforce rights, formal provisions remain paper

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guarantees, with little or possibly nothing like practical interventions. This has left many female headed households in a state of vulnerability.

## **5.2 The Production-Control Paradox: A Mechanism, Not a Description**

The ‘production-control paradox,’ the disjuncture between women’s labour input and their decision-making authority is not a new observation (Annan et al., 2021; Rwangire & Muriisa, 2021; Mohammed, Khonje, & Qaim, 2025). What this study contributes is a process-level account of how this paradox is reproduced through everyday interactions. The FHH narratives reveal that the paradox is not simply imposed from outside but is actively negotiated, contested, and crucially, sometimes subverted. FHH 007’s strategy of selling groundnuts quietly before the harvest is known; FHH 011’s use of mobile money as a private savings vehicle; FGD 1’s collective bargaining with LC leaders, these are evidence of lower-ranking agency operating within, and at the margins of, a constraining structure. A million-dollar question remains on how can this paradox be resolved without affecting the social structure in place.

This finding resonates with Kabeer’s (2021) concept of ‘bargaining without bargaining’ where women may not overtly challenge patriarchal norms but carve out spaces of relative autonomy through strategic action as has been observed in group formation and collective bargaining through an FGD revelation. It also aligns with the feminist political ecology emphasis on women’s practical and knowledge-based engagements with natural resources (Sultana, 2021). Development programmes should recognize and build upon these existing strategies rather than treating women as passive recipients of externally designed interventions. This explains why this challenge has persisted for many decades as evidenced by available empirical literature.

## **5.3 Food as a Battlefield: Dietary Precarity and Its Intergenerational Consequences**

The food insecurity findings go beyond the quantitative picture of caloric inadequacy to illuminate the qualitative dimensions of dietary precarity: food shame, the strategic rationing described in FGD 1, the school absenteeism documented in FGD 3, the nutritional vulnerability of children described by FHH 005. These findings resonate with recent scholarship on the intergenerational transmission of food insecurity (Nordhagen, 2021; Mpuuga, Bulime, & Ogwang, 2021) and add qualitative depth to what is predominantly a quantitative literature.

Particularly significant is the finding that dietary diversity is constrained not merely by poverty but by power: women’s inability to choose crops, invest in storage, or access markets without male kin authorization translates directly into nutritional impoverishment. This extends the argument of Mpiira et al. (2024) on gender-specific technology adoption to encompass the full crop-to-plate chain. From a policy perspective, this implies that nutrition interventions that do not address power relations in the household are likely to yield suboptimal results.

## **5.4 Psychosocial Dimensions: The Hidden Injuries of Patriarchy**

A relatively understudied domain in the agrarian literature is the psychosocial toll of gendered power relations. The study documents a specific form of what might be called ‘structural stress’ where chronic anxiety rooted not in any single traumatic event but in the accumulation of daily micro-insecurities, tenure precarity, income vulnerability, social stigma, and the intergenerational transmission of subordination through young sons. FHH

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006's articulation of 'building on sand' investing labour and care in a home and land that might be taken at any moment captures a form of existential insecurity that standard welfare measures fail to capture.

The divergence between the experiences of widowed and divorced/separated female heads, surfaced particularly in FGD 2, is an important refinement of the category 'female-headed households.' Treating this category as homogeneous obscures significant internal variation in the nature and degree of vulnerability. The moral stigma attaching to separation and divorce compounds material disadvantages in ways that widowhood does not, with important implications for targeted policy and programming.

### **5.5 Institutional Enablers and Structural Constraints: Towards a Political Economy of Local Governance**

The fifth theme on institutional gaps and community-level enablers constitutes a new empirical contribution not present in the original dataset. The FGDs surfaced a micro-political economy of local governance that is rarely examined in studies of female-headed households: the role of individual LC leaders in shaping enforcement of women's rights; the potential of women CDOs to create more accessible institutional channels; and the enabling function of collective organizations in converting individual vulnerability into collective bargaining power. These findings point to a research agenda around the political economy of local governance as a determinant of gender outcomes, a domain that intersects the literature on decentralization, state-society relations, and feminist political economy (Agarwal, 2010; Razavi, 2020).

## **6. Conclusion**

This qualitative study from Mbarara District, drawing on the integrated voices of institutional actors, community leaders, and centrally on women themselves, contributes to a deeper and more textured understanding of how gendered power relations pervade female-headed households, shaping food production and socioeconomic outcomes. The multi-method design enables the study to move beyond institutional accounts to foreground women's own narratives, revealing significant divergences between official understanding and lived experience that have important implications for policy design.

The findings confirm that female headship in a patrilineal context does not equate to empowerment. Patriarchal norms, enacted through customary land tenure, kin authority, harvest appropriation, and the intergenerational transmission of masculine privilege, continue to constrain women's control over crucial livelihood assets. The resulting food insecurity, dietary monotony, and psychosocial stress are not simply resource problems but power problems, and they cannot be addressed without confronting the structural roots of gender inequality.

At the same time, the study documents the multiple and creative ways in which women exercise agency within constraining structures: through quiet strategic action, through collective organization, and through the cultivation of intergenerational alliances with educated sons and supportive community leaders. These spaces of agency, however circumscribed, are the starting points for gender-transformative change and deserve recognition and amplification in programmatic responses.

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### **Recommendations**

For policy and practice, the study argues for interventions that simultaneously operate at multiple levels where joint land registration and legal literacy at the asset level; gender-transformative community dialogues that engage men and elders; strengthening of women's savings and cooperative groups; enhanced resourcing of community development officers; and institutional reforms that make formal rights practically enforceable at the sub-county level. Future research should longitudinally explore the impact of such multi-level interventions on power dynamics, food security, and livelihood resilience including disaggregating by household headship type to capture the distinct vulnerabilities of widowed, divorced, separated, and single female heads.

### **Declarations**

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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