

TIME MANAGEMENT AND FEMALE LEADERSHIP: ANALYSIS OF THE DYNAMICS OF EMPOWERMENT AMONG WOMEN FARMERS IN AGROECOLOGICAL ZONES 2 AND 3 IN BENIN

EZIN Obossou Hypolite,

*Doctoral School of Agricultural Sciences and Water (EDSAE),
University of Parakou, Benin, ezinobossouhypolite@yahoo.fr*

ONIBON DOUBOGAN Obo Yvette,

*Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (FLASH),
University of Parakou, Benin, yvette.onibon@gmail.com*

Abstract

The empowerment of women farmers in northern Benin remains a challenge hampered by social and organizational constraints. This research explores two dimensions of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI): leadership and time management. This research aims to understand how power dynamics and time management influence the empowerment of women farmers in agroecological zones 2 and 3 of Benin. Women's "lack of interest" is justified by time constraints and social norms rather than voluntary choices. There is an excessive workload of more than 16 hours per day, between domestic tasks, agricultural work, and family obligations, leaving little room for leisure. These realities call into question the WEAI's ability to capture informal forms of leadership and mechanisms of self-exclusion. This research calls for a reduction in gender inequalities by addressing the time constraints that hinder women's leadership and empowerment.

Keywords: *empowerment, women farmers, leadership, time, WEAI, Benin*

Résumé

L'autonomisation des femmes agricoles au Nord-Bénin demeure un défi entravé par des contraintes sociales et organisationnelles. Cette recherche explore deux dimensions du Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) : le leadership et la gestion du temps. Cette recherche vise à comprendre comment les dynamiques de pouvoir et gestion du temps influencent l'autonomisation des femmes agricoles des zones agroécologiques 2 et 3 du Bénin. Le « manque d'intérêt » des femmes reflète

se justifie par des contraintes de temps et de normes sociales plutôt que des choix volontaires. Il existe une surcharge de travail dépassant seize heures par jour, entre tâches domestiques, agricoles et obligations familiales, laissant peu de place aux loisirs. Ces réalités questionnent la capacité du WEAI à saisir les formes informelles de leadership et les mécanismes d'auto-exclusion. Cette recherche invite à réduire les inégalités de genre en relevant les contraintes temporelles qui freinent leadership féminin et son autonomisation.

Mots clés : autonomisation, femmes agricoles, leadership, temps, WEAI, Bénin

1. Introduction

The role of women in family farms is attracting growing interest, as evidenced by numerous scientific studies and international reports. According to the FAO (2022, p. 15), women represent about 43% of the global agricultural workforce and play a decisive role in household food security. In sub-Saharan Africa, women contribute nearly 60% of food production, but they continue to face persistent inequalities in access to land, credit, and inputs (IFAD, 2021, p. 32; Doss et al., 2018, p. 4). These constraints limit their decision-making power and, to some extent, their empowerment (Quisumbing & Malapit, 2015, p. 91; Peterman et al., 2019, p. 17). Indeed, analyses conducted in various African contexts show that lack of control over agricultural resources and income perpetuates economic dependence and limits opportunities for empowerment (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019, p. 24; Johnson et al., 2016, p. 211).

In Benin, women represent nearly 60% of the agricultural workforce (INSAE, 2021, p. 42), but their involvement in decision-making mechanisms and the allocation of intra-family resources remains marginal, often hampered by patriarchal attitudes (Djodji et al., 2020, p. 14). In Borgou and Alibori, studies reveal that their daily workload, between agricultural, domestic, and community activities, averages 12 to

14 hours, which reduces their rest time and their participation in local agricultural bodies (World Bank, 2020, p. 9; INSAE, 2021, p. 75). As Onibon Doubogan (2021, p. 35) also shows, feminist movements in Benin draw on endogenous local knowledge which, although decisive, remains largely invisible in development agendas.

This invisibility translates into an undervaluing of women's work in family farming. Barthez (1984, p. 71) and Rieu (2004, p. 118) have shown that the social space of rural women is polarized between "the home and the field," limiting their access to decision-making arenas. Pourtier (2015, p. 33) and Droz et al. (2014, p. 95) confirm that the availability of male labor directly influences their level of involvement.

Since the 2000s, analytical frameworks for women's empowerment in agriculture have evolved. Initially focused on access to production factors, they now incorporate social, relational, and temporal dimensions that influence capacity to act and productive efficiency (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437; Malapit & Quisumbing, 2015, p. 148). Women's decision-making power, which is often invisible, is recognized as a structural barrier to agricultural development and poverty reduction (Seymour et al., 2020, p. 245; Sraboni et al., 2014, p. 198).

These conceptual advances invite us to move beyond a strictly productivist interpretation of women's role. Filippi and Nicourt (1987, p. 52) emphasize the cognitive and organizational burden of women's work. Bonnet et al. (2022, p. 29) show that, despite the rise of farmers' organizations, institutional recognition of women's role remains limited. This antagonism between economic contribution and exclusion from decision-making bodies justifies the use of multidimensional indicators to analyze their empowerment.

It is with this in mind that the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) was designed and developed by IFPRI and USAID in 2012 (Alkire et al., 2013, p. 249; Malapit

et al., 2015, p. 72). It is based on five domains: production, resources, income, leadership, and time. These components provide insight into the productive and social dynamics that influence the empowerment of women in agriculture. Applied in more than 56 countries, the WEAI reveals generally low scores for women's empowerment, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Quisumbing et al., 2022, p. 18; Sraboni et al., 2014, p. 199).

In Benin, use of the WEAI remains limited. However, the work of Onibon Doubogan (2019, p. 112) shows that analysis of the dimensions of time and leadership is essential to understanding the empowerment of rural women, particularly in agroecological zones where domestic and agricultural burdens combine to reduce their visibility in spaces of power.

Leadership refers to membership in local groups and active community participation, including holding leadership positions. Several studies show that involvement in farmers' organizations or credit groups broadens access to networks, information, and economic opportunities (Beaman et al., 2012, p. 93; Bernard & Spielman, 2009, p. 1840). In Benin, recent research indicates that women who are members of village producer associations enjoy greater bargaining power and increased visibility in the community (Yabi et al., 2021, p. 67). However, their membership rate remains below 30% in some rural areas, and their presence in executive offices is even more marginal (INSAE, 2021, p. 77).

The time dimension raises questions about the distribution of work and access to leisure time. Seymour (2017, p. 152) shows that the domestic burden significantly reduces women's productivity and engagement in income-generating activities. In West Africa, IFPRI data (2019, p. 38) indicate that women spend on average twice as much time as men on domestic tasks. In Benin, EMICoV reveals that women allocate between 4 and 6 hours a day to domestic activities, in addition to agricultural work (INSAE, 2021, p. 83). This imbalance limits

their participation in decision-making bodies and their autonomy in agricultural organizations.

The link between leadership and time remains largely unexplored in Beninese literature on women's empowerment. However, studies such as that by Onibon Doubogan (2018, p. 7) reveal that, in Borgou and Alibori, women's participation in family farms is based on invisible forms of community responsibilities, which weigh on their capacity for collective action and institutional recognition. Few studies analyze the interaction between leadership and time in empowerment dynamics.

This gap in the literature justifies the present research by positioning a joint analysis of leadership and time through the WEAI (Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index) among women farmers to put into perspective the proven limitations of women farmers' empowerment.

This research aims to understand how power dynamics and time management influence the empowerment of women farmers in agroecological zones 2 and 3 of Benin. In other words, how do women farmers in northern Benin experience leadership within their communities? How do they organize their time between agricultural, domestic, and leisure activities? How can a good combination of leadership and time promote the sustainable empowerment of women farmers?

2. Methodological approach

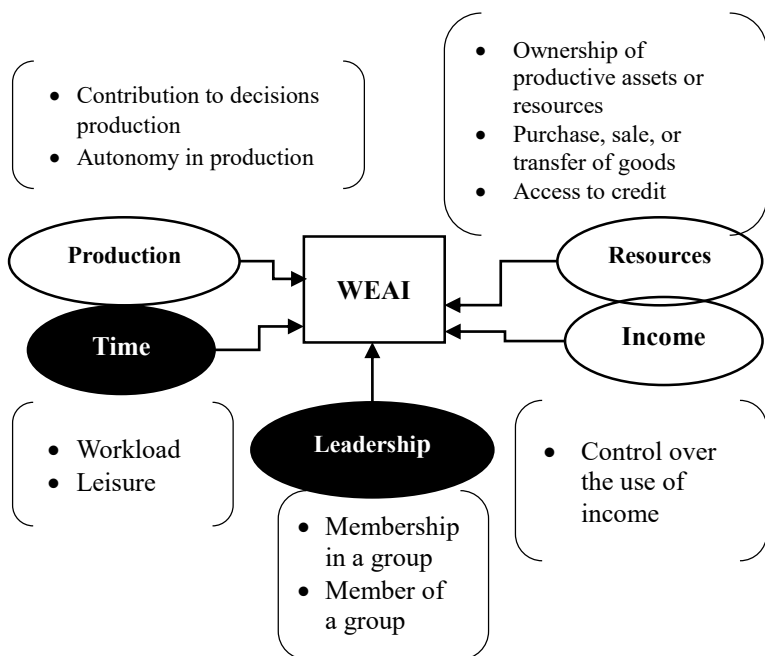
This research adopts a descriptive-analytical methodological approach based on a critical review of the literature and empirical data from agroecological zones (AEZs) 2 and 3 in northern Benin, compiled from a sample of 370 family farms, composed of men and women, obtained using the Cochran formula (1977). The ZAE were chosen for their strategic importance in Beninese agriculture, as their location in Benin

means that they represent the two zones where most of Benin's crops are grown.

In-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions provided primary data on the realities of agricultural actors and women, particularly in areas related to leadership and time. These areas are part of the Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) approach proposed by IFPRI, which we used in this study. The approach is based on five areas: production, resources, income, leadership, and time, which provide insight into the productive and social dynamics that influence the empowerment of women in agriculture.

This study attempts to analyze the extent to which the relationship between women farmers' leadership and their time management can be considered a real lever for empowerment. From this perspective, the WEAI approach is relevant because it captures both the dynamics of power and representation (via the leadership dimension) and the structural constraints related to time constraints (via the time dimension). The value of this dual perspective is that it highlights how the availability or unavailability of time influences women's ability to exercise a decision-making role and, conversely, how access to leadership spaces reconfigures the way they organize and value their time. This methodological approach thus paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of the concrete levers for action to strengthen women's empowerment in agriculture. These reflections are consolidated through gender theory and the theory of the division of labor, with a focus on the work of S. Walby (1990), who assesses how the social roles attributed to women and men influence the distribution of work, power, and time.

Figure 1 : Presentation of the WEAI domains



Source: Obossou Hypolite EZIN, 2024

3. Results

This section describes the main results organized around the dimensions of leadership and time management, in accordance with the study objectives.

3.1. Women farmers and leadership experiences in communities in northern Benin

The leadership experience of women farmers in communities in northern Benin is based on two main indicators: women's

membership in socio-professional and community organizations on the one hand, and their participation in decision-making bodies on the other.

3.1.1. Women's membership in socio-professional and community organizations

In communities in northern Benin, 58.8% of women farmers belong to at least one socio-professional or community organization, compared to 71.4% of men. Thus, more than four out of ten women remain outside any collective structure, a proportion that highlights women's weaker involvement in associations compared to men.

There is also a high concentration of female membership in agricultural and related socio-professional organizations, which account for 84.4% of all female members. These are followed by religious associations (30.7%), community support and assistance groups (26.5%), and political parties (20.4%). Membership in local development and civic associations accounts for 19.4% of female members, while tontines and savings and credit structures account for 16.3%. Finally, affiliations with water user associations (13.1%) and forest resource management organizations (4.6%) remain marginal.

Among non-member women (41.2%), the reasons explicitly mentioned paint a specific picture. Indeed, 71.8% cite a lack of interest, 22.3% a lack of time, and around 4.5% financial constraints related to membership fees or contributions. Other obstacles (family refusal or gender-related prohibition) are residual and account for less than 2%.

However, this "*lack of interest*" should not be understood as insensitive disengagement, but rather as the rationality of women as strategic actors in the agricultural environment. As one respondent explained:

"Even if I'm told to go to meetings, I don't see what it brings me. At the end of the day, I'm still the one who

must find food for my children and my husband" (Mrs. R. Y., 38, Banikoara, 2023).

3.1.2. Women's involvement in the decision-making bodies of organizations/groups

In communities in northern Benin, women's involvement in decision-making bodies appears to be unevenly distributed. Among women who are members of at least one organization, 21.2% say they participate in all decisions, while 20.7% say they take part in most decisions. Just over a quarter (28.1%) say they are involved in only some decisions, compared to 22.7% who are involved in very few decisions. Finally, 7.4% of women members do not participate in any decisions within the structures to which they belong.

Some women mention selective participation, focused on peripheral decisions: *"We are only consulted when it's time to prepare for a village celebration, but never to discuss money or fields."* (Mrs. H. B., 42, Nikki, 2023)

Other testimonies reflect the reality of post-membership for women farmers in these communities:

"I am a member, but when the men speak, we just have to listen. If you insist, they may say you are being disrespectful. Our tradition does not accept certain things. And even in organizations where we are only women, only a few make all the decisions; most of us don't always have the opportunity to express ourselves. They say that they have at least left our village once and seen things that the rest of us cannot understand." (Mrs. Y. F., 35, N'Dali, 2023)

3.2. Between fields, homes, and leisure: how women farmers organize their time in northern Benin

The organization of time for women farmers in communities in northern Benin is characterized by a constant balancing act between the demands of productive work and those of the home, with limited time for leisure. This division reveals the considerable burden of daily responsibilities shouldered by these women.

3.2.1. Women farmers under the weight of their daily lives

In the farming communities of northern Benin, women spend nearly 15 hours a day between the fields, domestic activities, and family responsibilities, which is the equivalent of nearly 300 hours per month. Half of them work more than 16 hours a day, well above the commonly accepted threshold of 10 hours of work per day in rural areas.

Their time is not only saturated by agricultural and domestic responsibilities but also controlled by family and tradition. Several women explain that they must work not only on their own fields, but also on their husbands' and sometimes even their in-laws'. One of them confirms:

"Here, I have to go and work in my husband's field first. If there are a lot of laborers, I prepare most of the food to reduce the financial burden and find a way to go to my own field. Unfortunately, I don't have much time to work in my field. Sometimes, if your mother-in-law is cultivating her field, it is proper to go and help her. This contributes to harmony in the extended family, and the woman is better appreciated. In the evening, it is my duty to go home to fetch and prepare what my children and husband are going to eat." (Mrs. S. Y., 36, Bembèrèkè, 2023).

Some women particularly mention the pressure exerted by their in-laws:

"My mother-in-law always says that it is the woman who must do everything in the house. Even if I come home late from the fields, she still reminds me that I must sweep, fetch water, prepare food, do this and that... We are not allowed to rest." (Mrs. Z. A., 40, Bembèrèkè, 2023).

The constraints are not only about additional responsibilities, but also about being forbidden to help their own families. Customary rules sometimes prevent them from allocating their labor according to their own choices:

"If I want to go and help my sister in her field, I am told that it is not right. We must first work for our husband and his family. Even if I think my parents need me during the busy farming season, I cannot make myself available to them." (Mrs. R. A., 34, N'Dali, 2023).

3.2.2. No leisure time for women farmers in northern Benin

The concept of leisure seems vague, even non-existent, for some of the women surveyed. Some say they don't know what "having leisure time" means: *"When you talk about leisure, I don't really understand... We work every day here; there's no such thing as leisure."* (Mrs. M. B., 39, Nikki, 2023)

Others associate this idea with intimate practice or very limited moments, without any real connection to the classic definition of the term:

"My leisure time is when I'm with my husband in bed at night." (Woman, 31, Nikki, 2023)

"For me, leisure is only when I sit down and chat a little with my neighbors, but that's rare." (Mrs. S. Y., 35, Bembèrèkè, 2023)

When women who can give a more conventional meaning to the word "leisure" are surveyed, the data reveals that more than one in two (51.9%) feel they do not have enough time to engage in recreational activities (visiting neighbors, watching television, dancing, playing sports). Conversely, 42.1% consider that they have a satisfactory amount of leisure time, while only 6% say they are very satisfied. One woman qualifies this: *"When we talk about leisure, it's not an easy thing... but we do what we can. Leisure is when I can listen to the radio while I pound yams."* (Mrs. S. B., 29, Banikoara, 2023)

Another testimony highlights the gender difference in access to leisure: *"Men go to the market and can drink tea with friends. We don't have that kind of time."* (Woman, 33, Kandi, 2023)

4. Analysis

Analysis of the results in light of the WEAI provides insight not only into where women farmers in northern Benin stand in terms of leadership dynamics and time management, but also how these dimensions translate into their daily power margins and constraints.

4.1. Leadership of women farmers in northern Benin through the lens of the WEAI

The results show that women's membership in socio-professional and community organizations reaches 58.8% but remains lower than that of men (71.4%). Within the framework

of the WEAI, which considers group membership to be a key indicator of leadership, this differential reveals a selective inclusion of women in community life. They participate in spaces that extend their traditional roles (agricultural organizations, religious associations) but remain largely absent from more strategic arenas of power, such as political parties or resource management structures.

The "lack of interest" cited by 71.8% of non-members does not necessarily reflect indifference but should be seen as a rational choice on the part of these women. Indeed, women, who are preoccupied with domestic and agricultural responsibilities, do not perceive the immediate benefits of their collective engagement. The WEAI, by capturing the "belonging" dimension, reflects this important structural limitation, but it does not always capture the subjectivity of disinterest, which can be likened to an internalization of temporal and social constraints.

Similarly, women's participation in decision-making remains marginal. While 21.2% of women say they take part in all decisions, a significant proportion rarely or never do so. Formal leadership (membership) does not therefore imply substantive leadership (real influence).

The verbatim quotes collected illustrate what could be described as a paradox. Being a member of an organization does not automatically mean having the right to express oneself. Some women are confined to peripheral decisions (preparing the village festival or organizing an important meeting), while others are silenced by patriarchal norms or even by rigid internal hierarchies among women. These data enrich the interpretation of the WEAI by showing that leadership cannot be reduced to a measure of membership but must also take into account forms of intra-organizational inequality.

Ultimately, women farmers' leadership in northern Benin appears to be quantitatively present but qualitatively very

limited. Indeed, their participation is more numerical than influential, confirming that empowerment, according to the WEAI, remains hampered by socio-cultural and organizational glass ceilings.

4.2. Time management among women farmers in northern Benin through the lens of the WEAI

Time management appears to be one of the most revealing areas of gender inequality in farming communities in northern Benin. The results reveal that women farmers devote an average of 15 hours a day to their activities, with half of them working more than 16 hours. According to the WEAI's *Time* domain, which focuses on workload and leisure time, such intensity reflects a clear lack of time autonomy. Rest is reduced to a small portion of their time, and women have virtually no space to freely decide how to use their time. Their daily lives appear to be an uninterrupted succession of agricultural, domestic, and family tasks that leave them little room for maneuver.

This overload is not only the result of the intensity of the work, but also of the social control exercised by the family and tradition. Women are required to work in their own fields, in their husbands' fields, and often in their in-laws' fields. Some explain that they are not allowed to support their families of origin, as custom dictates that they must first devote their labor to their husbands and their husbands' parents. This arrangement therefore places their time at the service of others and greatly reduces their ability to decide how to allocate it. In WEAI terms, this is low control over time allocation, or limited agency.

This lack of availability has a direct impact on organizational investment. The reason of "lack of interest" given by many non-members does not therefore reflect genuine indifference, but rather a rational personal management style on the part of women. Indeed, when their days are full, the time to devote to a meeting or a collective activity represents an

opportunity cost that is difficult to bear. In other words, under-participation is not so much a result of voluntary disengagement as it is the mechanical effect of time being taken away. There is a clear link here between the realm of time and that of leadership, since one directly and obviously conditions the other.

The issue of leisure time also illustrates this lack of temporal autonomy. Some of the respondents do not have a clear idea of what leisure time means. For some, it boils down to micro-moments inserted into daily tasks, for others it takes the form of a marital sphere or simple exchanges with neighbors. This semantic vagueness shows that leisure is not conceived as a distinct activity, but as a fleeting breath of fresh air in an overly saturated schedule. The satisfaction statistics collected must therefore be interpreted with caution, as only those who have an explicit notion of leisure were able to respond. This bias confirms, rather than relativizes, the indication of severely restricted temporal autonomy.

Finally, qualitative data suggest significant variations depending on family configurations and local contexts. The influence of in-laws, household composition, and agricultural cycles affect the distribution of responsibilities and warrant more detailed analysis. These factors suggest that time, far from being a uniform variable, is a source of multiple inequalities that directly influence the leadership and empowerment capacities of women farmers.

5. Discussion

5.1. Northern Benin illustrates the same realities observed in other agricultural contexts

When comparing our results with those from other contexts, it appears that the constraints observed among women in agricultural holdings in northern Benin are part of global dynamics that are common to many countries.

Indeed, the results obtained in northern Benin corroborate in several respects the findings of other studies conducted in similar agricultural contexts, as well as those of a joint and intersectoral analysis (JIAF2) covering the following countries: Guinea, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, and Malawi (UNOCHA, 2024). For example, the low participation of women in decision-making bodies despite their strong presence in organizations is not a new phenomenon. In Bangladesh, Sraboni et al. (2014) show that although more and more women are joining agricultural or community groups, their effective influence in decision-making remains marginal. They participate in the structures, but without any real power to influence policy or resource management. This is exactly what we see in northern Benin, where women are members but their access to decision-making remains limited to symbolic roles. This situation calls into question women's overall capability in terms of the strategic interests that could arise from their position in the decision-making sphere.

Similarly, the study by Bernard and Spielman (2009) in Ethiopia highlights that farmers' organizations, while open to women, reproduce rigid gender hierarchies that reduce their bargaining power. Membership confers status but does not guarantee authority. This dynamic is consistent with what has been observed in northern Benin, where formal leadership does not equate to substantive leadership, which can be a real lever for empowerment. Women farmers in the multiple role grid perform reproductive, productive, and community functions, but the latter function could be modulated into a political function to strengthen their leadership.

The issue of time has also been widely documented elsewhere. Seymour (2017), using data from West Africa, shows that domestic responsibilities weigh heavily on productivity and reduce women's ability to engage in collective activities. Our findings are consistent with this insofar as, in northern Benin,

women's time is taken up by multiple obligations, ranging from family responsibilities to domestic tasks, which makes participation in associations costly, if not impossible.

More broadly, IFPRI (2019), based on surveys in several West African countries, points out that women spend on average twice as much time as men on domestic work. This asymmetry, also observed in Ghana and Nigeria, has the effect of limiting their presence in collective spaces, despite their major role in agricultural production. The data from northern Benin are therefore no exception.

However, certain similarities with India are worth noting. Beaman et al. (2012) have shown, for example, that when women gain access to local leadership positions, even if their role remains limited at first, their presence gradually produces visible effects. In other words, even minority female leadership can have significant social repercussions. This observation is important for our context, as it suggests that the current situation in northern Benin, characterized by relatively strong support but very little influence, is not set in stone. If women's access to strategic decision-making bodies were strengthened, we could envisage comparable dynamics of transformation, where their voices would gradually become a lever for collective change and social well-being.

5.2. Realities specific to communities in northern Benin

However, these similarities do not prevent us from also seeing what distinguishes the Beninese context from others. Indeed, while several observations are like those made in other countries, certain elements appear to be typically rooted in the Beninese context, particularly in rural communities in the north. One of the striking findings is that the in-laws play a central role in the organization of women's work. Our data shows that wives do not just work in their own fields or those of their husbands, they are also mobilized in the fields of their in-laws. This social

constraint, which further limits their autonomy, is typically Beninese.

In addition to this agricultural time commitment, there is strong domestic pressure, often embodied by mothers-in-law, who constantly remind women of their duties. These obligations extend the day late into the night and leave very little room for real rest. Here again, the difference with other African contexts is notable. While domestic overload is a widespread phenomenon, the prescriptive and quasi-disciplinary role of the in-laws in regulating women's time seems particularly pronounced in northern Benin.

Another unique element relates to the very notion of "leisure." While in many contexts, leisure is directly measured as time devoted to recreational or social activities, our results show that this category does not clearly exist for some agricultural women in northern Benin. Some say they do not know what it means to have leisure time; others reduce it to micro-moments inserted into daily tasks, such as listening to the radio while pounding yams, or to the intimate sphere, such as moments spent with their husbands at night. This lack of a common frame of reference for thinking about leisure poses a cultural limitation to the application of the WEAI in the Beninese context. It shows that certain dimensions of the index, designed to be universal, may lose their relevance in environments where social categories do not reflect the same realities.

Thus, these specificities underscore that the empowerment of women in northern Benin can only be understood by taking local social logics into account. They enrich the interpretation offered by the WEAI by revealing that time constraints and restrictions on leadership are not only the product of gender imbalance, but also the result of customary and family arrangements that strictly and systematically regulate women's lives.

5.3. Leadership and time management among women farmers: a balance that remains elusive

In addition, the results highlight a close link between time management and leadership. On the one hand, lack of availability severely limits women's membership and participation in organizations. Many say they do not get involved because of a "lack of interest," but the verbatim quotes clearly show that it is mainly a question of time constraints that make any additional investment costly. When a woman already spends 15 or 16 hours a day between the fields, the home, and her in-laws, the idea or even the prospect of spending several more hours in group meetings becomes difficult to sustain.

On the other hand, even when they manage to take that first step toward joining, leadership responsibilities do not guarantee that their schedules will be reorganized. On the contrary, some find themselves faced with a dilemma, struggling to choose between continuing to shoulder the same domestic and agricultural burdens while adding the obligations associated with the role, knowing how much tradition influences their choices. Under these conditions, leadership can become an additional burden rather than a factor of impact or social well-being. **This shows that, under these conditions, the link between leadership and time is not yet a real lever for the empowerment of women farmers in agricultural holdings in northern Benin.**

The link between time and leadership could become a lever for empowerment, but in the current context of northern Benin, women find themselves in a vicious circle. The lack of time for leadership reduces participation, and participation, when it exists, does not transform time management. It is this double barrier that prevents women's leadership from playing a structuring role in the empowerment of women farmers. For this articulation to become a lever, access to leadership would need to be accompanied by an infiltration of women's well-being into

the mindsets and reasoning systems of farming communities on the one hand, and on the other hand, a relative redistribution of domestic and agricultural responsibilities, with institutional and community support that frees up time for women farmers in family farms and increasingly places their leadership at the heart of concerns.

5.4. *The WEAI put to the test in Benin*

The application of the WEAI in northern Benin has demonstrated its value, but also its limitations. The index makes it possible to highlight often overlooked aspects, such as time burden and participation in organizations. Thanks to the index, it is possible to document in a structured way what women experience: busy days, high levels of involvement in associations but limited decision-making power. In this respect, the WEAI remains a valuable tool for informing debates on empowerment.

However, several findings from our study suggest that the relevance of certain indicators should be qualified when applied without contextualization. The time dimension, for example, measures both workload and access to leisure time. However, some of the women we interviewed did not have a clear idea of what "having leisure time" meant. For some, it means intimate moments with their husbands, for others, a brief respite from domestic chores. This lack of a common frame of reference makes it difficult to interpret scores related to leisure. In this context, the indicator risks underestimating the extent of time constraints by translating them into a category that does not make sense to the respondents.

The dimension of leadership also raises questions. The WEAI relies on two indicators to assess leadership: membership in a group and participation in decision-making bodies. However, in the communities studied, these indicators are not sufficient to reflect the complexity of female power. On the one

hand, formal membership does not translate (at least not systematically) into real influence. Indeed, there are women who are often present but silent, and who are merely going through the motions. On the other hand, there are forms of informal leadership, for example in tontines, religious networks, or neighborhood associations, which play a real role in women's lives that the WEAI could better capture, as power in Benin is often exercised outside of recognized structures. Furthermore, there are other attributes that relate to women in the management of agricultural households or in decision-making processes where women subtly, unbeknownst to the public, advise, guide, and even hold a non-visible decision-making space. These elements of leadership are necessary for a better appreciation of female leadership in agriculture.

Finally, our results highlight a more profound limitation. The "lack of interest" reported by non-member women does not necessarily reflect a lack of motivation, but rather rational management influenced by lack of time and social norms. The WEAI views membership and participation as binary choices, but it does not allow for the identification of this "forced self-exclusion" where women withdraw not because they want to, but because they cannot necessarily do otherwise.

6. Conclusion

This research on the leadership and time management of women farmers in northern Benin highlights a double constraint. On the one hand, women are increasingly present in community and socio-professional organizations; on the other hand, their actual involvement in decision-making remains limited and often symbolic. At the same time, the saturation of their time between the fields, the home, and family responsibilities leaves them very little space to assert themselves as autonomous actors.

These findings, when compared with other African and Asian contexts, show that gender inequalities in agriculture are the result of structural dynamics that go beyond the Beninese context alone. But they also reveal local specificities: pressure from the in-laws, the impossibility of helping one's own family, and a narrow conception of "leisure" which, far from being a chosen space, often remains inconceivable.

The adoption of the WEAI has provided a comparative framework for analysis, but it also shows its limitations. Forms of informal leadership forced self-exclusion, and the cultural redefinition of leisure are still largely overlooked by the index. This calls for adaptations that better reflect the realities experienced by rural women in Benin. Furthermore, the application of the WEAI in northern Benin provides decision-makers with a tool for adjusting agricultural policies to consider women's available time and decision-making power. On the other hand, this research alerts agricultural actors to the need to reduce gender inequalities by highlighting the time constraints that hinder women's access to leadership. This research also contributes to rethinking the distribution of roles and recognizing the invisible work of women in agriculture.

Beyond the figures and indicators, this work reminds us of an obvious fact: that women's empowerment cannot be measured solely by formal membership of groups or by occasional relief from domestic tasks. It requires a more profound transformation of social relations and the use of time, where the daily balance of power is played out. As one respondent put it, "even when they are in the fields or at the market, it is always them who are expected at home." Given the central role of women in the functioning of agricultural households, the issue of empowerment remains a subject that requires further research.

Bibliographical references

ALKIRE Sabina, Meinzen-Dick Ruth., Peterman Amber, Quisumbing Ardyth, **SEYMOUR, Gary, & VAZ A.,** 2013, *The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index*. World Development, 52, pp. 71 - 91.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.06.007>

BARTHEZ, 1984. *Famille et travail : la part des femmes*. Paris : L'Harmattan.

BEAMAN Lori, DUFLO Esther, PANDE Rohini, & TOPALOVA Petia, 2012, Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India. *Science*, 335(6068), pp. 582 - 586.
<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1212382>

BERNARD Tanguy & SPIELMAN David, 2009, Reaching the rural poor through rural producer organizations? A study of agricultural marketing cooperatives in Ethiopia. *Food Policy*, 34(1), pp. 60 - 69.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2008.08.001>

BONNET Emilie, COUDEL E., & DEVIENNE, S., 2022, Femmes, organisations paysannes et reconnaissance institutionnelle : enjeux et paradoxes. *Revue Tiers Monde*, 247(3), pp. 23 - 42.

DJODJI Kossikouma Adjata, ADÉGBOLA P. Yves, & BIAOU, G., 2020, Participation des femmes à la gouvernance agricole locale au Bénin : contraintes et perspectives. *Cahiers Agricultures*, 29(12), pp. 1 - 15.

DOSS Cheryl, MEINZEN-DICK, Ruth, QUISUMBING Agnes & THEIS Stephanie, 2018, Women in agriculture: Four myths. *Global Food Security*, 16, pp. 69 - 74.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2017.10.001>

DROZ Yvonne, FORNEY Jérôme, & RIST Stéphane, 2014, Femmes rurales et pouvoir décisionnel : une perspective comparée. *Sociologie Rurale*, 54(2), pp. 89 - 106.

FAO, 2022. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2022: Leveraging automation in agriculture for transforming agrifood systems*. Rome: FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9479en>

FILIPPI Gérard., & NICOURT Christian, 1987, Le travail invisible des femmes en agriculture. *Sociologie du Travail*, 29(1), pp. 45 - 58.

FRANCOEUR Claude, 2022, Genre et gouvernance agricole au Bénin : le rôle invisible des femmes. *Revue canadienne d'études africaines*, 56(2), pp. 49 - 66.

IFAD, 2021. *Transforming agriculture for women's empowerment*. Rome: IFAD.

IFPRI, 2019. *Women's empowerment and agricultural productivity: Evidence from West Africa*. Washington DC: IFPRI.

JOHNSON Nancy L., KOVARIK Cheryl, MEINZEN-DICK Ruth S., NJUKI Jemimah, & QUISUMBING Agnes, 2016, Gender, assets, and agricultural development: Lessons from eight projects. *World Development*, 83, pp. 295 - 311. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.01.009>

KABEER Naila, 1999, Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), pp. 435 - 464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>

MALAPIT Hannah Jean & QUISUMBING Agnes R., 2015, What dimensions of women's empowerment matter most for nutrition? Evidence using nationally representative data from Bangladesh. *Food Policy*, 52, pp. 145 - 158.

MALAPIT Hannah Jean, QUISUMBING, Agnes R., MEINZEN-DICK Ruth S., SEYMOUR Gary, MARTINEZ Elisa M., HECKERT Jessica, RUBIN Della, VAZ Ana & YOUNT Kristin, 2015, Measuring progress toward empowerment: Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index: Baseline Report. *IFPRI Discussion Paper 1450*.

MEINZEN-DICK Ruth, QUISUMBING Agnes, BEHRMAN Julia, BIERMAYR-JENZANO Patricia, WILDE Vicki, NOORDELOOS Marco, RAGASA Catherine & BEINTEMA Nienke, 2019, Engendering agricultural research, development and extension. *IFPRI Research Monograph*.

ONIBON DOUBOGAN Obo Yvette, 2021, *Les mouvements féministes et les savoirs locaux endogènes en matière d'éducation au Bénin : une relation d'altérité pour une décolonisation du féminisme africain*. *Recherches féministes*, 34(2), pp. 33 - 50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092229ar>

ONIBON DOUBOGAN Obo Yvette, 2018, *Dynamique participative des femmes au fonctionnement des exploitations familiales paysannes dans les départements du Borgou et de l'Alibori au Bénin*. ResearchGate.

ONIBON DOUBOGAN Obo Yvette, 2019, *Entrepreneuriat féminin et développement au Bénin*. L'Harmattan.

PETERMAN Amber, QUISUMBING Agnes, BEHRMAN John & NKONYA Ephraim, 2019, Understanding the complexities surrounding gender differences in agricultural productivity. *Journal of Development Studies*, 55(4), pp. 653 - 670.

POURTIER Roland, 2015, Le travail féminin et la disponibilité masculine : enjeux de gouvernance agricole. *Afrique Contemporaine*, 254(2), pp. 29 - 45.

QUISUMBING Agnes R., & MALAPIT H. J., 2015, Gender, intrahousehold dynamics, and agricultural development. *World Bank Research Observer*, 30(1), pp. 79 - 111.

QUISUMBING Agnes, MALAPIT Hélène, & DOSS Christine, 2022, Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index: A Decade of Measurement. *IFPRI Report*.

RIEU Annie, 2004, Femmes rurales et espaces de décision. *Revue Tiers Monde*, 177(1), pp. 115 - 128.

SEYMOUR, Gary, 2017, Women's time use and agricultural productivity. *Journal of Development Economics*, 130, pp. 152 - 169.

SEYMOUR Gary, PETERMAN Amber, & QUISUMBING Agnes, 2020, Measuring women's empowerment in agriculture: Lessons and future directions. *World Development*, 136, pp. 105 - 245.

SRABONI Esha, MALAPIT Hazel J., QUISUMBING Agnes R., & AHMED Akhter U., 2014, Women's empowerment in agriculture: What role for food security in Bangladesh? *World Development*, 61, pp. 11 - 52.

WORLD BANK, 2020. *Benin Gender Assessment: Agriculture and Rural Development*. Washington DC: World Bank.

YABI Jacob Afouda., AHOYO A., & GANDONOU E., 2021, Leadership et autonomisation des femmes dans les organisations paysannes au Bénin. *Revue Béninoise de Sciences Sociales*, 19(2), pp. 61 - 79.