



DIE ERDE

Journal of the
Geographical Society
of Berlin

Gender relations in global agri-food value chains – a review

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Manuscript submitted: 12 December 2013 / Accepted for publication: 15 May 2014 / Published online: 26 September 2014

Abstract

This article reviews the research literature on gender relations in global agri-food value chains. The main focus is on the production side in countries of the Global South, with most examples from sub-Saharan Africa. After a short presentation of the underlying concepts and a review of the existing research literature, an outline is given of the major insights the analysis of gender issues in global value chains has offered. What is striking is the heterogeneity of the findings and proposed actions, as well as the scarcity of conceptual approaches that would integrate gender analyses further into the concept of global value chains.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag stellt die wesentliche Literatur zu Fragestellungen der Geschlechterbeziehungen in globalen *agri-food*-Wertschöpfungsketten dar. Das Hauptaugenmerk ist auf die Produktion in den Ländern des globalen Südens gerichtet, wobei sich die meisten Fallbeispiele auf Afrika südlich der Sahara beziehen. Nach einer kurzen Darstellung der zugrundeliegenden Konzepte wird die bestehende Literatur besprochen und werden die wesentlichen Erkenntnisse dargestellt. Dabei ist die Heterogenität der Schlussfolgerungen und Handlungsvorschläge auffällig, ebenso wie die Existenz nur weniger konzeptioneller Ansätze für die tiefer gehende Integration von Geschlechteranalysen in den konzeptionellen Ansatz der Globalen Wertschöpfungsketten.

Keywords Gender, global value chains, Africa, food

1. Introduction

A gender perspective is vital to a fuller understanding and conceptualisation of global value chains, their power structures, division of labour, welfare effects and empowerment (e.g. *Barrientos* 2001). The literature draws a heterogeneous picture of the effects that globalisation and internationalisation have on women and men and the implications for the divi-

sion of productive and reproductive work within the household (e.g. *Maertens et al.* 2012). The increased access to employment and income in non-traditional, export-oriented businesses, such as the production and trade of vegetables, fruits and cut flowers, are among the positive effects. On the other hand, horticulture has been rapidly intensified, commoditised and appropriated by men (*Dolan* 2001). Other studies suggest that the positive effects of the integration

Schumacher, Kim Philip 2014: Gender relations in global agri-food value chains – a review. – DIE ERDE 145 (3): 127-134



DOI: 10.12854/erde-145-10

of African agriculture into global production chains are beneficial for development, because it opens up job opportunities and employment for rural women (Adomako Ampofo et al. 2009). Because development via integration into global markets is high on the political agenda as is empowerment of women (c.f. Millennium Development Goal 3), better knowledge of those effects is needed.

Therefore this article reviews the research literature concerning the gender relations in global food value chains. The main focus is on the production side in countries of the Global South, with most examples from sub-Saharan Africa. The paper commences with a short presentation of the underlying concepts of gender, gender in Economics and Economic Geography, as well as the concept of global value chains (GVC), with a focus on buyer-driven chains in the agri-food sector. Subsequently the existing research literature is reviewed with an outline of the major insights the analysis of gender issues in global value chain analysis has to offer. What is striking is the heterogeneity of the findings and proposed actions, as well as the scarcity of conceptual approaches that would integrate gender analyses further into the concept of global value chains.

2. Gender in Economic Geography

Gender refers to the perceived differences between women and men as a socially constructed phenomenon, expressed through ideas of femininity and masculinity, and has until recently been distinguished from sex, understood in terms of our biological characteristics (Panelli 2004: 64f.). There has been a shift from defining gender as a male-female binary to conceptualising gender as a social construction (e.g. Binnie and Valentine 1999), which highlights the importance of geography. Gender relations influence our domestic and social arrangements, our experience of material life, cultural practices and, especially, power relations. Gender also affects the assumptions and expectations we hold as scientists. A gender economy approach argues for the inseparability of the reproductive and productive spheres, i.e. market-oriented economic activities and also the 'reproductive economy' of unpaid domestic work and childcare (Benería 1995, Barrientos et al. 2003: 1515). In this way it has altered explanations of economic restructuring and geographic change (Aoyama et al. 2011: 165). Ideas and practices of gender are created in everyday life but also as social and eco-

nomical processes and are dependent on the respective spatial, social and cultural settings. As a consequence, specific meanings and practices of gender differ from place to place and play a vital role in creating economic geographies (McDowell 1999, see also Aoyama et al. 2011: 158f.). Research has also demonstrated that the production, consumption and preparation of food are highly gendered (Allen and Sachs 2007).

Even though the scientific consideration of gender relations has boomed within the last 25 years (e.g. Garcia-Ramon and Caballe 1998), it is nevertheless necessary to sort out those contributions that only mention gender as an important category of difference but do not place it at the centre of their inquiry (e.g. Goodmann and DuPuis 2002, Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark 2011: 4).

3. A global value chains approach to geographies of food

The concept of global value chains describes the full range of activities of firms and workers necessary to produce and sell a product, which are characterised by increasing spatial distances and complexity due to the global division of labour and are usually carried out in inter-firm networks which source their products in various ways from suppliers all over the world (Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark 2011, Dannenberg and Nduru 2013). The basic dimensions of the concept, i.e. (1) an input-output structure, (2) a geographical consideration, (3) a governance structure, and (4) an institutional context in which the industry value chain is embedded, were developed by Gereffi (1995), later extended by 'upgrading', which describes the dynamic movement of how producers shift within the chain (Humphrey and Schmitz 2002). Most important is the typology of governance with different degrees of co-ordination and power asymmetries, depending on the complexity of transactions, the ability to codify them and the capabilities of the suppliers (Gereffi et al. 2005). Recently Neilson and Pritchard (2009) emphasised again the institutional dimension. Albeit heavily criticised (e.g. Coe et al. 2008) and challenged by other concepts, like the Global Production Networks (GPN) approach, the concept is still very valuable for explaining the relationships in global supply chains, especially in the food sector.

Within the last two decades, the global food system has been changing rapidly as a result of modernisa-

tion, globalisation and commodification processes (Maertens et al. 2012). These have far reaching effects, especially for the countries in the Global South and the people involved in agriculture and horticulture. The fresh fruit and vegetable supply chains provided empirical evidence for the concept of the global value chain. The trading relations have changed from market-based relationships to a highly coordinated and integrated supply chain, dominated by large retailers (Dannenbergh and Nduru 2013: 41). The integration of countries of the Global South into agricultural and food value chains is by now well documented. Today there are studies of numerous agricultural commodities and continents, for example, raspberries in Chile (Challies and Murray 2011), pepper in India (Hassler and Franz 2013), pineapples in Ghana (Fold and Gough 2008) or wine in South Africa (Greenberg et al. 2012).

4. A gender approach to global value chains

Gender entered Economic Geography first of all through research on work (e.g. Mammen and Paxson 2000, England and Lawson 2005). The same is true for gender analysis in global value chains, because it moves the focus away from the firm to the individual person. The global networks are socially located and involve men and women embedded in their social networks with individual opportunities and restrictions or exclusions from particular fields of productive activities (c.f. Barrientos 2001). The embeddedness of the individual, and the role of labour in general, have been downplayed by the original concepts on global value chains which saw labour as a productive asset (Riisgaard 2009: 326). In fact, the fourth dimension of the concept, the social and economic context in which value chains operate, is the most relevant for a gendered approach (Barrientos et al. 2003: 1512).

Work is also a topic that has recently received more attention within the analytical framework of Global Production Networks (GPN), also in combination with gender relations (Barrientos 2013, Carswell and De Neve 2013).

“Since these analyses highlight who controls and who is vulnerable in global commodity chains, commodity chain analysis is ideal for studying gender relations in the food system” (Allen and Sachs 2007: 4). As Coles and Mitchell (2011) emphasise, there is an expanding methodological ‘toolbox’ for gendered value chain analysis

providing ‘how to’ guidance for researchers (e.g. Laven et al. 2009). The prevalent approach of comparative gender analysis in value chains is the use of descriptive case studies, and the growing literature that describes the gender dynamics in value chains reflects this (Coles and Mitchell 2011). Value chain as a framework also helps to conceptualise holistic approaches for analysing men and women’s participation at every stage of agricultural supply chains, from the supply of production inputs to the retail of products which are marketed according to gendered socio-economic characteristics of consumer households (Coles and Mitchell 2011).

Global value chain analysis provides broad and network-oriented approaches for the analysis of gender relations. Within that analytical framework it is possible to reveal the connections along the chain, for example, how the gendered rituals of flower gifting for Valentine’s day in the United States or Europe require cheap and flexible (female) labour in Columbia or Kenya for the timely production and packing of cut flowers (Riisgaard 2009, Patel-Campillo 2012). Besides assessing the gender division of labour within a particular chain, a gender-sensitive global value chain approach offers insights into the ways how value chains function and are controlled, as well as assessing the networks of agents and individuals in their role and inequalities as entrepreneurs or employees and their opportunities for upgrading (Barrientos 2001).

The advantage of a global value chain approach for the analysis of the influences that globalised production and consumption have on gender relations at all nodes of the network is evident. Vice versa, analysis of value chains needs to incorporate gender as an essential element if it is to be fully understood how they function (Barrientos 2001).

Nevertheless, it is still unclear whether these effects improve the welfare of the people involved and if they further more equal opportunity between women and men.

5. Gender in global value chains – a review of the state of art

About a decade ago the first authors dealing with gender issues within the framework of global value chains had a clear starting point. For example, Stephanie Barrientos stated: “Gender is an important aspect of global value chains that is often overlooked in their analysis” (Barrientos 2001: 83), and a little later: “Gen-

der analysis of GVCs is still at an early stage” (*Barrientos et al. 2003: 1515*). This indication was shared well through most of the last decade as emphasised by the statement of *Allen and Sachs (2007: 4)*: “Very few studies explore the material aspects of gender relations throughout the food system, despite an explosion of studies of commodity chains and globalisation”. But meanwhile empirical research has advanced remarkably and the research on gender in global value chains has highlighted important aspects. First of all it has pointed to the central role of female labour within the functioning of the chains, especially as low paid and flexible workers in the production and packaging of produce (e.g. *Elson and Pearson 1981, Standing 1989, Barrientos et al. 2003*). This is analogous to the results of early gender studies, as well as to studies in Economics and Economic Geography focusing on gender issues that helped to make women visible (*Oberhauser 2003: 61*). In addition, the relation between productive and reproductive work is subject to constant reformulation. The marketisation and commoditisation of food production is a prominent example, because it demonstrates how food (production) that was formerly associated with the reproductive sphere is now a commodity (*Atkins and Bowler 2001*), especially when we think about ready-made convenience products. The availability of these products facilitates female participation in paid employment in the Global North because it reduces the time necessary for reproductive work.

An issue that received considerable attention is that of production standards and codes. A starting point was an interest in working conditions of (female) labour in general and a societal demand for stricter regulation and traceability of food along the chain. This has triggered a considerable amount of studies dealing with the role of private standards, set up for example by large supermarket chains. These standards try to regulate production processes and most of them also consider working conditions (e.g. *Nadvi 2008, Ouma 2010, Tallontire et al. 2011, Dannenberg and Nduru 2013*). The effects of the standards on female employees have also received considerable interest (e.g. *Barrientos et al. 2003, Tallontire et al. 2011, Riisgaard 2009*). The main findings are a remarkable shift from family-based employment to individual employment contracts. This in turn influences family structures by creating income and job opportunities but also long working hours and absence from the place of reproductive work. In general a shift to more flexible employment practices and informal employment (temporary, seasonal, casual, migrant, contract) can be observed (*Barrientos et al. 2003, Barrientos 2008*)

One approach to conceptualise gender relations within global value chains with the integration of gendered economy approaches are the ‘gender pyramids’ developed by *Barrientos, Dolan and Tallontire (2003: 1512)* as a framework for mapping and assessing the gender content of codes of conduct. Similar pyramid-like concepts can by now be found in studies of gender in the informal economy and informal employment (e.g. *Chen et al. 2006, Lloyd-Evans 2008*).

The basis of the pyramid is the wider socio-economic context of an individual, which can also be called the sphere of the reproductive work. On top of that is the informal employment, and the smallest segment is formal employment. In the context of African horticulture this is usually male dominated and rather strictly separated from reproductive work. Private standards are especially needed if the national legislation does not provide frameworks for minimum standards of working conditions, for example protection of pregnant women, equal pay, anti-discrimination etc. Nevertheless, the dominant buyers within a chain pass on many of their risks to the producers who react with more informal employment and with the employment of often cheaper, more seasonal female labour. Codes will therefore have to incorporate wider employment-related issues (*Barrientos et al. 2003*). Newer findings move away from seeing women in a totally inferior and dependent role. In her review, *Patel-Campillo (2012: 272)* observes that women workers are nowadays active agents in the production of agro-export goods for global markets. *Maertens and Swinnen (2009)* show that women profit from large-scale estate production and agro-industrial processing because these types of employment opportunities reduce gender inequalities.

Earlier, *Bolwig et al. (2008)* developed a framework for integrating gender, environmental and poverty dimensions into the analysis of global value chains (*Tallontire et al. 2011*). However, they come to the questionable conclusion that gender issues related to value chains should be addressed separately to ensure a systematic and encompassing analysis. Seeing gender issues as an integral part of global value chains analysis offers more in-depth insights into the functioning of the chains and their power relations. As *Bolwig et al. (2008: 54)* have observed, “agro-food value chains often are characterised by highly asymmetrical power relations and that the terms of participation in these chains to a large extent are controlled by downstream actors”. Maybe these power asym-

metries are one reason behind the inconsistency of research results about the effects of global value chains for development and the (economic) empowerment of women. The latter is a central issue within the discourse on gender and value chains (Coles and Mitchell 2011). Other reasons may be situated in the respective socio-economic and cultural settings of the study areas and the different degrees of integration into and influences of global markets. Findings by Udry (1996) in Burkina-Faso, for example, demonstrate that plots controlled by women are farmed less intensively. This contradicts current findings in the Kenyan horticultural sector where highly intensive export farming is often within the realm of women. One point of view is a positive effect of participation in global value chains because of income mobility and poverty reduction, but, on the other hand, there is evidence that it exacerbates existing inequalities and does not create direct gains for the rural poor in sub-Saharan Africa (Maertens et al. 2012: 480). Some authors see the increased access to employment and income in non-traditional, export-oriented businesses, such as flowers and fruits for example in Uganda and Kenya, as beneficial for women (Adomako Ampofo et al. 2009). This goes along with the assumption that increased resources in female hands lead to better education and nutrition for children (Barrett and Browne 1996). On the other hand, horticulture, the historical domain of women in Kenya's agriculture, has been rapidly intensified, commoditised and appropriated by men (Dolan 2001) with negative effects on female employment. As mentioned before, pressure within the chain is handed on, for example, by employing women in order to reduce labour costs and by an informalisation of work. In a case in Kenya, women even refused to grow cash crops and grew produce for local markets instead (Turner et al. 1997).

These contradictory findings call for further research and thorough examination of the question whether the framework of global value chains is best suited for the analyses of gender relations within the global agri-food system.

6. An agenda for future research

Completely missing so far in the literature on global value chains are men. In how far are men affected differently by inclusion into global value chains? What happens if traditional gender roles are switched? What does this do to the traditional gender contracts

in the family, the local or regional societies and how do these changes affect men and women differently? How are the concepts of household and family challenged by the integration of, for instance, small-scale farmers into global value chains? And how do new or additional income opportunities change the bargaining power within the household and how does this feed back on the organisation of the value chain, for example, the sourcing of labour or contractors? After all, labour is one of the key issues with many open questions, as the current research within the global production networks approach shows.

As proposed by Patel-Campillo (2012), the approaches of hegemonic masculinities (c.f. Connell 1998) might be of interest, even though these have not been used within the study of global value chains in the agri-food sector so far. Nevertheless, it seems important to analyse how these (hegemonic) masculinities shape global value chains by their influences, especially within the large companies and organisations that control the chains.

In general, an analysis of the differentiated roles that women and men play in transnational networks is necessary for a more nuanced understanding of the gendered production-consumption relations in global value chains. Studying the role that more privileged women play in the production-consumption relation of export-oriented value chains, as well as an analysis of the decision-making power that women and men have within the industry, are relevant in order to find out about gendered opportunities in terms of power and control within the chain. One example might be the remarkably feminised NGOs as players within the chain, where women possess substantial decision-making power and influence. All in all, this is important knowledge for any kind of changes proposed by consumers or politics to alter the current system of food policy and of the food industry.

The same goes for the still incomplete analysis of gender at every node of the chain (Barrientos 2001). Even though a lot of research has been done, the main focus is still on the production side. Analyses of gender relations in transport are missing as is a more profound analysis of the role middlemen play – between farmers and processing companies but also between production and the large retailers, for example in Europe.

A very wide field is the consumption of food. Who does the shopping, who sells the goods under which labour conditions, who decides about the environmental

friendliness of the purchased commodities, their ecological footprint or sustainability? Who is responsible for the food provision and how do the enhancement of equality in the Global North and the larger participation of women in the (full-time) workforce influence the workers in the Global South?

The necessary shift in geographical inquiry about food, from seeing it merely as a commodity or the study of economic processes, towards a more sophisticated cultural analysis of food and food practices, not least as a result of a more segmented food market, is already under way. It also seems necessary to reconnect farming and food in order to pick up on debates in society and politics on how food is produced and how the organisation of food value chains can be changed (e.g. *Winter 2003, Goodmann and Goodmann 2009, Hassler and Franz 2013*). This relates directly to concerns of consumers about working conditions within the production process and the gender issues connected with that (consumer advocacy).

Another phenomenon that will surely affect agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa is the rise of supermarkets. This will not only change the production side but also the (gendered) way in which food is bought and prepared (*Neven et al. 2009, Maertens et al. 2012*). In sub-Saharan Africa, as elsewhere in the Global South, the spread of mobile phones and the use of the internet already have an enormous influence on the way value chains function and will continue to do so. This might change the bargaining positions of farmers and producers and with it the gender roles and gender relations within families and local societies (e.g. *Murphy and Priebe 2011, Carmody 2012*).

Detached from these specific research questions, the review of existing literature on gender relations within global agri-food value chains calls for a broader scope of future empirical work. A shift from studying corporations (often male dominated – ‘hegemonic masculinities’) to a more holistic view of the chain (neglected nodes of the chain) and the role of labour promises helpful insights. This calls for a more multidimensional view of gender that encompasses the analysis of women’s and men’s positioning across the production, distribution and consumption of food commodities (*Patel-Campillo 2012*). The socio-cultural research within global value chain analysis and Economic Geography in general needs to be strengthened with special attention to interactions and relations.

7. Conclusion and outlook

This review has shown that gender research within the framework of global value chains has made a lot of progress within the last two decades. It can build on many studies dealing with different commodities and different social and cultural settings in various countries. Research on codes of conduct and standards is very important within the value chains of food production. With the exception of the gender pyramids (*Barrientos et al. 2003*), there are few conceptual ideas and contributions on how to integrate gender into global value chain analysis, and the empirical findings are often contradictory. This hampers the transfer of geographical knowledge into development and food policies.

The concept of the global value chain has proven helpful for the analysis of global agri-food chains (e.g. *Dannenbergh and Nduru 2013*). But is this also true for the study of (changing) gender relations? Is it the right concept for framing research that gives gender the desired priority? Are there barriers inscribed into the concept (c.f. *Carolan 2006*)? The majority of studies were made to fit into *Gereffi’s* original four dimensions of the global value chain concept: A value added chain of products, a geographic dispersion of production and marketing, a governance structure and an institutional framework (*Gereffi 1995: 113*) and the later added concept of ‘upgrading’. It is unclear whether the concept might predetermine our findings. Research is about governance and institutions, and to a much lesser extent about the individuals affected and governed. Using an economic concept which was in its origins firm-based seems questionable for an analysis of the reproductive sphere and the interactions of that sphere with the productive economy and its corresponding concepts, like competitiveness. Therefore I call for a discussion on the conceptual level about the suitability of the theoretical framework of global value chain analysis for an inquiry on gender relations and gendered roles within the global agri-food system.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the participants of the 2013 Berlin Mini-conference “Dynamics in Food and Agriculture based Supply Chains” of the IGU Commission on the Dynamics of Economic Spaces, especially *Stephanie Barrientos* and *Richard Le Heron*, for their valuable comments on a presentation of an earlier version of this paper.

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