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COOPERATIVE MODELS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES IN JAPAN AND MALI

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Abstract

This study examines the role of agricultural cooperatives in empowering women in Japan and Mali. Using a comparative analysis of JA Kyoto Chuo in Japan and Benkady Cooperative in Mali, the article examines how these organizations promote women's leadership, economic autonomy, and access to resources. In Japan, where gender equality is a national focus, cooperatives provide opportunities for women's leadership and economic advancement, though traditional gender norms persist in rural areas. In contrast, Malian women face deeply entrenched patriarchal barriers, limiting their participation in cooperative governance and decision-making. Despite these challenges, cooperatives in both countries have implemented initiatives to increase women's access to credit, training, and market opportunities. Yet, cultural, economic, and policy contexts heavily influence their effectiveness. Findings suggest that while cooperatives are pivotal for women's empowerment, their impact is constrained by local cultural expectations and resource availability. Japan must continue addressing lingering cultural resistance to fully empower women, while Mali needs strengthened institutional and financial support to overcome systemic barriers. This analysis contributes to understanding how cooperatives function as vehicles for social and economic change across different geographical, socio-economic, and political contexts.

Key words: Agriculture, Cooperatives, Cultural Barriers, Empowerment, Women.

Résumé

Cette étude examine le rôle des coopératives agricoles dans l'autonomisation des femmes au Japon et au Mali. À partir d'une analyse comparative de JA Kyoto Chuo au Japon et de la coopérative Benkady au Mali, l'article examine comment ces organisations favorisent le leadership féminin, renforcent l'autonomie économique des femmes et facilitent leur accès aux ressources. Au Japon, où l'égalité des sexes est une priorité nationale, les coopératives offrent des opportunités de leadership et de progrès économique aux femmes, bien que les normes de genre traditionnelles persistent dans les zones rurales. En revanche, les femmes maliennes sont confrontées à des barrières patriarcales profondément ancrées, limitant leur participation à la gouvernance coopérative et à la prise de décision. Malgré ces défis, les coopératives des deux pays ont mis en œuvre des initiatives pour accroître l'accès des femmes au crédit, à la formation et aux opportunités de marché. Cependant, les contextes culturels, économiques et politiques influencent fortement leur efficacité. Les résultats suggèrent que si les coopératives sont essentielles à l'autonomisation des femmes, leur impact est limité par les attentes culturelles locales et la disponibilité des ressources. Le Japon doit continuer à s'attaquer à la résistance culturelle persistante pour autonomiser pleinement les femmes, tandis que le Mali a besoin d'un soutien institutionnel et financier renforcé pour surmonter les obstacles systémiques. Cette analyse contribue à comprendre comment les coopératives fonctionnent comme vecteurs de changement social et économique dans différents contextes géographiques, socio-économiques et politiques.

Mots clés : Agriculture, Coopératives, Barrières culturelles, Autonomisation, Femmes.

Introduction

Agricultural cooperatives are member-owned organizations that facilitate collective access to essential resources, services, and markets, enabling farmers to secure inputs like seeds, tools, and machinery while accessing vital services such as marketing, processing, and distribution (Diallo, 2021; Bernard & Spielman, 2009). Operating under a democratic governance model, cooperatives empower members through shared decision-making and equitable profit distribution (Francesconi & Wouterse, 2019). Their primary goal is to enhance economic and social welfare, particularly in rural communities, while addressing broader challenges like poverty alleviation, job creation, and gender equality (Ortmann & King, 2007). In regions like Asia and Africa, cooperatives occupy a pivotal role in rural development, as seen in Japan's JA system, which supports farmers in achieving economic stability, and in African countries like Ethiopia and Kenya, where cooperatives improve food security and market access for smallholders (Chirwa et al., 2005). Additionally, cooperatives empower marginalized groups, including women, by fostering skill development, confidence building, and engagement in income-generating activities, contributing to poverty reduction and enhanced livelihoods (Tesfay & Tadele, 2013).

Empowering women in agriculture is critical for enhancing productivity, ensuring food security, and fostering sustainable development, as women play essential roles in planting, harvesting, and processing, particularly in developing countries (Mohammed & Lee, 2015). Despite their contributions, women face significant barriers, including limited access to land, credit, training, and technology, which restrict their potential (Ito & Kudo, 2015). Studies show that equitable access to resources can boost farm yields by 20-30%, potentially reducing global hunger by 12-17% (Tumenta et al., 2021). Agricultural cooperatives have emerged as effective platforms for addressing these challenges, providing women with access to resources, training, and markets while fostering economic independence and leadership skills through collective decision-making (Bernard & Spielman, 2009). Women's participation in cooperatives enhances their access to credit and improves their social standing within communities (Tesfay & Tadele, 2013). However, structural challenges, including entrenched gender norms and financial barriers, can limit the full impact of cooperatives, particularly in patriarchal cultural contexts, where socio-economic dynamics heavily influence their success (Manfre & Rubin, 2012; Mzuyanda et al., 2018).

This article on the cases of Japan and Mali offers a compelling contrast for examining the role of agricultural cooperatives in empowering women, given their distinct socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. In Japan, agricultural cooperatives have long been integral to the farming sector, providing extensive support to farmers, including women, in accessing essential resources, technology, and markets (Amanor & Chirwa, 2008; Diallo, 2022). The well-organized cooperative movement in Japan has facilitated women's participation in agricultural decision-making, thereby enhancing their economic empowerment and social status (IFAD, 2013). Conversely, cooperatives are emerging as crucial tools for rural development in Mali, particularly in addressing socio-economic challenges and gender inequalities (Onyilo & Adong, 2019; USAID, 2010). These cooperatives have empowered marginalized groups, including women, to assert their rights to land and other resources despite the historical and cultural barriers that have traditionally restricted their access (Diallo, 2022; Tesfay & Tadele, 2013).

By comparing the experiences of Japan and Mali, this study seeks to explore the diverse roles agricultural cooperatives can perform in different contexts, offering a specific understanding

of their impact on women's empowerment across distinct socio-political environments. The research aims to identify the key factors contributing to the successes or challenges of these cooperatives in both countries and to examine how cultural, economic, and policy differences shape their impact. The paper would draw lessons from both contexts that can be applied in other countries with similar contexts to enhance women's empowerment through agricultural cooperatives.

1-Methodology and Theoretical Perceptions

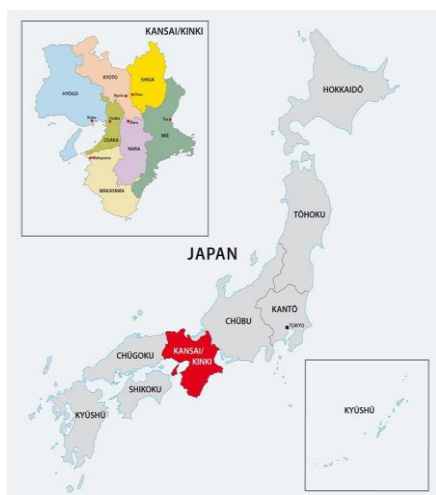
1.1 Study Sites

The study focuses on two distinct countries: Kyoto in the Kansai region of Japan and Baguineda in southern Mali.

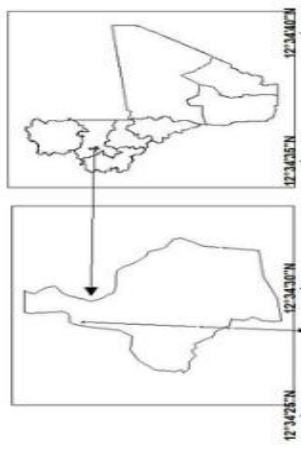
The Kansai region, located in southern-central Honshu, is a historically significant and economically diverse area bordered by the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean, with a population of approximately 22 million. Encompassing Kyoto, Hyogo, and Mie, it features a blend of traditional agriculture and modern industrial development, supporting small-scale farming alongside advanced practices focused on rice, tea, vegetables, and fruit production. Agricultural cooperatives in Kansai are vital to sustaining the region's agricultural economy by providing advanced technologies, financial services, and market access while preserving local agricultural heritage, particularly in culturally rich areas like Kyoto. These cooperatives emphasize community involvement and structured governance, with active participation from women in decision-making processes, making Kansai an ideal context to explore how cooperatives empower women in a developed setting. This study focuses on Kyoto, with a case study on JA Kyoto Chuo, to examine these dynamics in detail.

Maps of the study sites

a) Kansai Region, Japan



b): Baguineda, Mali



Sources : <https://tinyurl.com/up3yahtc>

<https://tinyurl.com/5n74kzwa>

Southern Mali, encompassing Baguineda, Kati, Bamako and other regions, is a fertile agricultural region in the semi-arid Sahel, benefiting from higher rainfall compared to northern Mali. This area, which includes Bamako, the capital with over 2.7 million residents, relies heavily on farming as its primary economic activity, producing key crops such as millet, maize, sorghum, and vegetables vital for local consumption and trade. Agricultural cooperatives in the region play a crucial role in empowering smallholder farmers and women by providing access to seeds, tools, credit, and markets, thereby enhancing productivity and economic stability. Despite their potential, these cooperatives face significant challenges,

including limited resources, infrastructural constraints, and persistent gender inequalities, which can hinder their effectiveness. The cooperative movement, supported by government initiatives and NGOs, strives to overcome these barriers by promoting sustainable practices and equitable resource access. This study focuses on the Baguineda area with the Benkady Cooperative as a case study to explore how cooperatives contribute to women's empowerment in a region marked by socio-economic vulnerabilities.

1.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected between April 2023 and July 2024 using a combination of primary and secondary sources to ensure reliability and comprehensive insights. Primary data collection involved focus group discussions, interviews, and structured questionnaires with members of smallholder cooperatives, administrative staff, and key informants in Japan and Mali. Semi-structured interviews enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and challenges, while six focus group discussions—three in Kyoto, Japan, and six in Baguineda, Mali—offered insights into cooperative governance, strengths, weaknesses, and impacts on women's empowerment. Additionally, structured questionnaires with ten smallholder farmers and cooperative leaders provided detailed data on cooperative structures, leadership, services, and gender dynamics. The study also analyzed cooperative records, governance practices, and national policies in both countries. It contextualized the findings through a review of academic literature and reports, situating the research within broader discussions on cooperatives and women's empowerment.

The analysis utilized qualitative methods to explore the role of agricultural cooperatives in empowering women in Japan and Mali, focusing on interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires. Data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed to uncover themes related to cooperative membership, women's leadership, and access to agricultural resources, providing a nuanced understanding of participants' opportunities and challenges. Comparative and descriptive analyses highlighted similarities and differences in how cooperatives function in the two countries, particularly regarding cultural, economic, and policy influences. While the study provided treasured understandings, limitations such as varying data collection practices, language barriers, cultural differences, and a relatively small sample size in Japan impacted the depth and generalizability of its findings.

1.3 Comparative Framework

The comparative analysis approach used in this paper involves systematically examining agricultural cooperatives in Japan and Mali, focusing on their roles in empowering women within their respective socio-economic and cultural contexts. This method identifies similarities and differences in how these cooperatives operate, their challenges, and the outcomes they achieve in both countries. By comparing these two distinct cases, the analysis aims to reveal the main factors contributing to agricultural cooperatives' success or limitations in promoting women's empowerment. This process not only highlights best practices that can be adapted to other contexts but also reveals the specific socio-cultural, economic, and policy-related factors that influence the effectiveness of these cooperatives.

The selection of Japan and Mali as case studies is justified by their contrasting socio-economic, cultural, and political environments, which provide a rich basis for comparison. Japan represents a developed economy with a long-established and well-organized cooperative system that has played a significant role in the agricultural sector, including women's empowerment. On the other hand, Mali, a developing country with emerging cooperative structures, offers an understanding of how agricultural cooperatives can function in a context characterized by socio-economic challenges and gender inequalities. By analyzing these two cases, the analysis aspires to comprehensively understand the diverse

roles agricultural cooperatives can play in different contexts, proposing treasured lessons for enhancing women's empowerment through cooperatives worldwide.

2. Analysis and Discussions

2.1 Case Study of Japan: Historical Background and Development of Agricultural Cooperatives

Agricultural cooperation in Japan has deep historical and cultural roots, with collective resource management being an integral aspect of rural life since the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). Early cooperative practices, such as joint efforts to build and maintain infrastructure like dams and dikes, emerged as responses to environmental challenges, setting the foundation for more formalized systems. During the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan adopted modern cooperative principles inspired by the European Raiffeisen model, resulting in the Cooperative Society Law of 1900 (Yamauchi, 2001). This law facilitated the growth of cooperatives in credit, marketing, and production, especially during major historical events like the Russo-Japanese War and World War I. The Agricultural Cooperative Law of 1947 further strengthened cooperatives, enabling the rapid expansion of Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives (JACs) and helping to stabilize the agricultural sector post-World War II (Iwashima & Sato, 2022). Over time, JACs became instrumental in addressing Japan's evolving agricultural and economic needs, ensuring food safety, promoting exports, and contributing to rural development.

Today, Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives (JA), also known as Nokyo, remain a cornerstone of the agricultural sector, representing approximately 9.1 million members with a net worth of 5,800 billion yen (38.86 billion USD). JA is globally recognized as the largest farmer-based organization, with its annual revenues placing it among Fortune 500 companies (MAFF, 2023). It provides a wide range of services, including credit, insurance, marketing, and processing, addressing members' economic and welfare needs (Harimaya & Kagitani, 2022). However, JA faces increasing challenges from trade liberalization, financial reforms, and shifts in agricultural policies, which have reduced its influence within the sector. These pressures underscore the need for adaptation and reform to sustain its pivotal role in Japan's agricultural development amidst changing economic and political conditions.

2.1.2 Structure, Organization, and Membership Demographics

Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives (JA) operate within a three-tier hierarchical structure comprising primary cooperatives at the local level, prefectural federations, and national federations (Iwashima & Sato, 2022). The survey cooperatives are primary cooperatives, which are the foundation of the JA system and include both multipurpose and specialized cooperatives. They provide an extensive range of services to their members, such as agricultural extension, credit, insurance, marketing, and welfare services, which are crucial for supporting small farmers—many of whom are tenants or part-tenants (Takagi, 2017; Saito, 2019). Membership is open to both farming and non-farming individuals, with regular members actively farming and associate members, often non-farmers, utilizing cooperative services. Over time, the growing number of associate members reflects broader changes in Japan's agricultural landscape (Ito & Kudo, 2015). These cooperatives also face substantial challenges, particularly in the financial domain, as tenant farmers often remain vulnerable due to their reliance on landlords and large landowners who dominate credit cooperatives (Tsuji, 2017).

To address challenges such as declining farming populations, trade liberalization, and political shifts, JA has consolidated and restructured its operations to better serve its evolving membership (Nishikawa & Yamamoto, 2018). Despite these obstacles, JA remains a

dominant force in Japan's agricultural sector, particularly through its robust financial services, where it acts as the primary credit provider and manages a highly profitable mutual insurance business (Matsumoto, 2020). However, the decline in active commercial farmers and the increasing proportion of non-farming members continue to challenge JA's traditional agricultural focus, necessitating further adaptation to sustain its relevance (Miyazaki, 2022; Tsuji, 2017).

2.1.3 JA Kyoto Chuo (JA京都中央)

JA Kyoto Chuo (JA京都中央) is one of the most prominent branches of the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives (JA) in Kyoto Prefecture, playing a central role in supporting agricultural activities across the region. Located in the heart of Kyoto, JA Kyoto Chuo serves a total membership of approximately 20,000, composed of 12,000 male and 8,000 female members. Among these, 60% are regular members who engage actively in farming activities, while the remaining 40% are irregular members, often non-farming associates who support JA's initiatives and utilize its financial services (Ouchi, 2021). The cooperative's diverse membership base allows it to cater to the needs of both small-scale and large-scale farming operations, offering a comprehensive range of services, from agricultural resources and training to financial and insurance solutions. Through these efforts, JA Kyoto Chuo promotes agricultural productivity and fosters community engagement and economic stability for its farming and non-farming members.

JA Kyoto Chuo plays a vital role in promoting organic farming, sustainable practices, and community engagement while providing comprehensive support to its members. It actively encourages the cultivation of organic rice, vegetables, and Uji tea to meet the growing consumer demand for environmentally friendly products. Through education and training programs, the cooperative equips farmers with essential skills in organic farming techniques, soil management, pest control, and marketing strategies, ensuring high-quality produce and sustainable farming practices. By connecting farmers with urban markets like Kyoto and Osaka, JA Kyoto Chuo helps local farmers access high-demand sectors, including restaurants and organic food stores, while supporting branding and product promotion to enhance competitiveness.

In addition to financial services like credit, loans, and insurance that facilitate farmers' transition to organic farming, the cooperative offers technical support to optimize farm management. JA Kyoto Chuo also emphasizes community involvement through initiatives such as "chisan-chisho" (local production for local consumption) and collaborates with schools and municipalities to promote sustainable food systems. Its efforts have positively impacted the local economy, helping smallholder farmers thrive in premium markets and preserving traditional farming practices in a rapidly modernizing agricultural landscape. The cooperative remains a cornerstone of sustainability and economic health in the region.

2.1.4 Women's Empowerment Initiatives in JA Kyoto Chuo

JA Kyoto Chuo actively empowers women within the cooperative, recognizing their growing importance in the agricultural sector. Through targeted initiatives, the cooperative has created pathways for women to assume leadership roles and participate in governance, addressing the economic and social dimensions of rural development. A key strategy involves offering leadership training programs that equip women with essential management and decision-making skills, focusing on agricultural expertise and entrepreneurship. These programs enable women to lead farm-based businesses and diversify income streams, reflecting a broader shift in Japan's agricultural sector toward recognizing the contributions of women. The outcomes of JA Kyoto Chuo's empowerment initiatives reveal a significant increase in female

leadership within the cooperative. Currently, the cooperative has a total of 20 leadership positions, with women occupying 12 of these roles, reflecting a shift toward gender inclusion. This marks a substantial rise from previous years, where only five positions were held by women—an increase of approximately 30% in female leadership over the past decade, as noted by one of the JA leaders. Many of these women initially joined as regular members and have since advanced to influential roles, actively shaping the cooperative's governance and strategic direction. This evolution underscores JA Kyoto Chuo's commitment to fostering women's empowerment and enhancing their influence within the agricultural sector.

This shift toward gender inclusion has positively impacted the cooperative's operations, particularly in product diversification and marketing. Women leaders have played a crucial role in expanding the cooperative's reach into urban markets like Kyoto and Osaka, resulting in a 25% increase in organic product sales over the last five years. Their leadership has been instrumental in tapping into niche markets, such as organic farming, which continues to grow in demand. JA Kyoto Chuo's commitment to gender inclusivity has cultivated a more diverse and resilient leadership structure, a critical factor in adapting to market changes and evolving consumer preferences. The data have also shown that the cooperative's initiatives have provided women farmers significant personal and professional development opportunities. Through its entrepreneurship and leadership programs, over 50 women have been able to start their own businesses or substantially improve their farming operations, resulting in increased financial independence. In fact, 40% of the female participants reported a 20% increase in their farm incomes after engaging in these programs. Beyond economic growth, the cooperative offers mentorship and peer support, creating a network where women can share their experiences, learn from one another, and collectively overcome challenges. This sense of community has empowered individual women and contributed to the broader economic stability and social cohesion of the communities served by the cooperative.

2.1.5 Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership at JA Kyoto Chuo

Despite these successes, challenges remain in fully realizing gender equality within JA Kyoto Chuo. The findings revealed that one of the main obstacles is the persistence of traditional gender norms and cultural attitudes that limit the acceptance of women in leadership roles. In some instances, male cooperative members have resisted the idea of women taking on management positions, creating a slow and sometimes difficult transition toward more inclusive governance. This resistance resulted in women proving their capabilities more rigorously than their male counterparts, often leading to additional pressure on female leaders to demonstrate their value in leadership roles, as highlighted by female respondents.

Although Japan's status as a developed country with advanced infrastructure and technology, its society remains deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, which continue to influence gender roles, particularly in rural areas. In Japanese culture, traditional expectations often position men as primary breadwinners and women as caretakers, leading to societal pressures that discourage women from pursuing demanding careers, especially in leadership roles. This cultural expectation is particularly pronounced in agriculture, where women's work is frequently considered secondary to men's. Consequently, women in farming cooperatives often face limited recognition of their contributions and fewer opportunities for advancement than their male counterparts.

This patriarchal structure significantly impacts women's employment in farming, where they are frequently relegated to supportive or administrative roles rather than leadership positions. Moreover, the expectation for women to balance cooperative leadership with traditional family duties—such as childcare, household management, and elder care—places an additional burden on them, according to the majority of female respondents. This dual

responsibility limits the time and energy they can devote to cooperative activities and leadership development, often resulting in slower career progression within the cooperative. These cultural and structural barriers not only hinder women's personal growth but also restrict the cooperative from fully benefiting from the potential contributions of women leaders.

Financial barriers also inhibit women's full participation in cooperative governance. While JA Kyoto Chuo provides training and resources, the costs associated with transitioning to leadership roles, such as additional education or investment in new farming technologies, were excessive for some women. These financial challenges are compounded by the fact that women in rural areas often have less access to credit and financial services than their male counterparts, making it difficult for them to compete on an equal footing with male farmers and leaders. Hence, while JA Kyoto Chuo has made significant strides in empowering women through leadership training and opportunities, ongoing efforts are needed to address the cultural and structural challenges that hinder women's full participation in cooperative governance. By continuing to promote gender equality and provide targeted support for women farmers, JA Kyoto Chuo has the potential to enhance women's role in shaping the future of agriculture in the region.

2.2 Case Study of Mali: Historical Background and Development of Agricultural Cooperatives

Agricultural cooperatives in Mali have been instrumental in supporting rural development and improving the livelihoods of smallholder farmers, particularly women. These community-based organizations provide access to critical resources such as credit, agricultural inputs, and markets, fostering collective action in a subsistence farming economy (Diallo, 2022; Mohammed & Lee, 2015). With nearly 80% of Mali's workforce engaged in agriculture in rural areas, cooperatives play a central role in promoting food security and mitigating the risks of small-scale farming. By pooling resources and facilitating access to services and markets, cooperatives empower marginalized groups, including women, to participate more actively in the agricultural economy (Tumenta, Amungwa & Nformi, 2021).

The origins of cooperatives in Mali date back to the colonial period, when they were introduced to control agricultural production and integrate the local economy into global markets (Amanor & Chirwa, 2008). Initially focused on cash crops like cotton and groundnuts, cooperatives evolved after Mali's independence in 1960, with state-led initiatives promoting rural development. Economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s led to a more autonomous and market-oriented cooperative model, diversifying activities into food crops, livestock, and agro-processing. Despite challenges like limited financing, poor infrastructure, and gender inequalities, cooperatives, supported by NGOs and donor agencies, remain essential to rural development, poverty alleviation, and inclusive growth (Tesfay & Tadele, 2013; FAO, 2011).

2.2.1 Structure, Organization, and Membership Demographics

Agricultural cooperatives in Mali function as grassroots organizations structured across local, regional, and national levels. Local cooperatives comprise smallholder farmers who pool resources to enhance their bargaining power and access critical services like credit, inputs, and market opportunities (Diallo, 2021; Bernard & Spielman, 2009). These cooperatives typically focus on specific agricultural products, including food crops like millet and sorghum or cash crops like cotton and groundnuts. Their organizational structure includes general assemblies, executive committees, and sub-committees responsible for finance, marketing, and production. At the regional and national levels, federations of cooperatives provide additional support and advocate for the interests of local cooperatives, offering coordination and representation at higher governance levels (Onyilo & Adong, 2019).

Membership in Mali's cooperatives is diverse, with a significant portion comprising smallholder and subsistence farmers, many of whom rely on rain-fed agriculture (Amanor & Chirwa, 2008). Women play an essential role in food production and agro-processing, but cultural norms and gender biases limit their participation in leadership roles (Mzuyanda, Hans & Lungile, 2018). Efforts by national and international organizations have aimed to promote gender inclusion, leading to a gradual increase in women's leadership representation, though significant challenges remain. Additionally, youth engagement is a concern, as younger generations often avoid agricultural activities due to limited access to land and capital and a lack of economic incentives. While some cooperatives have introduced youth-focused initiatives, the membership remains predominantly older, posing sustainability challenges. Addressing gender and generational disparities is essential to ensure cooperatives contribute effectively to rural development and economic growth.

2.2.2 Benkady Cooperative in Baguineda

The Benkady Cooperative in the Baguineda area of Mali's Koulikoro region is dedicated to improving the livelihoods of its 200 members, with a strong emphasis on empowering women. Of the members, 110 are women, and 90 are men, with 70% being regular members actively engaged in farming and cooperative activities, while 30% are irregular members providing support in various ways. Specializing in vegetable gardening, livestock farming, and compost production, the cooperative enables members to diversify their income sources, reducing reliance on single crops or activities. These efforts are supported by microcredit programs, which provide financial resources for purchasing seeds, tools, and livestock, expanding farms, and training programs focused on farm management and sustainable practices.

Sustainability, community empowerment, and inclusive leadership form the core principles of Benkady's operations. The cooperative emphasizes environmentally friendly farming practices, such as using natural fertilizers and compost, to enhance productivity without depleting resources. Training programs in financial literacy, leadership, and sustainable farming equip members with the skills to achieve economic independence and actively participate in decision-making, particularly encouraging women's leadership. This inclusive governance structure ensures that women play a central role in shaping the cooperative's direction, aligning with its mission to foster equality and sustainability.

Benkady's activities have transformed the community, improving socio-economic conditions and fostering social cohesion. Members have reported household income increases of up to 35%, enabling better access to education, healthcare, and improved living standards. Environmentally, the cooperative's sustainable practices preserve soil fertility and water resources, benefiting members and the wider community. Additionally, Benkady has created a supportive network for women to collaborate, share knowledge, and overcome challenges collectively, strengthening the social fabric and positioning the cooperative as a cornerstone of economic empowerment and social solidarity.

2.2.3 Women's Empowerment Initiatives in Benkady Cooperative

In Mali, women have experienced remarkable successes through their involvement in agricultural cooperatives, especially in regions where access to resources and economic opportunities have traditionally been limited. The findings indicated that one standout example is the Benkady cooperative in Baguineda, which has played a pivotal role in empowering women to diversify their agricultural activities and significantly increase their household income. Established in the early 2000s, the Benkady cooperative serves over 100 women members, providing them with essential tools and resources to thrive in agriculture. One of the crucial drivers of success has been the cooperative's access to informal microcredit schemes, which allow members to invest in more profitable agricultural ventures such as

vegetable gardening, livestock farming, and compost production. These informal microcredit schemes operate within the cooperative, where members pool small amounts of money to create a collective fund. This fund is then used to offer low-interest, flexible loans to other members who may not qualify for formal bank loans. By providing accessible, community-based financial support tailored specifically for women, these informal microcredit schemes enable members to make essential investments in their agricultural activities. This approach not only boosts productivity and income but also facilitates the expansion into higher-value agricultural ventures that yield greater returns, fostering both individual growth and collective solidarity within the cooperative.

Moreover, the Benkady cooperative, through the support of agricultural extension agents, strongly emphasizes capacity building by offering regular training in sustainable farming techniques, including organic farming, water conservation, and soil fertility management. Additionally, the cooperative provides financial literacy programs, equipping women with essential financial management, budgeting, and investment skills. This has enabled many women to improve their farm productivity and gain greater access to local and urban markets, thereby increasing their economic contributions. As a result, members of the Benkady cooperative have experienced an average increase in household income of 35% over the past four years. This improved economic independence has allowed these women to take more active roles in community development, invest in education for their children, and enhance their families' living standards.

The success of the Benkady cooperative has also spurred broader social change, as women who were previously marginalized in decision-making processes now have a stronger voice in both their households and the cooperative. The cooperative's emphasis on inclusive governance has led to a situation where women comprise 45% of the leadership positions, reflecting a growing recognition of their critical role in the cooperative's success. This empowerment and inclusive development model has drawn the attention of local authorities and development organizations, positioning the Benkady cooperative as a shining example of how agricultural cooperatives can drive gender equality and economic growth in Mali's rural regions.

2.2.4 Challenges Faced by Women in Benkady Cooperative

The data have shown that one of the women's most significant challenges in the Benkady cooperative is limited access to financial resources. Although the cooperative has established informal microcredit programs, many women still need help to obtain sufficient capital from formal financial institutions to invest in their agricultural activities. Due to the rural nature of the Baguineda area, access to formal banking institutions is limited, and many women lack the collateral required to secure larger loans. This financial barrier hampers their ability to purchase equipment, high-quality seeds, and other necessary agricultural inputs. The interest rates on microloans, though lower than traditional loans, can still be burdensome for women just starting or expanding their farming ventures. As a result, many women are forced to rely on small-scale farming activities that generate lower incomes, limiting their economic growth and contribution to the cooperative's success.

Social and cultural norms in Mali present another significant challenge for women in the Benkady cooperative. Despite their active involvement in agriculture, women in rural areas are often expected to balance domestic responsibilities with their farming activities, which limits the time and energy they can devote to their work within the cooperative. These traditional gender roles also affect their participation in leadership and decision-making. While the cooperative has made strides in promoting women to leadership positions, some

male members still resist the idea of women holding authority, creating tensions and obstacles to fully integrating women into cooperative governance.

In most agricultural regions of southern Mali, like Baguineda, especially in rural and traditional communities, societal norms often favor men over women regarding land ownership and inheritance rights. This means that women are frequently restricted from owning or inheriting land, limiting their control over one of the most vital resources in agriculture. Without formal land ownership, women cannot make autonomous decisions regarding farming practices, crop choices, or land improvements, as they often rely on male relatives or husbands for such permissions. This lack of legal ownership also affects their long-term security, as they are vulnerable to losing access to the land if family dynamics change, such as through marriage, divorce, or death. Consequently, this restricts women's ability to invest in or expand agricultural activities independently, limiting their economic empowerment and stability within the farming sector.

Another challenge faced by women in the Benkady Cooperative is the limited access to advanced agricultural training and technology. Although the cooperative provides basic training in sustainable farming techniques and financial management, the resources available for more advanced, specialized training are scarce. This restricts women's ability to adopt innovative farming practices that could significantly boost productivity and reduce labor-intensive tasks. Moreover, the lack of access to modern agricultural tools and technology further constrains women's ability to scale up their agricultural operations. Many women still rely on manual labor and traditional farming methods, which are less efficient and can limit the competitiveness of their products in local and regional markets. Without greater access to modern technology and advanced training, the women of the Benkady Cooperative face difficulties in fully realizing their potential in terms of productivity and economic empowerment.

3. Similarities and Differences in Japan and Mali

Table 2 features the key similarities and differences between the JA Kyoto Chuo and Benkady cooperatives regarding their geographic, cultural, economic, and operational contexts. It compares how these cooperatives empower women, focusing on leadership opportunities, access to financial resources, and their specific challenges in each country.

Table2: Comparison of JA Kyoto Chuo and Benkady Cooperative

<i>Aspect</i>	JA Kyoto Chuo	Benkady
<i>Geographic location</i>	Kyoto	Banguineda
<i>Cultural Context</i>	Evolving gender norms, with some resistance in rural areas	Entrenched patriarchal norms limiting women's participation
<i>Economic environment</i>	Highly developed economy with strong infrastructure	Underdeveloped economy with limited financial infrastructure
<i>Policy support</i>	Strong government support and subsidies for coops	Limited government support, reliant on external aid and NGOs
<i>Leadership opportunities for women</i>	Increasing leadership roles for women with 60% of	Women hold 45% of leadership roles but face

	leadership positions held by women	resistance from male members
<i>Access to financial resources</i>	Access to formal financial institutions, advanced loans and subsidies	Informal microcredit schemes available but limited access to formal financial systems
<i>Focus on sustainable agriculture</i>	Strong emphasis on organic farming sustainable practices encouraged	Focus on sustainable farming, composting and organic practices
<i>Market access</i>	Access to domestic and international urban markets including Kyoto and Osaka	Limited market access, mostly local with some urban connections
<i>Challenges faced by women</i>	Cultural resistance to women in leadership in some areas, balancing work with family	Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, limited financial autonomy and access to technology

Source: Author based on fieldwork 2024

Based on the above findings, the analysis uncovered that in both Japan and Mali, agricultural cooperatives play a crucial role in empowering women by improving their economic opportunities and access to essential resources. In Japan, JA Kyoto Chuo provides women access to credit, training, and market linkages, enabling them to enhance their agricultural productivity and participate in niche markets such as organic farming. These cooperatives offer targeted programs to help women improve their entrepreneurial skills, providing financial literacy training and support in farm management. Similarly, in Mali, Benkady focuses on giving women access to informal microcredit schemes and sustainable farming practices, which allow them to diversify their agricultural activities and invest in higher-value ventures like vegetable gardening and livestock farming. Despite operating in different economic contexts, both cooperatives share the goal of reducing financial barriers for women by providing them with the tools and resources needed to improve their farm operations and generate higher incomes. As a result, women in both Japan and Mali experienced increased financial independence and enhanced economic roles within their families and communities, leading to greater participation in local economies.

Additionally, Japanese and Malian agricultural cooperatives contribute to women's social empowerment by creating ways for them to assume leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes. In Japan, JA Kyoto Chuo has made significant strides in promoting gender inclusivity within its leadership structures, with women increasingly taking on management positions and influencing strategic decisions related to cooperative governance, with 60% of leadership positions assumed by women. This shift has allowed women to shape the direction of agricultural development in their regions and helped change societal attitudes toward women in leadership. Similarly, in Mali, the Benkady Cooperative emphasizes women's participation in leadership, with 45% of leadership positions held by women. This involvement has empowered Malian women to challenge traditional gender roles and increase their influence in cooperative governance and broader community decisions. In both cases, the cooperatives foster environments that encourage women to build their leadership skills and gain confidence in public roles, promote gender equality, and enhance women's voices in agricultural and community development.

The cultural context in Japan and Mali influences the effectiveness of agricultural cooperatives in empowering women, though gender roles and social expectations vary in impact and intensity. In Japan, women in cooperatives like JA Kyoto Chuo face cultural barriers. Yet, these are gradually diminishing within a highly developed society prioritizing gender equality, especially in urban areas. Japanese women are taking on more leadership roles within cooperatives, contributing to strategic decision-making and driving organizational growth. However, traditional gender norms persist, particularly in rural regions where resistance to women in leadership is more robust, limiting the pace of gender inclusivity in cooperative governance.

In contrast, in Mali, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms create more substantial barriers for women in agricultural cooperatives such as Benkady. Social expectations in Mali often confine women to domestic roles, which restricts their participation in cooperative activities and leadership opportunities. While cooperatives aim to empower women, cultural resistance from men and the broader community frequently slows progress. As a result, although women in both countries face cultural challenges, the barriers in Mali are more deeply rooted and complex, making social empowerment for women a more gradual and challenging process compared to Japan.

Lastly, the economic and policy environments in Japan and Mali also create stark contrasts in the functioning and effectiveness of cooperatives. As a highly developed economy, Japan offers a more structured and resource-rich environment for cooperatives to thrive. Cooperatives such as JA Kyoto Chuo benefit from government support, access to advanced agricultural technology, and well-developed financial systems that enable members to secure loans and invest in profitable ventures. Japan's agricultural policies are also designed to promote rural development and sustainability, providing cooperatives with subsidies and other assistance that facilitate their operations. On the other hand, Mali's cooperatives operate in a much more challenging economic environment. The country's underdeveloped financial infrastructure and lack of access to modern agricultural technology limit the scope and impact of cooperatives like Benkady.

Moreover, policy frameworks in Mali are less supportive, with fewer resources allocated to rural development and women's empowerment, unlike in Japan. The reliance on international aid and non-governmental organizations to support cooperatives further complicates sustainability, as these initiatives often face funding limitations and are subject to changing political climates. As a result, while Japanese cooperatives operate within a stable and supportive policy framework, Malian cooperatives contend with economic and policy instability, which hinders their long-term effectiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, agricultural cooperatives in both Japan and Mali play a pivotal role in empowering women, though their effectiveness is heavily influenced by the distinct cultural, economic, and policy environments in each country. In Japan, cooperatives benefit from advanced infrastructure, government support, and relatively progressive gender norms, creating a more favorable setting for women's leadership and economic participation. Women in JA Kyoto Chuo cooperatives have access to advanced technology, financial services, and institutional support that facilitate their roles in leadership and entrepreneurial ventures. These resources enable women to participate confidently in cooperative management and strategic decision-making, although some cultural resistance to women in leadership persists, particularly in rural areas.

In contrast, Benkady cooperatives in Mali face more deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that limit women's full participation in leadership and economic activities. Mali's underdeveloped

financial infrastructure and limited policy support for cooperatives further constrain the potential for women's empowerment. Although external aid and microcredit schemes have provided some economic relief, these efforts do not offer the same level of security or autonomy that Japanese women experience. These systemic barriers mean that while cooperatives in Mali play an essential role in improving women's access to resources and leadership opportunities, progress in women's empowerment remains slower and more challenging compared to Japan, where the institutional and policy contexts are more favorable. To fully harness the potential of cooperatives in both countries, Japan must continue to dismantle cultural resistance, while Mali needs to strengthen its institutional and financial support systems for cooperatives.

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