Exploring African women's agency in land access in urban agriculture: The case of women within Kinshasa's urban agriculture (DR Congo)

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how women in Kinshasa's urban agriculture sector navigate structural constraints, including land commodification, tenure insecurity, and socio-economic exclusion, to sustain their roles as farmers, sellers, and intermediaries. Drawing on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between October 2022 and May 2023 in the Ndjili Kilambu district of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the study is based on 70 in-depth interactions, including 37 recorded interviews with female farmers, sellers, and other key stakeholders. It applies a decolonial lens to examine urban farming as a site of situated agency. Rather than privileging land ownership as the primary indicator of agency, the thesis analyses how women access land and produce through rental arrangements, kinship ties, labour exchange, and informal brokerage. These relational and negotiated strategies challenge dominant survivalist framings, revealing urban agriculture as a practice grounded in intentionality, adaptability, and locally embedded knowledge.

Guided by structuration theory and nego-feminism, and grounded in a decolonial feminist methodology, the thesis develops *Toyokani*, a Lingala term meaning "we agreed as such", as a localised analytical concept. Toyokani captures how women navigate exclusion through trust, negotiation, and informal reciprocity embedded in social and, at times, spiritual norms. This framework offers a nuanced reading of agency that emphasises adaptation over resistance or formal participation. Using narrative inquiry, the thesis analyses life histories across the agricultural value chain. The study contributes to feminist and development debates by introducing Toyokani as a relational ethic of agency, foregrounding the transformative roles of overlooked actors in Kinshasa's urban farming system, and calling for a reframing of urban farming as a space of intentional, skilled, and locally grounded practice.

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ACP – Agence Congolaise de Presse (Congolese Press Agency)

CECOMAF – Centre de Commercialisation des Produits Maraîchers et Fruitiers (Centre for the Marketing of Horticultural and Fruit Products)

COVID – coronavirus disease

DFID – Department for International Development (United Kingdom)

DRC – Democratic Republic of Congo

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Fc – Franc Congolais (Congolese currency)

GAD – Gender and Development

GLTN – Global Land Tool Network

IIED – International Institute for Environment and Development

ILO – International Labour Organization

MFU – Mission Française d'Urbanisme (French Urban Mission)

NGO – non-governmental organisation

ONATRA – Office National des Transports (National Transport Agency, DRC)

PASMAKIN – Projet d'Assistance aux Maraîchers de Kinshasa (Kinshasa Horticultural Assistance Project)

RVA – Régie des Voies Aériennes (Civil Aviation Authority, DRC)

SENAHUP – Service National d'Horticulture Urbaine et Périurbaine (National Urban and Peri-Urban Horticulture Service)

SNEL – Société Nationale d'Électricité (National Power Utility, DRC)

UN – United Nations

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme

USUS$ – United States dollar

WB – World Bank

WAD-Women and Development

WID- Women in Development

Glossary of Terms

Agriculture urbaine – Literal: “urban agriculture.” Contextual: The cultivation, processing, and distribution of food within and around cities. In this thesis, it refers primarily to market gardening practices in Kinshasa’s peri-urban zones.

Ba mamans – Literal: “the mothers.” Contextual: A colloquial expression used to describe groups of women. The term conveys both respect and gendered identity, not necessarily related to biological motherhood.

Bilanga ya ndunda – Literal: “fields of amaranths.” Contextual: Market gardening plots often located in lowland or riverine areas, used for cultivating water-intensive crops such as amaranth and spinach. Commonly found in Kinshasa’s peri-urban zones.

Croquis / parcelle sheet – Literal: “sketch / plot sheet.” Contextual: Visual representations of land boundaries and plot ownership, often used locally to indicate official or informal claims.

Customary chief / land chief – Contextual: A local authority figure recognised as having influence over land allocation and conflict resolution, particularly in peri-urban areas. Often hereditary and embedded in local cultural and spiritual systems.

Débrouillardise – Literal: “resourcefulness / improvisation.” Contextual: A Congolese term describing the ability to adapt, improvise, and overcome obstacles in constrained environments, including urban agriculture.

Décret sur les terres vacantes – Literal : “decree on vacant lands.” Contextual: A colonial and later postcolonial law governing “unoccupied” land, which continues to shape land tenure and urban agriculture in Kinshasa.

Female farmer – Contextual: Refers to women who actively cultivate land and manage farm production.

Helpers – Contextual: Individuals, often casual labourers, who provide physical assistance with farming tasks.

Kilambu – Literal: "kilambu" (locality). Literal: proper noun, no direct translation. Contextual: A peri-urban neighbourhood of Kinshasa that serves as a central case study site in this thesis.

Kuluna – Contextual: Local street gangs or armed groups. Women in urban agriculture may negotiate or navigate around these actors for safety while selling or transporting produce.

Landholder / landowner – Contextual: Used broadly in this thesis to refer to individuals owning land, whether through formal legal title (landowner) or customary claims (landholder).

Ma [Name] – Literal: contraction of the French word maman "Mother" (honorific). Contextual: A respectful form of address for women locally, used with preferred names (e.g., Ma Bibi, Ma Ma Marie Noel), regardless of whether they have children. The use of "Ma" reflects local custom and interlocutor preference.

Maman bilanga – Literal: "mother of the farm." Contextual: Refers to women responsible for cultivation and management of farming plots. See also **Female farmer**.

Maman dunda – Literal: "mother of the amaranths." Contextual: Women who buy vegetables from the fields to sell to secondary sellers (**Maman manoeuvre**) or directly in markets. Cross-reference: **Middlewomen**.

Maman manoeuvre – Literal: "mother labourer." Contextual: Women who act as secondary vegetable sellers, purchasing produce from **Maman ya ndunda** to resell in markets or directly to consumers. Cross-reference: **Middlewomen**.

MFU – Mission Française d'Urbanisme (French Urban Mission) – Contextual: A French urban development organisation involved in urban planning initiatives in Kinshasa; referenced in this thesis as the name of a cooperative for urban agriculture in the study area.

Middlewomen – Contextual: Women who act as intermediaries between farmers and markets / consumers, facilitating vegetable circulation and resale. Includes roles such as **Maman ndunda** and **Maman manoeuvre**.

Mikala – Literal: plural of Mukala. Contextual: Refers to multiple raised vegetable beds.

Mukala – Literal: "ridge / bed." Contextual: A raised vegetable bed, often about 1.2 m x 20 m, though sizes vary. It is the basic cultivation unit for certain vegetables in Kinshasa's peri-urban areas.

Nzambe akosala – Literal: "God will do it" (Lingala). Contextual: A spiritual expression reflecting farmers' reliance on faith in managing uncertainty and sustaining livelihoods, often said at moments of expected or unexpected evictions.

Pancarte – Literal: "sign / sketch." Contextual: Locally used metal signs indicating plot ownership and boundaries, sometimes including details of official ownership.

Seed providers – Contextual: Individuals or small traders who supply seeds for farming, often informally.

Sellers – Contextual: Women (and some men) who distribute and sell vegetables in local markets or by roadsides.

Structuration theory – Contextual: A social theory developed by Anthony Giddens, emphasising the duality of structure and agency: structures constrain and enable human action, while human action simultaneously reproduces or transforms structures.

Tontine / ko buaka carte / likelemba – Literal: "informal savings or credit groups." Contextual: Collective financial strategies used by women in urban agriculture to pool resources, secure inputs, or extend credit within trusted networks.

Toyokani – Literal: “we agreed as such” (Lingala). Contextual: A vernacular term meaning an agreement was reached, leading to an action. In this thesis, it is developed as an analytical lens to understand relational, adaptive forms of agency within constraints in Kinshasa.

Women in urban agriculture – Contextual: Refers to all categories of women involved in urban agriculture, including **Female farmers**, **Middlewomen**, and **Helpers**

1 Introduction

My interest in studying women in urban farming and their experiences of land access and maintenance in Kinshasa arose from both personal experience and a long-standing interest in listening to local women's voices. Women play a central role in producing and providing vegetables in the city. Growing up in Salongo, in the Lemba district, I frequently purchased vegetables from the ba mamans bilanga- women who have cultivated plots in these neighbourhoods (particularly Camp Riche and Échangeur) for decades. In 2017, these women faced eviction as the land was slated for conversion into a petrol station. At the time, I was working as a farmer entrepreneur and offered to help them relocate to a site approximately 20 km from their original plots. Despite the uncertainty, not a single woman agreed to move. I initially struggled to understand this refusal of what I perceived as a better economic opportunity. De Boeck (2011) notes that in Kinshasa, residents navigate the city's invisible folds, discovering alternative itineraries and hidden possibilities. The women I encountered embodied this insight. When I returned in 2020, I was surprised to find them farming again on the same site, having managed to reclaim access in the Échangeur neighbourhood. These experiences challenged my assumptions that land is static and that mobility or opportunity follows linear pathways. Coming from a middle-class upbringing, largely abroad, and shaped by formal education and Western entrepreneurial values, which privilege capitalist logic and individual gain, I initially failed to recognise the embedded knowledge, creativity, and agency of these women. Observing how they sustained their activities despite structural constraints revealed the diversity and subtlety of their practices, which are often overlooked in dominant portrayals of urban agriculture and women's agency in the city. These encounters led me to ask how women, particularly smallholders I met and observed, sustain their engagement in Kinshasa's urban agriculture despite land insecurity, economic pressures, shifting urban dynamics, and restrictive policies, and what this reveals about their agency.

Building on these reflections, I developed the formal research questions that guide this study (presented later in this chapter) and that also informed the theoretical frameworks used as an analytical lens for understanding women's agency in urban farming (introduced here and elaborated further in Chapter Two). This chapter first situates these questions within the broader

literature on women in urban agriculture, highlighting persistent gaps such as the invisibility of women's strategies, the overemphasis on land ownership, and limited attention to other forms of agency. It then outlines the contribution of the study, the research aim and objectives, the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the scope and limitations, before concluding with an overview of the thesis structure.

1.1 Background Literature and Research Gaps

Local authorities have long dismissed urban agriculture (UA) (Suka and Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022), viewing it as a fringe activity incompatible with their "modernist" visions of urban space (Simatele & Binns, 2008, in Battersby & Watson, 2018, p.96). This perspective reflects an internalised logic separating "urban" from "rural", privileging Western notions of modernity that exclude smallholder farming, and exemplifying a persistent epistemic coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Yet, urban agriculture in Kinshasa has grown substantially, employing an estimated 60,000 people and supplying over 80% of the city's fresh food (Minengu et al., 2018; Ngweme et al., 2020; Suka & Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022). Women play a central role, engaging in both production and resale of vegetables, underscoring the sector's social and economic importance for urban households (Suka and Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022). Despite their contributions, women in urban farming face persistent challenges, particularly regarding land access and tenure insecurity. Kinshasa is expanding at an alarming rate; by 2035, it is projected to house almost 27 million people (Gardham, 2021). This rapid urbanisation, combined with high demographic pressure, is reducing green spaces and placing agricultural lands under increasing threat of conversion into residential areas (Wagemakers Inge et al., 2010). Although these lands are legally designated as public spaces, the state's governance remains weak and fragmented. In practice, multiple actors, including local politicians, civil servants, land chiefs, private owners, and farming associations, exercise overlapping authority over these lands, often through informal arrangements (De Boeck, 2020; Wagemakers Inge et al., 2010). These actors frequently fragment public lands into small residential plots to commercialise them (Wagemakers Inge et al., 2010). Women engaged in urban farming in Kinshasa, affected by complex social power relations and differing rights and responsibilities, must navigate these constraints daily to secure land and access produce for cultivation. Despite their resourcefulness and adaptive strategies, the experiences of women in urban farming, and their responses to institutional and spatial constraints, remain underacknowledged in the literature.

Existing feminist scholarship, alongside modernist and neoliberal development perspectives, struggles to account for why urban agriculture, predominantly practised by women in Kinshasa, continues to secure and maintain access to land and produce, despite ongoing pressures from local authorities and the city's rapid expansion. While much attention has been devoted to urban agriculture in Africa, the core literature does not sufficiently explore women's agency (beyond female farmers) in urban agriculture through the lens of land access. Most studies focus on the livelihood aspect of urban agriculture, portraying it as important for women primarily because of their mothering role in providing food for families, thus framing it largely as a subsistence activity (Hovorka, 2006; Mougeot, 2010; Musibono et al., 2011; FAO, 2012). Moreover, claims about African women's experiences in urban agriculture are often based on rural agriculture examples and simplistic survey methods, rather than robust evidence from urban contexts(Doss et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2021). Such approaches have perpetuated dominant gender myths, including the notion that women own only 2% of land, and reinforced a paradigm of African women's marginalisation and obedience in gendered social-cultural landscapes (Butegwa, 1991; Wanyeki, 2003; Tsikata, 2009; Doss et al., 2018). Thus, there is a critical need to investigate women's agency in urban agriculture through nuanced, context-specific approaches that account for both structural constraints and everyday strategies. Existing studies tend to obscure the everyday strategies, norms, and knowledge through which women manage institutional and spatial limitations in urban agriculture (Torvikey, 2021). By foregrounding these practices, this research makes women's agency visible, showing how their engagement can be contextually grounded, at times purposeful and strategically adaptive, and shaped by the creativity, knowledge, and resilience they bring to sustaining their livelihoods. Understanding these practices provides a lens to critically examine dominant frameworks, such as the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which often conceptualises women's agency in oversimplified terms and fails to account for the local realities shaping their lives.

The notion of agency has become central to the dominant GAD discourse since the late 1980s (Klenk, 2004). The way agency has been incorporated in mainstream development has enabled significant recognition of the need to integrate gender analysis into all aspects of development (Brown, 2006; Bowman and Sweetman, 2014). As a result, GAD has stimulated policy debates leading to the allocation of resources for gender-based interventions. However, in equating women's "oppression" with "victimhood", GAD has failed to recognise, or significantly downplayed, the ability of oppressed women to engage in the struggle for structural change

(Wilson, 2009). It has also led to the oversimplification of women's lives. In last two decades of development discourse, women's agency has been linked to "smart economics", coined in the gender efficiency approach (Bowman and Sweetman, 2014). Some common models intended to increase women's agency, championed by development agencies, have come into being through projects such as conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes, microfinance schemes, and "investing in girls" (Bowman & Sweetman, 2014). They have been created to simultaneously empower women and alleviate women's poverty (Chant, 2016). The principal justification for promoting gender equality as "smart economics" via such programmes is based on assumptions and arguments that rely on rigid gender biases and traditional norms (female "altruism" and "self-sacrifice") (Wilson, 2009). The uncritical assumption that agency operates at the level of the individual, rather than through relations, fails to capture the structural discrimination women face through patriarchal, cultural, and socio-economic norms (Wilson, 2009; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Chant, 2016). Such framings impose external criteria and priorities, overlooking the conditions, perspectives, and choices of the women themselves. In practice, women's strategies are diverse and shaped by socio-economic structures and prevailing norms, rather than being solely expressions of personal autonomy.

Feminists have challenged these notions of agency on several levels. Decolonial feminists such as Sarah Ahmed, (2017) and Gloria Anzaldúa, (2015) try to demonstrate that women can lead everyday lives that are feminist. Ahmed observes that such women articulate their concerns, take risks, and have agency and creativity (Anzaldua, 2015:XXV, cited in Kabira et al., 2018, p.256). Feminists believe that agency is about more than observable action, meaning that women's agency is about paying attention to women's everyday activities. However, in relation to the effort to identify women's agency in daily activities, many critics fear the overidentification of agency, as this could lead to a tendency to "romanticise mundane practices", attributing them to agency (McNay, 2015). In short, McNay (2015) implies that a balanced and contextual understanding of agency makes agency meaningful and valuable. Other feminists have framed agency as resistance and free will (Ahearn, 2001). This implies that a person must resist a patriarchal status quo to demonstrate agency. This form of agency has been construed in terms of how much freedom one has in relation to others. In the liberal feminists' view, with their individualist model of women's agency, agency is, by definition, a choice to live as one chooses, free from any structural constraints that have prevented women from fully participating in their activities or communities (Borovoy and Ghodsee, 2012).

However, resistance may not ultimately lead to women's agency or reflect "real" agency if women only enter a new relationship with a different form of power. Women might resist their culture's oppression only to adopt other cultures' oppression (Mahmood, 2005; Borovoy and Ghodsee, 2012), as actions that conform to social norms do not necessarily evidence a lack of agency unless conformance with social norms and rules constitutes a constraint on acting of one's own accord (Campbell, 2009). Indeed, as Bawa (2016) argues, African women are often perceived “to be shackled not just by poverty, but also by backward traditional cultural practices endorsed by a patriarchal socio-cultural society that is itself in need of enlightenment” (Bawa, 2016). If agency is narrowly defined as complete autonomy or freedom from structural constraints, the lived experiences of many African women fall outside this framework. This prompts a critical question: is anyone ever truly free from structure, and if not, how can agency be conceptualised in ways that account for complex, context-specific realities? African feminist approaches provide significant insights into this debate, demonstrating that African women’s agency, through frameworks such as African feminism and womanism, has historically operated to resist patriarchal constraints, even prior to sustained interactions with other continents (Bawa, 2016; Busingye, 2020; Tamale, 2020). Moreover, Africa is not an undifferentiated mass of homogeneous social, economic, or epistemic practices: expressions of agency vary according to class, race, educational background, and other positionalities (hooks, 2001). Understanding these nuanced, context-specific conceptualisations of agency is essential for exploring domains such as urban agriculture, where women’s engagement is mediated by overlapping structural, social, and economic constraints.

While there is a growing body of literature on African feminism and women’s agency, few studies have critically distinguished between the experiences of elite African women – such as professionals or those occupying privileged positions within political, economic, and educational hierarchies – and those of non-elite urban women engaged in informal livelihoods, including small-scale farming, street vending, or petty trading. This distinction is important because these groups occupy different social positions within urban society, encounter different forms of constraint, and often adopt distinct strategies to assert agency. Recognising these differences is essential for a nuanced understanding of African women’s agency, grounded in the intersectional realities of class, gender, occupation, and urban marginality (Mama, 1995; Sweetman, 1998; Brown, 2008).

Moreover, while elite urban women may distance themselves from Western feminist frameworks, they often construct non-elite women as the "other" (Manning, 2021). Activities such as urban agriculture are frequently marginalised and interpreted through what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) describes as the coloniality of being, in which being "modern" entails disavowing traditional practices and mimicking Western norms. Elite perspectives thus tend to portray rural or non-elite urban women as homogeneous, traditional, and impoverished, while their practices, norms, and values are often labelled as primitive (Kinyanjui, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). These representations are reinforced by the types of data elites rely on, which often overlook assets, social networks, and forms of wealth that are meaningful to non-elite women (Brockington and Noe, 2021). They are further entrenched by internalised postcolonial and global discourses that privilege a modern / traditional binary, framing non-elite women's practices, such as urban agriculture, as unproductive or misaligned with prevailing notions of "modern" development (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Such framings have contributed to policy conclusions that advocate that the best way to obtain economic growth is for people to leave informal activities like agriculture and seek formal employment in other sectors (Brockington & Noe, 2021). As a result, knowledge often treated as "grassroots" in published research may in fact reflect elite perspectives rather than the lived experiences and expertise of smallholder urban women (Brown, 2006). This highlights a significant gap in the literature: the perspectives and practices of non-elite urban women, particularly those engaged in urban agriculture and related activities, remain underrepresented. Addressing this gap is central to the present study, which focuses on the experiences of women in Kinshasa's informal farming sector, emphasising their own practices and self-representations. While Riley and Robertson, (2021) illustrate similar insights through social media, their findings highlight a broader methodological point: centring actors' perspectives and practices provides a richer, contextually grounded understanding of their strategies, priorities, and societal roles. In this study, women's skills, work, roles, constraints, and navigational strategies are documented through ethnographic engagement, foregrounding their own experiences. This approach offers a nuanced perspective that challenges dominant narratives shaped by elite interpretations, including those of researchers themselves, and addresses the underrepresentation of non-elite women in urban agriculture research.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

Research Aim

The aim of this thesis is to explore how women in Kinshasa's Ndjili Kilambu district negotiate and sustain their agency through urban agriculture within a structurally constrained context.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the socio-economic and organisational dynamics of urban agriculture in Kinshasa and their implications for women's agency.

2. To analyse the structural constraints, including land ownership, that affect women's participation and capacity to exercise agency in urban agriculture.

3. To explore the strategies and practices through which women maintain and assert agency within these constraints.

4. To document how women's localised experiences in urban agriculture produce knowledge, demonstrate agency, and contribute to reframing perceptions of urban farming.

Central Research Question

How do women in Ndjili Kilambu assert and manifest agency in sustaining urban farming within their socio-structural context?

Sub-questions

1. What are the socio-economic and organisational dynamics of urban agriculture in Ndjili Kilambu?

2. What are the structural and historical constraints, including land access, that shape women's participation in urban agriculture?

3. How do women navigate these constraints to maintain and assert agency in urban agriculture?

4. How do women's localised experiences in urban agriculture reveal situated forms of knowledge and agency, and contribute to reframing perceptions of urban farming?

These questions address gaps in the literature by centring women's strategies and vocabularies, offering a localised understanding of agency grounded in vernacular knowledge systems. They also inform the study's theoretical lens, which conceptualises agency as both embedded within structure and enacted through relational ethics and pragmatic negotiation. The following section provides an overview of these frameworks, setting the stage for the study's contributions.

1.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Understanding women's agency in Africa requires frameworks that can capture both the diversity of contexts and the subtleties of localised practices, drawing on Tamale's (2020, p.43) observation that "it is difficult to propose a single theoretical framework for a multiplicity of peoples with varied cultures and histories". This call highlights the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to studying agency, underscoring the importance of frameworks that can accommodate local diversity and capture complex historical and structural dynamics. Kinshasa, and specifically the peri-urban district of Ndjili Kilambu, exemplifies such a context. Women in this sector navigate a precarious socio-economic and land-tenure environment shaped by legal pluralism, informal arrangements, gender norms, and the commodification of land, all operating within the fragile-state dynamics of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Stearns, 2021). These overlapping structural, local, cultural, and political factors demonstrate why a single theoretical lens is insufficient to capture the strategies women employ. To analyse the dynamics of women's agency in this setting, this research therefore draws on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) as complementary lenses, providing a nuanced understanding of how women's practices are

simultaneously adaptive and transformative, revealing the dynamic interplay between social structures, local cultural norms, and individual agency within Kinshasa's urban farming sector.

From the convergence of these frameworks, an empirical insight emerged during field observations: the practice of Toyokani. Derived from the Lingala verb "yokana" [yoh'-ka-na], meaning "agree" or "get on with" (Divuilu, 2005, p.152), Toyokani is the first-person plural and past tense, commonly used in everyday speech to signal agreement, coordination, or collectively negotiated understanding, and can be literally translated as "we agreed as such". Toyokani is an ethnographic insight, highlighting how women navigate social and structural constraints in adaptive, relational, and context-specific ways. The practice resonates with other African relational concepts, such as Ubuntu in South Africa and Botho in Botswana, which articulate humanness through interdependence and shared responsibility, while remaining distinct in its local, pragmatic character (Ramose, 2002; Gaie and Mmolai, 2007). This being the case, Toyokani provides a grounded lens bridging structuration theory and nego-feminism, supporting a nuanced, contextually informed understanding of women's strategies in line with Tamale's (2020) call for locally situated analyses. This section begins with structuration theory, which explains how social structures and individual actions shape one another. It then examines nego-feminism, highlighting ethical negotiation and relational agency, before presenting Toyokani as an empirical insight that bridges these frameworks, illustrating women's adaptive and context-specific strategies in Kinshasa's urban farming sector and paving the way for a discussion of their combined analytical relevance.

A. Structuration Theory: Agency Within and Beyond Structures

When analysing women's agency, it is essential to consider both individual actions and the social structures that both shape and are shaped by those actions. Agency must therefore be contextualised within the structural constraints and opportunities that frame women's lives (Lister, 2015, p.145). Structuration theory, developed by Anthony Giddens (1984), provides a useful lens for understanding this interplay, offering an ontological framework that emphasises how structures are continuously reproduced and potentially transformed through human action. Giddens developed this theory in response to the limitations of late-20th century social analysis, critiquing positivist sociology, which modelled social phenomena on biological principles, as well as functionalist and structural approaches, which he argued were "strong on structure, but

weak on action" (Giddens, 1993, p.4). These earlier approaches treated human agents as largely passive, emphasising the pre-eminence of social systems over individuals' capacities to shape, negotiate, or transform social reality.

Structuration theory challenges this view by emphasising that structures are both the medium and outcome of social action. Structures provide rules and resources that guide behaviour, while human agency continuously interprets, engages with, and reshapes these structures (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005). To capture the complexity of structural influence, Giddens identifies three modalities: signification, the production of meaning; legitimation, encompassing norms and moral orders; and domination, involving control over resources and power (Lamsal, 2012). These dimensions illustrate how structures simultaneously constrain and enable human agency while remaining open to transformation through social practices. Structuration theory is particularly useful for analysing African women's agency because it centres human actors as knowledgeable agents capable of interpreting, negotiating, and reshaping social systems (Giddens, 1984). This perspective challenges Western and patriarchal narratives that have historically portrayed African women as passive or victimised (Mohanty, 2003; Mama, 2007; Tamale, 2020; Corbera et al., 2021), allowing recognition of women as active participants whose strategies and actions shape the social contexts they inhabit. In contexts such as Kinshasa's urban agriculture sector, structural constraints, including class inequalities, gender- and age-based social divisions, institutional failures, limited infrastructure, economic precarity, urban insecurity, land tenure limitations, elite networks, spiritual beliefs, local norms, and perceptions of urban agriculture, intersect with women's everyday strategies to sustain their livelihoods (Trefon, 2004; De Boeck, 2011; Stoop et al., 2019). Examining these constraints through Giddens' modalities shows how agency is exercised within, through, and sometimes against structural systems. These systems are not fixed; they consist of rules and resources that both guide and constrain behaviour while being reproduced or transformed through practice. Some critics, including Bhaskar (1979) and Callinicos (1985), argue that structural constraints can severely limit feasible options, so that in many situations agents effectively have only one real choice (Jones and Karsten, 2008, p.132). Giddens (1976, 1984) emphasises that power is relational: it emerges in interactions between people rather than residing solely in formal authority or coercion. Giddens' response highlights that even within these constraints, relational power enables actors to influence outcomes, preventing a deterministic reading of social life. Agency, therefore, refers to the capacity to act intentionally, adaptively, and

relationally, using available rules, resources, and networks to negotiate, reproduce, or transform social arrangements. Crucially, this framework recognises that such agency is meaningful even within structural constraints, allowing actors to shape outcomes in ways that matter, without presuming limitless freedom (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, pp. 963–964). This relational and meaningful agency can be observed in everyday practices. For instance, in Kinshasa's urban agriculture, women often lack formal land ownership, which might appear to constrain their agency. Yet, this does not render them powerless. By cultivating vegetables on household plots, using communal spaces, or participating in informal markets, women sustain their livelihoods and contribute to local economic activity. In some cases, they even influence the decisions of elite landowners or local authorities, who rely on women's labour and networks for agricultural productivity. These practices illustrate how women exercise meaningful agency within existing constraints, shaping outcomes in practical and context-specific ways. These dynamics will be explored in greater detail in the empirical chapters, demonstrating the relevance of Giddens' theoretical lens. While Giddens' theory contributes to situated analyses, it primarily addresses broad ontological considerations rather than specific contexts. As Giddens, (1991) cautions, the theory should not be applied wholesale to a single setting. It functions as a flexible, "second order" analytical framework that can be combined with other perspectives without reducing them to incommensurable paradigms (Gregson, 1989; Gioia and Weaver, 1994), helping to avoid oversimplifying the interplay between structure and agency (Vaughan, 2001). This flexibility is important given the diversity of African women's experiences, which cannot be fully captured by a single framework. In this study, structuration theory is paired with the contextually grounded African feminist framework of nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004). Together, these frameworks highlight the fact that women deploy strategies to navigate and negotiate their social worlds, which are explored in detail in the empirical chapters. The discussion now turns to nego-feminism.

B. Nego-feminism: Negotiation as a Locally Embedded Strategy

While structuration theory provides an ontological framework for understanding agency (Giddens, 1984), nego-feminism, as developed by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), explicitly resists ontology as its starting point. Nnaemeka argues that African women's lives cannot be adequately captured through abstract theorising about "being" or fixed categories of identity. Instead, nego-feminism foregrounds functional and pragmatic considerations: it focuses on

what women actually do within specific cultural contexts to negotiate power, maintain relationships, and create spaces of agency. It is a culturally grounded framework that shifts attention from abstract categories to lived practices. For instance, Nnaemeka (2004) invokes the Igbo proverb "When something stands, something stands beside it". From this foundation, nego-feminism is defined as a form of feminism rooted in negotiation, compromise, and complementarity rather than direct confrontation. The term "nego" carries a double meaning: negotiation and "no-ego". This principle underscores humility, relational balance, and prioritisation of communal well-being over individual assertion. As a praxis, it recognises that women often operate within existing structures – whether social, economic, or political – to achieve their goals, adapting strategies to suit the specific circumstances in which they are situated. By highlighting negotiation and relational balance as forms of agency, nego-feminism captures subtle, everyday practices that are often overlooked by Western frameworks of women's agency (Nnaemeka, 2004).

A practical example illustrates this contrast. Western feminist discourse, particularly in its neoliberal form, emphasises individual agency and market participation, encouraging women to "lean in" and secure autonomy through economic engagement (Fraser, 2013; Rottenberg, 2018). In many African cities, where income opportunities are scarce, working or generating income is rarely avoidable, as refusing a woman the chance to earn is a luxury few people can afford (Akinbobola, 2019). These intersecting demands illustrate the intersectional nature of African women's experiences, where gender interacts with culture, class, and social obligations. Women's agency, therefore, emerges not simply from having work but from how they strategically negotiate these overlapping constraints to remain productive. In the context of Kinshasa's urban agriculture, some women have to negotiate household expectations, manage domestic responsibilities, and contend with external socio-economic and political pressures – including land dynamics, weak infrastructure, elite networks, local authorities, urban insecurity, bureaucratic procedures, and physical and spiritual constraints – to sustain their livelihoods (Crenshaw, 1989 ; Bayu, 2019). These negotiations exemplify the strategic practices theorised by Nnaemeka's nego-feminism (2004, p.378), which emphasises knowing when to negotiate, when to compromise, and when to push back. In certain cases, women secure land and livelihoods by framing farming as beneficial to the household and community, negotiating access with landholders – sometimes even through subtle manipulation, and building alliances to sustain their engagement in farming despite restrictive or exploitative

systems. Nego-feminism thus reconceptualises agency as pragmatic, relational, and culturally grounded, attentive to both social norms and structural constraints (Amadiume, 1997; Amina Mama, 2001). In doing so, it bridges lived realities and feminist theory, advancing a distinctly African feminist praxis that values collaboration, relational negotiation, and agency without reducing women's experiences to homogenised notions of victimhood.

Nego-feminism's strength lies in its grounding in local realities. As Nnaemeka (2004, p.378) observes, "nego-feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies" (Arndt, 2002; Nkealah, 2016). African women working for social change, Nnaemeka (2004, p.380) adds, "build on the indigenous by defining and modulating their feminist struggle in deference to cultural and local imperatives". Empirical studies illustrate this praxis: women navigate constraints by mobilising social networks and culturally informed strategies, challenging patriarchal hierarchies while sustaining livelihoods (Kuumba, 2006; Tsikata and Ossome, 2024) . By centring context-specific, relational practices, nego-feminism provides a nuanced understanding of agency as pragmatic, embedded, and relational, though outcomes can be ambivalent. Structuration theory complements this perspective by explaining the interplay between agency and structure: structures offer rules and resources that shape action, while agents reproduce or transform these structures over time (Giddens, 1984; Craib, 1992). Together, the two approaches reinforce each other: structuration establishes the ontology of the knowledgeable agent acting within constraints, while nego-feminism illustrates how such agency is enacted through negotiation, reshaping meanings (signification), normative acceptance (legitimation), and access to resources and decision-making (domination) via alliances and reciprocal exchange. In the African context, culture functions as a medium for operationalising agency (Tsikata & Ossome, 2024), responsive to power dynamics and shaped by intersecting positionalities.

C. Bridging Theory and Practice: The Emergence of Toyokani

Toyokani, as observed in women's farming practices in Kinshasa, provides an empirically grounded entry point for bridging structuration theory and nego-feminism (see Figure 1.1). Invoked in everyday speech and action to signal informal agreement, it offers a pragmatic basis for coordination, trust, and collective responsibility in the context of Kinshasa's dynamic socio-economic instability (Trefon, 2004).

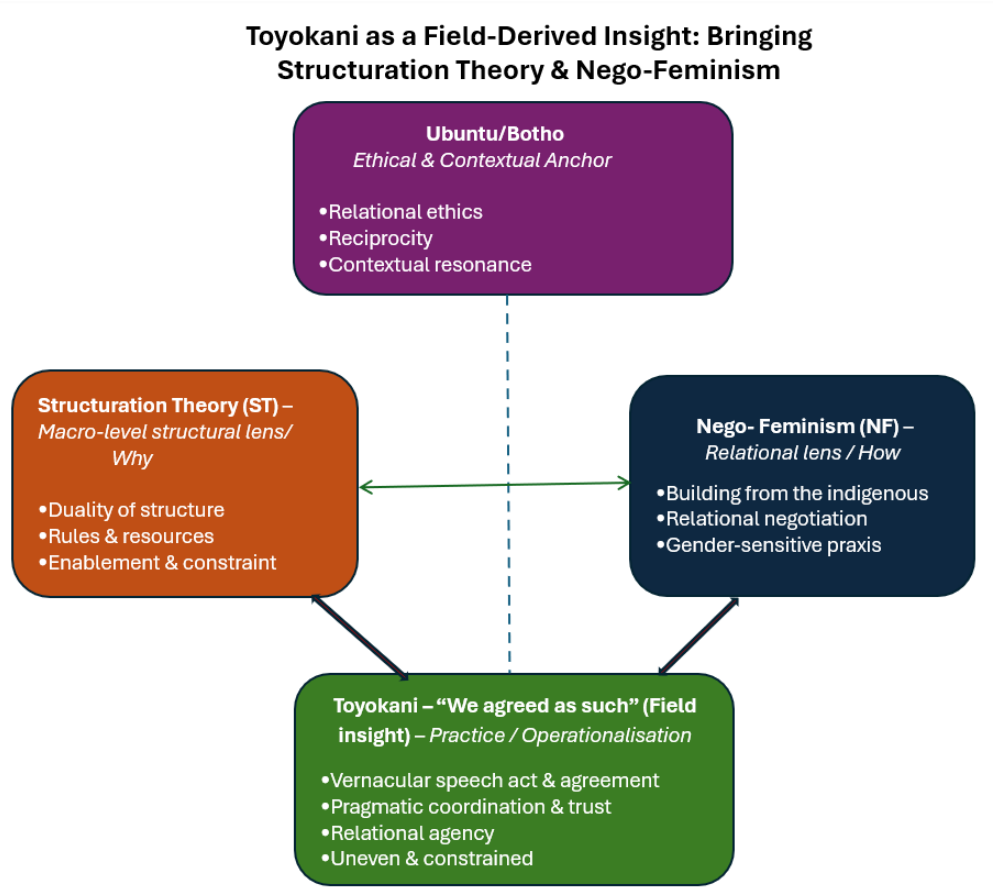

Figure 1.1 Toyokani as a field-derived insight: Bridging structuration theory and nego-feminism

(Source: P. Tshomba, 2023, based on fieldwork)

The diagram illustrates Toyokani as a vernacular speech act in Kinshasa's urban farming sector, operationalising both the macro-level structural lens of structuration theory, explaining why agency exists and how structures enable or constrain action, and the relational lens of nego-feminism, showing how agency is enacted through locally grounded negotiation and gender-sensitive practices. Ubuntu / Botho provides ethical and contextual resonance, while Toyokani illustrates the pragmatic, trust-based relational strategies through which women navigate systemic constraints.

From a structuration perspective, Toyokani embodies the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984): it operates as a rule, setting expectations of cooperation, and as a resource, enabling women to mobilise labour, negotiate access to land, produce, and tools, and sustain livelihoods. Through

these practices, women both reproduce existing norms of collective responsibility and subtly reshape them, illustrating how structures are recursively enacted and adapted in everyday life (Archer, 1996). At the same time, Toyokani reflects nego-feminism's emphasis on negotiation and relational complementarity. It provides a field-derived insight into how women coordinate obligations and resources within relational and gendered contexts, "building from the indigenous" to ground agency in local ways of doing and being (Nnaemeka, 2004). Not all women wield Toyokani with equal authority; its practice is shaped by structural inequalities of class, age, and access to land, and by differences in negotiating capacity, and it operates within the broader constraints of fragile state structures, limited infrastructure, urban economic precarity, challenging local authorities, and entrenched gender hierarchies (Mama, 1995; Oyěwùmí, 1997), as further explored in the empirical chapters.

Within this relational framework, Toyokani aligns with broader African humanistic philosophies, such as Ubuntu in South Africa and Botho in Botswana, which emphasise reciprocity and shared humanity (Ramose, 2002). Unlike these broader ethical philosophies, Toyokani functions as a pragmatic speech act rather than an abstract ethic, illustrating how women actively negotiate obligations and responsibilities within relational and gendered contexts (Manyonganise, 2015). By situating Toyokani within both structuration theory and nego-feminism, this study demonstrates how local practice enriches abstract theory. Toyokani reveals the generative tension between structure and agency and illustrates how relational ethics – trust, negotiation, and flexible obligations – are operationalised in contextually grounded ways that are negotiated, uneven, and constrained. It thus functions as a bridging concept: not as a theory in itself, but as an empirically informed insight into how women's agency is enacted and sustained within Kinshasa's urban farming sector. Building on this theoretical foundation, the next section outlines the contributions of this study, highlighting how it extends debates on African women's agency through the case of urban agriculture in Kinshasa.

1.4 Contribution of the Study

This thesis offers a meaningful contribution to the study of African women's agency by providing an empirically grounded, contextually specific analysis of how women sustain their roles in Kinshasa's urban agriculture sector. Through narrative inquiry and life histories, it foregrounds the voices of women involved in urban farming, centring their lived experiences and culturally situated strategies. Rather than relying on formal institutional frameworks or land ownership, these women exercise agency through flexible, trust-based practices embedded in local social, economic, and at times spiritual relations.

A key theoretical contribution of this study is the conceptualisation of Toyokani – a vernacular Lingala term meaning "we agreed as such" or "we negotiated on this basis", which emerged directly from field encounters. Toyokani extends structuration theory and nego-feminism by providing a grounded lens for understanding the informal, iterative strategies women use to remain present, productive, and relationally engaged within structurally constrained systems. While structuration theory explains the duality of structure and agency (Giddens, 1984), and nego-feminism emphasises relational negotiation and gender-sensitive praxis (Nnaemeka, 2004; Nkealah, 2016), Toyokani captures the practical enactment of these dynamics through trust, reciprocity, and negotiation.

Although Toyokani is rooted in the specific socio-political and historical context of Kinshasa, its relational logic may resonate in other African or Global South settings where negotiation, rather than confrontation or formal rights, remains central to livelihood strategies (Mbiti, 1996; Akurugu, 2024). In this sense, Toyokani parallels African relational philosophies such as Ubuntu, Botho, or Te Jaa Bonyeni, which emphasise reciprocity, trust, and ethical interdependence (Metz, 2011; Gade, 2012; Akurugu, 2024). It thus offers a locally rooted interpretive lens for understanding how African women navigate agency in informal urban contexts, with potential relevance in comparable settings.

Methodologically, this thesis contributes by adopting a feminist, decolonial, and reflexive approach to narrative inquiry. Rather than imposing externally defined categories, the research evolved through sustained presence, iterative dialogue, and participant-led meaning-making. This relational and situated methodology prioritises how participants themselves understand

and explain their strategies – challenging conventional assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge in feminist and development research. In addition to its theoretical and methodological insights, this thesis broadens the literature on urban agriculture by incorporating a rarely analysed dimension: the role of *ba mamans manœuvres and mamans bilanga*, here collectively referred to as *middlewomen* – vegetable sellers who mediate between farms, markets, and consumers. These women play a vital, yet often overlooked, role in the urban farming value chain. Their work reflects adaptive strategies in response to land scarcity and demonstrates how relational coordination across different roles sustains the sector. By highlighting these actors, the thesis enriches understandings of agency, labour, and reciprocity within urban agriculture.

Finally, this study contributes to African feminist scholarship by addressing the underrepresentation of Central African contexts within broader feminist debates, which have been largely dominated by Anglophone and West African case studies (Nkealah, 2016; Mama, 2019). By focusing on the peri-urban dynamics of Kinshasa, the research offers a richly contextualised account of how African women negotiate structural constraints through culturally embedded practices. In doing so, it challenges both universalist framings of women's agency and the development discourse that often reduces urban agriculture to a survivalist strategy. Taken together, this thesis offers a multidimensional contribution, empirical, theoretical, and methodological, rooted in Central African women's everyday practices and responsive to broader scholarly debates on gender, urban livelihoods, and decolonial feminist theory.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This study examines women's agency in urban agriculture within Ndjili Kilambu, a peri-urban locality in Mont-Ngafula municipality, Kinshasa. The site was selected for its distinct land access dynamics, shaped by rapid urban expansion and overlapping formal and informal governance. The research is geographically bounded to this site and temporally limited to fieldwork conducted between October 2022 and May 2023. The study focuses on female farmers and middlewomen as central actors in the urban agricultural value chain, while other women, such as helpers or input suppliers, are included only when directly relevant. Methodologically, it employs a decolonial feminist ethnographic approach that privileges

participants' voices over statistical breadth. This strategy generated rich, context-specific insights but resulted in a sample skewed towards older women, with younger and intergenerational perspectives underrepresented. Safety concerns and political sensitivities ahead of the December 2023 elections further constrained discussions, particularly around land tenure. Taken together, these boundaries situate the findings within their local and temporal context. They also point to opportunities for future research to explore longer-term processes, intergenerational perspectives, and the roles of other women actors across the urban agriculture sector in Kinshasa**.**

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured across eight chapters that collectively build a coherent argument about women's agency in urban agriculture in Kinshasa. The opening chapters establish the study's conceptual and methodological foundations.

- Chapter Two: Literature Review situates the research within broader academic debates, examining scholarship on urban agriculture, African feminist approaches to agency, development discourses, and structural constraints. It identifies the theoretical and empirical gaps that this study addresses and discusses structuration theory and nego-feminism as guiding frameworks for understanding how women act within and on structural constraints.

- Chapter Three: Methodology provides a reflexive account of the methodological approach, grounded in decolonial feminist ethnography and narrative inquiry. It discusses the research site in Kilambu Village, the shift in research design prompted by field realities, and the iterative process of data collection through life histories, participant observation, and informal dialogue. The chapter reflects on the researcher's dual positionality as both insider and outsider, ethical choices around consent and anonymity, and the interpretive strategy used in data analysis. It shows how the methodology evolved through relational engagement and epistemological unlearning in the field.

- Chapter Four: Contextualising Urban Agriculture in Kinshasa provides the bridge between conceptual framing and empirical analysis. It examines the historical, spatial, and socio-political dynamics of Kinshasa's urban farming landscape, highlighting the structural conditions within which women's practices are embedded.

The three findings chapters form the analytical core of the thesis:

- Chapter Five: The Complexities of Land Ownership and Women's Agency in Peri-urban Kinshasa responds to the second research sub-question. Drawing particularly on structuration theory and grounded in the local analytical lens of Toyokani (understood as both enabling and constraining), the chapter examines the barriers women face in accessing and owning land. Using the lived experiences of three urban female farmers, observations, interactions with other stakeholders, and documentary evidence, it demonstrates that ownership alone does not guarantee agency, as tenure insecurity persists even when women have rights to the land. The chapter lays the foundation for understanding how women navigate these constraints and enact agency, a theme further developed in the following chapters.

- Chapter Six: Agency Within Constraints addresses the third research sub-question. Drawing particularly on nego-feminism and grounded in the local lens of Toyokani (understood as negotiation and compromise), the chapter examines the strategies women employ to navigate structural pressures. Using the lived experiences of two female farmers, two middlewomen (vegetable sellers), other stakeholders, and collective narratives, it shows how agency emerges relationally and adaptively. The chapter highlights negotiation, compromise, and informal arrangements as key modes of action, illustrating how women exercise relational intelligence and socially embedded practices to remain productive, respected, and strategically engaged within structurally constrained contexts.

- Chapter Seven: Reframing Urban Agriculture Beyond Survival responds to the fourth research sub-question and builds on the previous chapters through the detailed life history of a key participant, who simultaneously works as a middlewoman, farmer, and landowner while collaborating with her husband. Drawing also on insights from other

stakeholders, observations, and collective narratives, the chapter demonstrates – through the lenses of structuration theory and nego-feminism, and grounded in the local analytical lens of Toyokani (understood as enabling, constraining, and a tool for negotiation and compromise) – that urban farming is a knowledge-intensive, economically demanding, strategic, and dignified livelihood. In doing so, it challenges dominant survivalist framings of women's work in urban agriculture, illustrating how women navigate constraints to pursue livelihoods that may be intentional, productive, and socially recognised.

Taken together, these chapters trace a progression, from examining the structural constraints on women's land access (Chapter Five), to exploring how agency is relationally and adaptively enacted (Chapter Six), and finally to illustrating how urban agriculture constitutes a dignified, knowledge-intensive livelihood that challenges survivalist framings of women's work in urban farming (Chapter Seven).

- Chapter Eight: Conclusion synthesises the findings across the empirical chapters and reconnects them to the research objectives and theoretical framework. It emphasises the study's conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions – including the articulation of Toyokani as a locally grounded lens of analysis and the recognition of overlooked actors such as middlewomen – and identifies directions for further research.

Building on these insights, the next chapter situates the study within broader academic debates. It examines existing scholarship on urban agriculture, African feminist approaches to agency, development discourses, and structural constraints. This review highlights theoretical and empirical gaps that the present study addresses and sets the stage for understanding how structuration theory and nego-feminism frame the analysis.

2 Literature Review

"Due to misinformation and mind set, Europeans writers mistook African women resistance as to be "cult"—some spiritual form of power that survived on magical powers." (Busingye, 2020, p. 7)

In her critique of colonial misrepresentations of African women's resistance, Busingye (2020, p.7) identifies a persistent pattern in development and colonial literature: the failure to recognise African women's strategies as rational, intentional, and grounded in skill and lived experience. Instead, their agency is often misread through exoticising or external lenses, rendered invisible, mystical, or derivative, or dismissed as a strange anomaly. This framing reflects a deeper epistemological refusal to acknowledge expressions of agency that do not align with universalised, Western-centric norms. Busingye's critique thus calls for a different conceptual starting point, one that centres local meaning-making, historical experience, and context-specific strategies of adaptation and resistance. While Busingye's analysis focuses on broader historical misreadings of African women's resistance, this literature review takes up that concern within the context of African urban agriculture, where similar epistemological blind spots persist. It critically engages with both dominant and alternative frameworks to examine how women's agency is often narrowly interpreted – whether through the lens of land ownership (formal or informal) or as a coping response to poverty – while overlooking the locally grounded strategies that African women use to sustain their participation in urban farming. In response, this chapter brings African feminist thought, structuration theory, and relational ethics into dialogue with urban agriculture literature to build a conceptual foundation for rethinking agency, not as a measurable outcome or legal entitlement, but as an embedded, negotiated, and relational practice. To unpack these issues, the literature review is structured around six thematic areas that move from dominant development paradigms to alternative feminist and theoretical frameworks capable of illuminating African women's situated agency in urban agriculture

1. Situating Feminist Development Paradigms: From Women in Development (WID) to GAD and African Alternatives

2. Dominant Discourses on Land, Ownership, and Agency

3. Gendered Urban Land Use and Agriculture in African Cities

4. African Feminist Critiques of Gender, Land, and Power

5. Theorising Women's Agency: From Liberal Framings to Relational Negotiation

6. Theoretical Framework: Structuration Theory and Nego-feminism

Together, these sections provide the scholarly scaffolding for the empirical chapters that follow, demonstrating how this study builds on, challenges, and extends existing knowledge about African women's agency, land, and urban agriculture, while offering a conceptual lens grounded in local logic and lived practice.

2.1 Feminist Development Paradigms: From Women in Development (WID) to GAD and African Alternatives

Feminist scholarship on land, development, and agriculture has long been shaped by evolving paradigms within the field of GAD. To understand how women's roles and agency have been conceptualised globally, and why these paradigms may fall short in the African context, it is essential to trace the evolution from WID to GAD, and towards emerging African feminist alternatives.

A. WID: Inclusion Without Transformation

The WID approach emerged in the early 1970s following Ester Boserup's (1970) seminal work *Women's Role in Economic Development*, which challenged the gender-neutral assumptions of mainstream development. Boserup drew attention to the systemic erasure of women's labour, particularly in agriculture and informal economies. WID responded by advocating for women's

integration into existing development frameworks, emphasising that this inclusion would enhance both efficiency and equity (Buvinić et al., 1983; Rathgeber, 1990). A key concern within this framework was the "feminisation of poverty", with studies showing that female-headed households increasingly comprised the majority of the world's poor (Buvinić et al., 1983). WID strategies thus prioritised increasing women's productivity through targeted interventions such as access to credit, training programmes, and land. This inclusionary logic significantly influenced international institutions, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which began to more explicitly incorporate women into agricultural and rural development initiatives. A notable example comes from Kenya, where FAO-supported smallholder irrigation schemes were revised to include women in planning and management processes. Although women had long been the primary producers of food, they were previously excluded from water user associations. By adopting participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools and gender-sensitive planning methods, the FAO enabled women to engage in decision-making roles. These efforts not only improved project outcomes, such as productivity and long-term sustainability, but also elevated women's visibility and voice within institutional structures (FAO, 1998). This case illustrates how WID principles were translated into practice through institutional reform, demonstrating the approach's emphasis on integrating women into development planning. However, by the 1980s, such cases also exposed WID's early limitations, as it came under critique for its reformist, technocratic, and depoliticised orientation. Moser, (1993) characterised many WID interventions as welfare-oriented and top-down, arguing that they aimed to insert women into male-dominated development structures without challenging the broader systems of power that sustained inequality.

B. Women and Development (WAD): A Structural Critique

In response to the limitations of WID, the WAD approach emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, drawing on Marxist and socialist feminist traditions. Scholars associated with the DAWN, collective (1987) and others rejected WID's reformist logic, arguing that women's subordination could not be resolved through inclusion alone but must be understood as a consequence of global capitalism, colonial legacies, and patriarchal development structures. Sen and Grown, (1987, pp. 23–24), for instance, emphasised that poor women constitute the majority of the world's impoverished and are central to both reproductive labour and the informal economy. They argued that meaningful poverty reduction must prioritise women's

roles in both economic production and social reproduction. Unlike WID's focus on integrating women into existing systems, WAD advocated for a fundamental transformation of development itself, linking women's struggles to broader critiques of imperialism, debt, and economic exploitation.

While WAD marked a critical departure from liberal economic assumptions, it was not without limitations. Critics such as Rathgeber, (1990) noted that WAD tended to treat women as a homogeneous group, failing to interrogate how gender is socially constructed and embedded in relational power structures. Its macro-structural focus often overlooked the micro-level dynamics of everyday gender relations, such as those within households or communities, which would later become central to the GAD approach. Moreover, by prioritising structural critique over women's lived experiences and agency, WAD was sometimes perceived as overly theoretical or top-down in orientation. Marchand and Parpart, (1995) further argue that WAD's abstract framing left little room for the voices of local women or for recognising their context-specific strategies. Finally, in implementation, WAD interventions occasionally resembled WID in practice, as development institutions struggled to shift away from pre-existing paradigms. These critiques set the stage for GAD's emergence, which sought to centre gender relations, intersectionality, and everyday practice within development theory and programming.

C. From GAD to African Feminist Alternatives

The GAD approach emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a corrective to the limitations of both WID and WAD. Rather than focusing solely on women as an isolated group, GAD emphasised the gendered power relations that shape both women's and men's access to resources, labour, and decision-making (Rathgeber, 1990; Sen & Grown, 1987). The shift from "women" to "gender" reflected a broader analytical concern with the social structures and institutional arrangements that perpetuate inequality. GAD called not just for inclusion but for transformation, highlighting the need to analyse how systems of power, including patriarchy, capitalism, and state institutions, interact to structure development outcomes. Naila Kabeer, (1994) was instrumental in shaping this shift, arguing that a meaningful understanding of

women's agency requires attention to both material conditions and the social institutions that mediate access, control, and choice. Her emphasis on intra-household dynamics, social reproduction, and intersectionality helped deepen GAD's theoretical framework.

Among GAD's most influential interventions has been the push for gender-sensitive land reform to secure women's rights to own and inherit land. Rejecting WID's emphasis on access alone, GAD scholars argue that without ownership, women remain structurally dependent and vulnerable to dispossession (Kabeer, 1994; Agarwal, 1994). From this perspective, land ownership is not merely a material asset, but a means of shifting power relations within households, communities, and economies. Feminist scholars such as Bina Agarwal (1994; 2005) have played a key role in advancing this position. Agarwal contends that women's bargaining power, both domestically and societally, is strongly linked to their control over productive assets, particularly land. As she writes, "the single most important factor affecting women's situation is the gender gap in command over property" (1994, p.1455). Her advocacy contributed to landmark legal reforms, such as India's Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005, which granted daughters equal inheritance rights.

Inspired by the GAD emphasis on ownership and tenure security, a wave of land reforms across sub-Saharan Africa has sought to strengthen women's land rights through legal and institutional measures. Ethiopia's Land Certification Program and Rwanda's Land Tenure Regularization Program (LTRP), for instance, introduced joint titling and formal documentation of women's rights. Similar initiatives in Uganda and Tanzania incorporated legal reforms and policy guidelines aimed at increasing women's access to individually or jointly titled land (Ikdahl et al., 2005; Deininger et al., 2011; The World Bank, 2012; DFID, 2014; Ali et al., 2014). Most land reform initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa have been shaped by donor-led agendas that reflect Western liberal ideals – linking women's agency to autonomy, individual land ownership, and legal entitlements. In addition, influenced by GAD principles, many land reform initiatives implemented within donor-driven development frameworks prioritised economic outcomes. The World Bank's document Land Policies for Growth and Poverty Reduction (2003) (In Deininger, 2003), for example, recognises the importance of land as a key asset for the poor and calls for gender-sensitive tenure reform. Yet, its framing remains rooted in a market-based logic of poverty alleviation, where land is primarily valued as an economic input. As a result, the justification for securing women's land rights has frequently

been tied to claims of improved agricultural productivity. This merged empowerment discourse with an instrumentalist rationale: land ownership would not only promote gender equality but also boost yields, household incomes, and national development indicators. Such arguments were bolstered by widely cited statistics, for instance, that closing the gender gap with land ownership could increase yields by up to 30% (FAO, 2011; World Bank, 2012). while politically persuasive, efforts to promote growth through gender equity in land ownership have proven complex and limited, as there no universal solution across African cities (Phiri and Raimi, 2025). Framing empowerment in economic terms risked reducing women's agency to its financial outcomes, thereby sidelining broader social, relational, and structural dimensions (Jackson, 2003; Razavi, 2009).

African feminist scholars have engaged deeply with GAD, drawing on and reshaping its frameworks to reflect the lived realities of African women. Writers such as Tsikata (2009), Whitehead and Tsikata, (2003), Doss and Meinzen-Dick, (2020,) Agarwal, (2003) have shown that agency through land ownership must be analysed within broader socio-political contexts – such as class divisions, customary tenure systems, communal landholding practices, and the wider political economy of resource governance, where land is often treated as a shared resource governed by reciprocal obligations. Even institutions like the World Bank have acknowledged the limits of past approaches. In its 2003 report, the bank recognised the failure of imposing individual freehold models in African contexts and expressed support for more flexible tenure frameworks, including group rights and socially recognised land claims (World Bank, 2003). African feminist engagements have thus broadened GAD's original scope, moving it beyond universalist prescriptions towards more contextually grounded analyses of land, power, and gender.

Yet, even within these re-readings, the nexus of gender, land and agriculture continued to be framed overwhelmingly through rural contexts. This is largely because agriculture, customary tenure, and rural poverty have been treated as the most obvious entry points for gendered land analysis. Ikdahl et al. (2005, p.9) note, "Land is a vital resource for rural livelihoods. Establishing and clarifying land rights through formalisation has become a key issue in development policies that aim to promote more productive uses of land". Where urban women do appear, it is often in discussions of housing, slum upgrading, or urban planning (Scheufler and Santamarina, 2025), rather than in debates on land tenure and agricultural livelihoods. This

rural bias, however, obscures the complex dynamics of peri-urban and urban spaces – where agricultural activity coexists with speculative land markets, zoning regulations, and rapid urban expansion have impacted women. In these contexts, women's land ownership is shaped not only by patriarchal inheritance norms and customary practices, but also by urban capital flows fragmented legal pluralism (Cousins, 2007; Myers, 2011; Benjaminsen and Bryceson, 2012), the "title deed as empowerment" narrative becomes less straightforward: women may cultivate land through informal or socially negotiated arrangements without ownership, or conversely, may hold legal titles but face family or market pressures to sell or repurpose their land. These layered pressures demand a rethinking of agriculture, land and women's agency beyond rural-centric and land ownership frameworks. Such perspectives challenge not only instrumentalist views of agency but also the presumed universality of "woman" as a development category. Crenshaw's, (1991) question, "When feminism speaks for women, and anti-racism speaks for Black people, where do Black women fit in?", this research similarly asks: When development frameworks speak of "women's agency", which women are being imagined, and which are rendered invisible?

In the Congolese context, this question is particularly salient, since "There is no typical Congolese woman" (Muswamba, 2006, p.26). Material conditions, ethnic diversity, and social differences such as age, class, and status shape highly differentiated experiences of womanhood. In Kinshasa, distinctions of ethnicity, class, and generation intersect in ways that destabilise fixed notions of gender identity and women's agency (Makongote et al., 2024). These interlocking conditions are especially evident in urban and peri-urban agriculture, where land scarcity, informal tenure arrangements, and rapid urban expansion directly impact women's livelihoods, negotiations, and production. To address this gap, the thesis advances African feminist land critiques by focusing on women's active engagement with land in urban agriculture, an area where their roles are vital, but their agency has yet to be fully theorised. The following section reviews key trends in urban agriculture across African cities, with particular attention to its gendered dynamics, spatial constraints, and political invisibility.

2.2 Gendered Urban Land Use and Agriculture in African Cities

A. Defining Urban Agriculture in Context

Defining urban agriculture requires attention to multiple intersecting elements. It is not sufficient to distinguish it from rural agriculture based on location alone; what sets it apart is its embeddedness in and interaction with the urban system – particularly significant in peri-urban zones (Crush et al., 2011; Vermeiren et al., 2013). Smit et al., (2001, p.1) note that a richer definition of urban agriculture emphasises elements that characterise it as it is practised today while recognising its great variety. Figure 2.1 summarises the various elements required to characterise urban agriculture.

Figure 2.1 Urban agriculture conceptual elements forming the definition of urban agriculture

(Source: Adapted from Mougeot, 2000)

For this study, urban agriculture refers specifically to the cultivation of vegetables on vacant plots and open spaces within the city and its peripheries, whether for household consumption or urban market sale. This definition is intentional, as it reflects the realities of low-income urban farmers, who are the focus of this research (Schmidt, 2012) . This form of cultivation aligns with broader trends across African cities, where urban farming typically unfolds in

fragmented, marginal, and often insecure spaces, shaped by everyday negotiation and adaptation (Mougeot, 2000; Hovorka et al., 2009; Crush et al., 2011; Schmidt, 2012; Vermeiren et al., 2013). It is especially relevant to ordinary[1] women, who tend to access such plots due to a combination of factors, including limited financial capital, informal tenure systems, and the appropriation of agriculturally viable land by elites and state actors. This framing highlights how urban agriculture is deeply embedded in spatial, political, and economic contestations across African cities, especially for low-income women navigating informal tenure and resource constraints.

B. Urban Agriculture in African Cities: A Gendered History of Practice and Participation

Urban agriculture has a long history in many African cities, as urban centres often emerged around existing farmlands, and rural migrants brought farming practices with them to sustain urban households (Drechsel and Dongus, 2010; WinklerPrins, 2017; Dobele and Zvirbule, 2020). Its significance became especially visible in the 1980s during the structural adjustment period, when declining state support for food provision pushed urban residents to produce their own food (Maxwell, 1995; Prain and Lee-Smith, 2010). Mlozi (1996, p.47) described urban agriculture as "a micro-level or people's initiative to deal with the economic crisis while governments struggle to implement structural adjustment programmes" (cited in Slater, 2001, p.637). Since then, studies have consistently identified urban agriculture as an important informal sector and livelihood strategy, particularly during economic or social crises (Ayambire et al., 2019). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Amankwah and Gourlay, (2021)found that urban households in Malawi, Nigeria, and Uganda were more likely than rural ones to turn to agriculture, echoing its role during the 2008 global financial crisis. Such findings

[1] "Ordinary women" refers to those in the informal sector (here, urban agriculture), acknowledging that they are not homogenous and differ substantially, as discussed further below

highlight the resilience-building potential of urban agriculture for low-income households during periods of food insecurity and unemployment.

Women constitute the majority of urban farmers in several African cities – accounting for 90% in Nairobi and Bissau, and 70% in Brazzaville and Bujumbura (FAO, 2012). Bryceson, (2019) notes that women also outnumber men in Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, and Rwanda, while in parts of West Africa, men's dominance in open-space farming contrasts with women's predominance in home gardening. Women's participation is shaped by multiple structural factors, including lower educational attainment, unequal access to formal employment, and gendered household responsibilities, which often push them towards informal livelihood activities such as urban farming (Hovorka et al., 2009; Chant, 2013). Urban agriculture, while largely informal and not always legally supported, is often regulated through hybrid systems involving state authorities, traditional leaders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Nchanji, 2017). Women's engagement is also culturally framed. In Nairobi, Dennery, 1996, p.196) found that "women view food production as part of their responsibility to feed the family". Thus, for many urban women, urban agriculture not only supplements household food security but also generates income for non-food needs, such as medical expenses and school fees.

C. Beyond Survival: Reframing the Significance of Urban Agriculture for Women

Urban agriculture is often framed as a coping mechanism for food insecurity or economic crisis, particularly for women. However, this framing flattens the complexity of women's engagement and obscures the broader social, cultural, and political dimensions of their participation. Such narrow interpretations overlook African women's diverse motivations and practices, something African feminist scholars have long critiqued. As Bayu (2019) and Busingye (2020) argue, gender is neither the sole nor necessarily the primary locus of oppression in African contexts. African feminism, therefore, broadens the scope of struggle beyond gender to encompass intersecting injustices based on race, class, culture, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. While economic motivations remain important, especially in periods of heightened vulnerability, many women in urban farming do not farm only to meet immediate household needs: they also cultivate to build financial autonomy, claim social recognition, and assert

agency. In Benin, for instance, Houessou et al., (2019) found that women in urban farming developed financial independence that reshaped gender dynamics within households and communities. Urban agriculture can therefore serve as a site of intentional engagement, enabling women to negotiate visibility and power in both domestic and public spheres.

The significance of urban agriculture also extends beyond its material or financial outcomes. In Zimbabwe, Gabel, (2005) observed that women placed deep value on their maize crops, not merely for their market value, but also for the pride and dignity they brought through being shared with family, neighbours, and tenants. Similarly, Dennery, (1996) noted that women in Nairobi frequently gave part of their harvests to relatives, friends, and neighbours, underscoring the role of urban agriculture in fostering social bonds and fulfilling moral and communal obligations. These findings highlight how urban agriculture can help women cultivate social capital, strengthening networks of reciprocity within neighbourhoods, faith groups, and informal savings circles (Houessou et al., 2019). Women's participation in urban agriculture is also deeply rooted in historical and cultural practice. Saidi, (2020) notes that in many parts of Africa, women have long played foundational roles in agricultural innovation and the transmission of farming knowledge – even when men held more visible positions of authority. Urban farming thus resonates with a deeper history of gendered labour and identity. As Nnaemeka (2004) cautions, dismissing culture as either neutral or inherently oppressive erases the complexities of women's choices. Likewise, Campbell, (2009) warns that women's conformity to social norms should not automatically be seen as a lack of agency. In Houessou et al.'s (2019) study, 78% of women in Cotonou and Porto-Novo stated they would continue urban farming even if formal employment opportunities were available, suggesting a sense of purpose that exceeds economic necessity. While urban farming is often aligned with women's caregiving roles, what women themselves articulate reveals a more layered experience. As Halliday et al., (2020) argue, the meanings women attach to urban agriculture go beyond externally imposed assumptions. Nnaemeka (2004, p.375) aptly reminds us that "people in need are complex beings like most people. To strip them of their complexity is to deny them their humanity". Reducing urban farming to a mere survival strategy erases the intentionality, cultural logic, and relational agency that women in urban farming enact daily, as this study further demonstrates through the cases of women in Kinshasa. Recognising these layered meanings does not imply that women's engagement in urban farming is without constraint.

Despite its significance in their lives, ordinary women engaged in urban farming face persistent barriers to land access.

D. Urban Female Farmers' Land Access Dynamics

A common assumption in policy and academic discourse is that urban women enjoy greater access to land than their rural counterparts (Vélez-Guerra, 2004).This belief is grounded in the idea that urban land is primarily accessed through market mechanisms governed by statutory law, which is presumed to weaken the influence of restrictive customary norms (Vélez-Guerra, 2004; Akinola, 2018). However, this perception oversimplifies the complex and often exclusionary realities of land governance in African cities. In practice, access to urban land is shaped by a fluid and often unpredictable interplay between statutory and customary frameworks, frequently overlaid with informal norms, elite interests, and embedded social hierarchies (Kiduanga and Shomari, 2017). Legal exclusion is not only a matter of what is codified in law, but also of how social power is enacted in everyday interactions. As Tamale (2020, p.130) argues, "written law is a secondary rather than primary locus of social regulation, particularly for women". Statutory systems may formally guarantee women's land rights, yet in practice access is mediated through bureaucratic procedures, political patronage, and social positioning that often marginalise women – especially those lacking strong kinship networks, political influence, or financial means (Smits, 2018).

Moreover, statutory law itself is not inherently gender-neutral. In many African cities, formal land acquisition processes – such as titling, zoning compliance, or registration – require conditions that structurally disadvantage low-income women, including proof of income, spousal consent, and institutional access (Sweetman, 1998; Yamba Yamba, 2014). These exclusions are further exacerbated by zoning laws and speculative land markets that prioritise commercial and residential development over small-scale agriculture. As a result, access to land remains highly stratified – not only between men and women, but also among women themselves, shaped by intersecting factors such as class, marital status, migration history, and

socio-political ties (Kiguli and Kiguli ., 2004; Kalabamu, 2019). This layered complexity is especially visible in the experiences of urban female farmers, who must continually define and redefine their constraints while seeking alternative pathways to sustain their place in the city. Their land access practices often fall outside codified legal channels, drawing instead on evolving local norms and context-specific arrangements. The dominant binary of "formal" versus "informal" tenure fails to capture these realities. Instead, women's access is frequently negotiated through hybrid regimes that reflect broader socio-political dynamics – such as overlapping claims, verbal agreements, tolerated use, and fluid relationships with landholders. These arrangements may lack legal recognition but carry strong local legitimacy (Suchá et al., 2020)

The following subsection explores how statutory and customary frameworks – alongside zoning regulations and urban planning logics – interact to shape, and often constrain, women's access to land in African cities. It examines how these overlapping systems of exclusion manifest in urban agricultural zones, and how women respond by cultivating marginal spaces, reappropriating disused land, or forging relational agreements that defy rigid legal categories.

D.1 Statutory Law, Zoning, and Urban Planning Constraints on Women's Land Access

Despite the existence of urban farming policies and statutory land frameworks, low-income urban women often remain excluded from secure land access due to planning biases, bureaucratic hurdles, and gendered norms (Sweetman, 1998). Many African local governments do not recognise urban agriculture as a legitimate claim to urban space, often viewing it as a backward, peasant activity that contradicts visions of modern urban development (Halloran and Magid, 2013). As a result, agricultural land is rarely prioritised or protected in urban planning frameworks (Schmidt, 2012). Although some governments have adopted zoning as a means to regulate or even legitimise urban agriculture (Akinola, 2018), zoning practices have paradoxically contributed to the marginalisation of low-income women. In Ghana, for example, zoning regulations have enabled the conversion of farmlands into residential plots, leaving no provision for urban agriculture (Akaateba et al., 2021). Similarly, in Cameroon, over half the producers surveyed in one study were forced to relocate (FAO, 2011), and in Bissau, many female gardeners were pushed to establish new plots more than 3.5 km from the city centre (FAO, 2011).

These relocations are not just inconvenient – they often pose serious risks. Zoning laws frequently require farmers to travel long distances to access land, but women's mobility is limited by social expectations, financial constraints, and urban insecurity, including the risk of robbery and sexual violence (Halliday et al., 2020). A study of grandmother-headed households (GHHs) in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, reveals the severity of these constraints. One participant recounted being raped in Ngozi mine in 2010, with no assistance available due to the area's isolation. She subsequently abandoned that land and found a smaller plot closer to home (Hungwe, 2022, p.9). Such cases highlight how zoning and urban planning can significantly restrict women's ability to engage in agriculture, particularly when safety, time, and transport are at stake (Vélez-Guerra, 2004). Consequently, many urban farmers cultivate land in unpermitted or overlooked areas such as parks, nature reserves, and cemeteries – often without formal approval (Kiduanga & Shomari, 2017). Public spaces that are unsuitable for construction, such as those under power lines or in waterlogged zones, are commonly used for farming because they are less likely to be claimed by state authorities, private developers, or traditional landowners (Bisaga et al., 2019). Long-term informal use of such marginal spaces is not uncommon. In West and East Africa, research shows that open areas deemed unfit for housing have been continuously cultivated for 20 to 50 years (Dongus, 2001; Obuobie et al., 2006; Drechsel et al., 2006). Interviews conducted by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) in Ghana found that 80% of urban open-space farmers cultivated the same plot year-round, and 70% had done so for more than 10–20 years (Drechsel and Dongus, 2010,p.73).

Second, policies governing land access for urban agriculture often overlook intersectional factors such as class, income, and education that cut across gender (Malta et al., 2019). In many African cities, women tend to be less educated than men on average, which limits their ability to access formal channels for acquiring government plots or legal urban agricultural permits (Ngome and Foeken, 2012). For instance, Shannon et al., (2021) found in Mozambique that although most female farmers surveyed had cultivated their plots for over 10 years, qualifying them as legal rights holders under national land law, none held formal land titles. Legalisation does not necessarily guarantee inclusion. In Kampala, for example, the 2006 Urban Agriculture Ordinance requires farmers to obtain formal permits from the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). Yet many female farmers are either unaware of these requirements or unable to meet them, leaving them vulnerable to eviction (Vidal Merino et al., 2021). A similar contradiction

exists in Ghana. Although the Land Use and Spatial Planning Act (Act 925) formally permits urban farming, the city of Tamale lacks designated agricultural zones, and metropolitan authorities do not issue permits in practice, rendering legal access effectively unattainable (Vidal Merino et al., 2021). These policy gaps are compounded by dominant urban planning logics in which land is primarily viewed as a commodity for development rather than a resource for food production, further deprioritising women's agricultural claims.

Third, access to urban farmland through purchase or leasing mechanisms disproportionately disadvantages low-income women. While policies may technically permit women to acquire land, in practice such access is often limited to those with sufficient financial resources and social capital (Akinola, 2018). Research has shown that affluent urban residents – sometimes referred to as "privileged urban farmers" – also engage in agriculture to supplement their incomes and often possess the networks and political leverage necessary to lobby successfully for land (Mougeot, 2000; Nchanji, 2017). This results in stratified access, where only certain categories of women, particularly those with class privilege, can benefit from existing land frameworks. For women living in poverty, even when local governments offer seemingly inclusive land access, the outcome is often exclusionary. In Senegal, for instance, although agricultural land is theoretically granted free of charge, the strong demand for peri-urban plots has resulted in widespread informal transfers, typically favouring wealthier beneficiaries (FAO, 2012). The FAO notes the emergence of "urban farmer entrepreneurs" with privileged entry points to both land and credit, further widening the gap between policy intentions and lived realities.

These contradictions between policy and practice disproportionately impact low-income urban women, who often lack the legal literacy, financial means, or bureaucratic familiarity to navigate complex administrative systems. As Vélez-Guerra (2004) highlights, so-called gender-neutral legislation often deepens women's vulnerability, exposing them to evictions or categorisation as illegal squatters. Such laws rest on assumptions of equal access to information, time, and institutional support – assumptions that rarely hold true for socio-economically marginalised women. In this way, gender neutrality obscures structural inequalities, reinforcing exclusion under the guise of formal equality.

Faced with these constraints, many urban female farmers turn to informal arrangements. These include verbal agreements or temporary borrowing of land from friends, neighbours, or extended kin who possess underutilised plots (Kiduanga & Shomari, 2017). As (Nuhu, 2019) observes, informal channels are often preferred precisely because they bypass costly and opaque bureaucratic hurdles. These arrangements may also serve the interests of landowners, particularly in peri-urban areas, where allowing agricultural use can deter squatting and preserve speculative investment value (Vélez-Guerra, 2004). In Ilala, Tanzania, for example, farmers have cultivated land beside the Tazara Railway since the 1980s through a verbal agreement with the railway company, a symbiotic relationship that ensures security while enabling agricultural use (Schmidt, 2012). Sharecropping agreements are also common, with tenants providing a portion of their harvest, typically one third to one half, in exchange for land access (Vélez-Guerra, 2004).

Together, these examples underscore how planning policies, market mechanisms, and bureaucratic logics systematically marginalise low-income urban women from formal land access. In response, many rely on negotiated, informal practices that exist outside the bounds of legality but remain deeply rooted in local legitimacy. The following section explores how customary norms and practices further shape women's land access in urban settings, both enabling and constraining their ability to secure space for agricultural livelihoods.

D.2 Urban Female Farmers' Land Access under Customary Tenure

Urban growth often involves the reclassification of rural spaces into peri-urban or urban fringe zones – areas that are neither fully rural nor fully urban (Lerner and Eakin, 2011; United Nations, 2019). Despite this shift, peri-urban areas tend to fall outside the direct concern of local governments (Simon, 2008). Instead, land in these transitional zones is often governed through customary tenure systems managed by traditional authorities, such as land chiefs (Akinola, 2018). As a result, access to land in many peri-urban areas is formally regulated through customary norms and practices. Customary land access operates through a set of unwritten rules rooted in tradition but often flexible, negotiable, and location-specific (Cotula et al., 2004; Babalola et al., 2019). However, these rules are typically embedded in patriarchal logics that privilege male control over land. As Chigbu, (2019, p.132) notes, in many African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon, and Uganda, women often access land only

under specific conditions, such as returning to their ancestral home after a failed marriage or inheriting land through a male child after the death of a husband. These patterns underscore women's structural dependence on male authority, rendering their land access both precarious and conditional.

Even in cases where women negotiate access to land, such as through sharecropping, customary norms often reinforce gendered biases. For instance, some land chiefs prefer to allocate land to men based on the assumption that "men are more likely to produce higher yields than women" (Hovorka et al., 2009). These assumptions not only limit women's participation in urban agriculture but also reinforce structural inequalities, making it more difficult for women to secure and sustain access to land on equitable terms. Yet customary tenure systems are not static. In peri-urban zones, increasing land commodification has reshaped traditional practices. Whereas land chiefs once allocated land based on social belonging or exchanged it for symbolic gifts, they now often demand cash payment due to rising land values and urban expansion pressures (Vidal Merino et al., 2021). Land that was once accessible through community membership or relational negotiation is now sold off for residential or speculative use (Vélez-Guerra, 2004; Ngome and Foeken, 2012; Güneralp et al., 2020). As a result, women who lack the financial resources to purchase or rent land from land chiefs, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, are increasingly excluded from farmland they once accessed through social networks or customary affiliation (Akinola, 2018; Malta et al., 2019).

Moreover, when peri-urban farmlands are expropriated or converted for residential use, women are frequently excluded from compensation due to entrenched gendered power dynamics within evolving customary systems (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2020). Women's land rights are often secondary – tied to male relatives rather than based on direct entitlements – making them more vulnerable during land redistribution or monetisation by customary authorities (Chigbu, 2019; Andersson Djurfeldt, 2020). In Kenya, for example, the formal subdivision and titling of formerly communal trust lands have routinely designated male household heads as sole titleholders, displacing women who had long cultivated these plots under customary tenure. These shifts illustrate how the transition from community-based, flexible access to commodified, individualised ownership often excludes women, even when reforms aim for gender equality, and reinforces patriarchal land norms under the veneer of modernisation (Mwangi, 2024). As a result, women in urban farming face a double burden: their ability to

maintain and sustain agricultural livelihoods is constrained not only by formal exclusion but also by the erosion of flexible customary land access arrangements.

In response, many women pursue land access through social relationships and negotiated forms of tenure that circumvent both statutory and customary limitations. For instance, in the peri-urban areas of Kampala, low-income women have gained access to land through a Buganda-specific tenure arrangement known as bibanja – plots located on mailo land – allowing them to operate as customary tenants on privately held land (Vélez-Guerra, 2004). These arrangements, while informal and often lacking legal protection, provide a more viable pathway for many women than navigating rigid formal processes or facing the financial demands of land purchase under commodified customary systems. While often embedded in patriarchal norms, customary systems have shown adaptability, allowing women in some contexts to negotiate access through relational means – even as broader shifts towards commodification have narrowed these possibilities. In sum, the evolution of customary tenure in peri-urban areas, from socially negotiated access to market-driven transactions, has disproportionately limited urban women's access to agricultural land. Yet rather than exiting farming altogether, many women continue to assert their presence through strategic, relational forms of land access that challenge the binary between formal and informal and demonstrate the continued relevance of negotiated agency in navigating urban land constraints.

E. Beyond Ownership: Navigating Land Tenure Security Through Trust and Negotiation

Access to land may be essential for urban female farmers; however, land tenure security is equally essential. Tenure security is the assurance that the land one owns or holds for an agreed-on period or purpose is distinct and safeguarded in the event of specific threats (Garvelink, 2012). Suchá et al. (2020) note that perceived land tenure security is often measured by the farmer's own perception of tenure security rather than being determined by the fact of acquiring land formally or informally, since neither form of acquisition automatically makes the land secure. Instead, what matters is the extent to which farmers believe their rights will be respected, a belief shaped by social relations, institutional trust, and contextual stability. Figure 2.2 visualises the fluid and negotiated pathways through which urban farmers, particularly women, access land and secure their tenure. It reveals that landholding in urban agriculture

cannot be reduced to formal legal status. Instead, access and security exist along a spectrum, shaped by social trust, customary practices, informal agreements, and lived relationships. This framework challenges dominant assumptions that tenure security is synonymous with formality, and instead foregrounds the situational, relational, and often transient nature of land use in African cities' urban farming spaces.

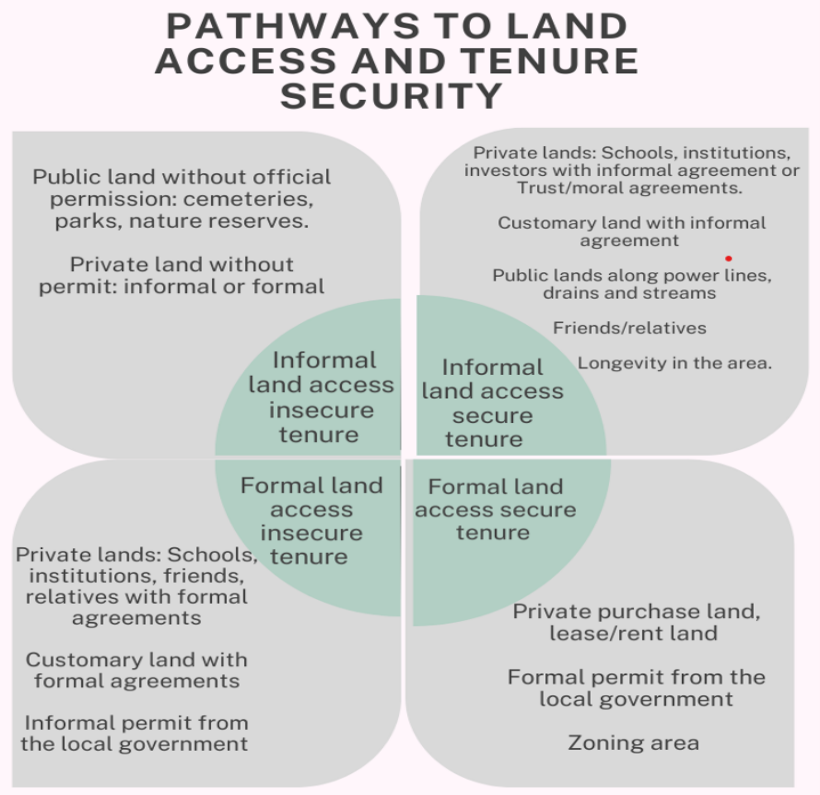

Figure 2.2 Pathways to land access and tenure security

(Source: P. Tshomba, 2022)

In many African urban contexts, negotiation and trust emerge as central mechanisms through which women navigate land access and assert tenure security. As Vélez-Guerra (2004) emphasises, landholding often depends less on legal entitlement and more on interpersonal relationships, tacit agreements, and social expectations. These strategies reflect what Nnaemeka (2004) describes as the negotiated ethics of African feminism, where women craft adaptive and pragmatic responses to patriarchal structures.

Crucially, the ability to negotiate land access and sustain security is shaped by class, age, ethnicity, and social standing (Sweetman, 1998). Negotiation is not merely a skill: it is a

practice deeply embedded in local hierarchies and culturally specific power relations. As Tamale (2020) notes, these negotiations often unfold through a relational language, shaped by social obligations, indirect communication, and cultural expectation. For many low-income women, particularly those excluded from formal frameworks, informal access can offer more stability than navigating rigid bureaucratic procedures. In such cases, verbal agreements, long-term presence, and trust serve as substitutes for formal land titles. In this context, tenure security does not derive from legal status alone, but from embeddedness in social networks, shared responsibilities, and negotiated trust. This challenges dominant framings that link security to individual ownership and instead affirms the centrality of relational agency in sustaining urban agriculture. In this view, tenure security is not guaranteed by documents, but by belonging – underscoring the fact that African urban farming is upheld not only by law but also through trust, negotiation, and culturally grounded strategies of continuity.

2.3 Transnational Feminist Dynamics: Alignments and Divergences

bell hooks (2001) defines feminism as a movement to end sexism and women's oppression, emphasising that feminism is open-ended and non-homogeneous. Yet dominant strands of feminist thought, liberal, radical, and Marxist, have historically emerged from Western contexts and prioritised Western women's experiences and epistemologies (Maynard, 1995; Manning, 2021). These frameworks have been widely critiqued by Third World feminists for failing to reflect the material realities, cultural values, and strategic priorities of women in the Global South (Bayu, 2019). Rather than offering a plural vision of liberation, Western feminism has often universalised white, middle-class values, marginalising alternative expressions of agency: what Mohanty, (2003) critiques as a form of "discursive colonisation" refers to the construction of Western feminist values as the normative yardstick, against which the experiences and strategies of Third World women are rendered deficient or derivative. Tamale (2020, p.36) similarly argues that Western epistemologies often "negate, undermine, and delegitimise indigenous knowledge systems". Rafia Zakaria, (2021), in *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*, expands this critique by highlighting how traits such as rebellion and individual risk-taking are privileged as inherently feminist. In contrast, values like endurance, caution, and communal responsibility, central to many women's lived realities in the Global South, are frequently dismissed or devalued within dominant feminist paradigms.

These critiques become particularly salient when examining how women navigate access to land, labour, and authority across various Global South contexts. For example, in her study of cassava production in south-eastern Ghana, Torvikey, (2021) documents how women reclaimed land by appealing to their roles as mothers and social reproducers. These claims, grounded in culturally resonant notions of care and obligation, were effective in securing land access. However, Torvikey also notes that such strategies operated within existing patriarchal norms rather than challenging them, raising questions about the long-term implications. This concern echoes Tiernan and O'Connor's (2020) concept of "unsatisfactory gains": achievements that may provide short-term access or visibility but leave structural inequalities intact. Similarly, Eric-Udorie, (2018) warns that strategies of accommodation may ultimately reinforce, rather than transform, existing gendered power relations. Mathur, (2015) echoes this concern, arguing that without clear mechanisms for structural change, such approaches risk entrenching oppression rather than offering liberation. These critiques raise a deeper tension in feminist theorising: how to balance the pursuit of transformation with the lived realities of women whose strategies are shaped by precarious conditions and structural vulnerabilities.

Ghanaian scholar Bawa (2016) cautions against feminist models that seek to dismantle patriarchy without offering viable material alternatives, noting that such efforts may leave women more exposed than empowered. Similarly, Madhok, (2013) emphasises the importance of situating agency within women's socio-political contexts. Her concept of vernacular rights cultures challenges universalist assumptions and insists that transformative change must emerge from women's lived negotiations with power. In contexts where neither the state nor the community offers meaningful protection, failing to consider locally embedded socio-political dynamics can result in harm, both for the women involved and for the initiatives designed to support them. These critiques reflect a shared concern: the danger of pursuing structural transformation without grounding it in the specific conditions of women's lives.

Yet while such critiques of Western feminist paradigms resonate across the Global South, they do not reflect a unified response. Feminists in Africa, Latin America, and Asia may share discomfort with externally imposed categories, but their visions, strategies, and political priorities often diverge (Byrne, 2020) . Similarly, within African feminism itself, there is no single conceptualisation of agency or consensus on how best to theorise feminism. This diversity raises a broader question: what does agency mean in African contexts, where histories

of colonisation, socio-economic inequality, and plural legal systems intersect with everyday gendered realities? While a full survey of African feminist thought is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to avoid portraying Africa as intellectually or culturally monolithic. The following section therefore highlights a selection of African feminist perspectives that grapple, sometimes in tension, with the challenge of theorising agency in ways that are attentive to locally situated meanings, strategies, and constraints. These insights provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how African women, such as those in Kinshasa's urban farming sector, navigate power, precarity, and possibility.

2.4 Rethinking Agency Through African Feminist Thought

While African feminism shares with other feminist traditions a commitment to improving women's lives, it diverges significantly in how it conceptualises and enacts agency. As in dominant feminist discourses, some African feminists envision the ideal feminist subject as one who asserts autonomy by radically resisting social constraints. Others have critiqued this framing as overly narrow, arguing that it fails to reflect the lived realities of many African women, realities in which agency may be enacted through kinship ties, negotiation, or strategic accommodation rather than overt opposition. These differing perspectives have generated ongoing debates within African feminist thought. Some scholars and activists identify explicitly as feminists and work within formal feminist frameworks. Others reject the label, viewing it as overly Western or disconnected from local social and political contexts, even as their practices advance feminist aims (Frenkel, 2008). As a result, African feminism is not a unified movement but a constellation of strands, each offering distinct frameworks for understanding agency, shaped by their own epistemologies and ontologies. The first strand includes African feminists who explicitly embrace the label "feminist" and adopt radical stances that resist both patriarchy and efforts to frame feminism as Western or culturally inappropriate. South African scholar Desiree Lewis argues that the avoidance of the term "feminism" often serves to placate patriarchal nationalism, which dismisses women's radical demands as Western imports (Osha, 2006, p. 84). Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, (2014) contends that rejecting feminism in favour of broader terms like "human rights" denies the specificity of gender oppression and erases women's particular struggles. For some, embracing feminism also means confronting male-centred ideologies directly. Werewere Liking, one of the more radical African feminist theorists, coined the term "misovere" to

describe a woman who has never met an admirable man (Frenkel, 2008, p.2), challenging romanticised notions of male–female complementarity. Patricia McFadden likewise advocates for a confrontational and autonomous feminist politics. She critiques alternative African feminist frameworks that, in her view, seek male approval or compromise (McFadden, 2004; Alkali et al., 2013,p. 240).

These feminists conceptualise agency primarily as resistance, an unambiguous stance against gender oppression that refuses accommodation or cultural relativism. They underscore the importance of naming and confronting patriarchal systems directly, reminding us that African women's agency can, and sometimes does, take the form of open defiance. However, in the context of Kinshasa, such overt confrontation is less commonly observed. As scholars such as Maximy, (1984) and De Boeck, (2011) note, urban life in Kinshasa is often characterised by strategic manoeuvring within a city governed by absence, where people "forge alliances, make deals, and hustle". This tendency remains particularly evident among urban women navigating the constraints of land and livelihood in the farming sector. This leads to a second strand of African feminist thought: those who pursue feminist goals, of gender equality, while eschewing the label "feminist" (Frenkel, 2008). These perspectives often conceptualise agency as emerging through locally grounded practices that do not rely on overt resistance. They reflect a refusal to adopt the feminist label while advancing feminist goals, often through frameworks rooted in cultural affirmation, relational ethics, and communal values (Frenkel, 2008).

A. Culturalist Frameworks: Womanism and Motherism

Womanism, founded by Chikwenye Onwu Ogunyemi and developed further by Modupe Kolawole in the 1980s, celebrates African heritage, Black identity, and examines the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender (Kolawole, 1997; Alkali et al., 2013). It emphasises community endurance and cultural values but has been criticised for its exclusion of LGBTQ+ perspectives (Nkealah, 2016) and for offering few substantive alternatives to Western feminism beyond anti-imperialist rhetoric (Osha, 2006). Similarly, Motherism, proposed by Catherine Acholonu, (1995), centres African womanhood in maternal and ecological ethics. It positions motherhood as a core African value and a source of transformative agency. However, scholars such as Agada, (2022) and Eze (in Osha, 2006) note its tendency to dismiss gender as a structural axis of oppression, and to idealise rural

womanhood at the expense of urban experience – thus narrowing its applicability to diverse African realities. Both frameworks contribute to reclaiming African womanhood from colonial misrepresentations, but they risk romanticising tradition and obscuring internal hierarchies.

B. STIWANISM: Bridging Resistance and Relational Inclusion

In contrast, Omolara Ogundipe's STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) offers a reformist feminist strand that includes men in the struggle for transformation (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Distancing itself from both Western feminism and womanism, STIWANISM emphasises the need for social change that is inclusive, situated, and ethically grounded in African realities (Alkali et al., 2013). It builds on principles of relational complementarity and mutual responsibility, envisioning agency as both collaborative and politically engaged. While elements of this framework – particularly its emphasis on ethical interdependence and situatedness – resonate with the everyday practices of urban women in Kinshasa, it does not fully centre negotiation as an explicit or central form of agency.

C. Cameline Agency: Reasserting Strategic Resistance

Nkealah's, (2017) concept of cameline agency emerged in response to what she perceived as the passivity of earlier, conciliatory models such as Ezeigbo's "snail-sense" feminism. Drawing on the camel as a metaphor of endurance and adaptability in African poetic traditions, cameline agency foregrounds women's ability to act decisively and reshape their conditions. It reclaims the language of resistance while grounding it in context-specific, embodied realities. This framework offers an important corrective to earlier models by centring the strategic and assertive dimensions of women's action, yet, without defaulting to confrontation.

Together, these frameworks highlight the plurality within African feminist thought. While they differ in emphasis, whether that is on cultural affirmation, collaborative reform, or strategic resistance, they share a commitment to theorising agency on African terms. These strands provide important entry points for understanding African women's agency, although their relevance to urban agricultural contexts such as Kinshasa remains uneven. The following section turns to nego-feminism, the framework that most directly informs this thesis. By foregrounding negotiation, situational ethics, and interdependence, nego-feminism offers an

especially resonant lens for interpreting the forms of agency observed among women navigating land and livelihood constraints in Kinshasa's urban farming sector.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Decolonial Feminism and Agency

A. Nego-feminism: A Decolonial Feminist Framework

> To meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the African environment that one must refer. African feminism is not reactive; it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance. (Nnaemeka ,1998a, p.9; in Nnaemeka, 2004, p.376)

This quote by Obioma Nnaemeka captures the foundational ethos of nego-feminism: a theory grounded in African world views and lived experiences. Rooted in broader decolonial imperatives, nego-feminism challenges the imposition of Western feminist models onto African contexts and calls instead for locally meaningful approaches to understanding women's agency. African feminism is not a singular ideology but a constellation of perspectives encompassing resistance, negotiation, social reform, and cultural affirmation. However, much of this theorising has been disproportionately shaped by Anglophone voices (Adomako Ampofo et al., 2008; Nkealah, 2016; Tamale, 2020), particularly those emerging from West Africa, and Nigeria in particular (Nkealah, 2016, p.62). These Indigenous feminist frameworks have played a vital role in redefining feminist goals through African epistemologies. Nonetheless, their prominence has often overshadowed articulations from other regions, such as Central Africa, where different socio-political and historical dynamics shape feminist thought.

While nego-feminism was articulated by a Nigerian scholar, its strength lies in its contribution to epistemic decolonisation through a commitment to contextual flexibility. Rather than offering a fixed theoretical template, it advances a methodological orientation rooted in negotiation, relational ethics, and cultural specificity. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us that location matters (Byrne, 2020, p.40); Nnaemeka's framework, similarly, enables African women's agency to be understood through their situated, everyday practices. This orientation aligns with calls by Ampofo et al. (2008) to move beyond the uncritical transfer of theories

across regions and to instead engage with vernacular traditions, oral histories, and Indigenous concepts that reflect lived realities. Nego-feminism embodies this orientation not only in its origins but also in the ethical and relational principles it foregrounds.

At its core, nego-feminism is built on two interlinked principles: negotiation and “no-ego”. As Nnaemeka (2004, p.377) explains, these values reflect an ethic of flexibility, mutual respect, and pragmatism – traits embedded in many African relational cultures. While negotiation might be misinterpreted as compromise or weakness, nego-feminism reframes it as strategic wisdom: knowing when to resist, when to circumvent, and how to navigate power through culturally appropriate means. This interpretive lens is particularly useful for analysing how women in Kinshasa’s urban farming sector navigate layered constraints, such as land commodification, male-dominated institutions, and insecure urban tenure, through contextually grounded strategies. In this thesis, nego-feminism is used to interpret practices such as land rental agreements, affective appeals to landowners, and informal produce-sharing networks. These tactics are not passive responses to exclusion, but active and intentional negotiations embedded in local norms of reciprocity, kinship, and obligation. By framing agency through negotiation rather than defiance, nego-feminism challenges dominant feminist paradigms that equate empowerment solely with formal rights or direct resistance. Instead, it brings into focus how women rely on social capital, emotional reciprocity, and subtle manoeuvring to sustain their livelihoods, strategies often overlooked in mainstream analysis, yet politically meaningful and culturally coherent when interpreted through this relational lens.

A central concern within African feminist thought is the continued marginalisation of grassroots women in both theory and advocacy. Feminist discourse in Africa has often been shaped by educated, urban, middle-class voices, those most likely to access academic spaces and policy platforms, while the experiences of rural, peri-urban, and working-class women remain underrepresented or abstracted. Tamale (2020) critiques the dominance of elite-driven frameworks that speak about African women without sufficiently grounding theory in their lived realities. Spivak's (1988) well-known provocation “Can the subaltern speak?” finds resonance here, as do Oyěwùmí's (1997) calls to resist re-inscribing Western assumptions through African intellectuals' own frameworks.

Nego-feminism offers a corrective by centring women's everyday practices, rooted in kinship, reciprocity, and survival, as valid foundations for theorising. It shifts attention from elite representation to the relational, situated strategies of what this study refers to as ordinary women: those whose socio-economic and spatial positions, such as those of small-scale urban farmers in Kinshasa, often fall outside the scope of elite feminist discourse, yet whose practices reveal complex forms of agency grounded in contextual knowledge and relational ethics. By affirming Indigenous knowledge systems and lived strategies, nego-feminism provides this thesis with an analytical lens to interpret how women navigate structural constraints in ways that align with Congolese practices – and specifically, the everyday practices of ordinary women in Kinshasa; these strategies, rooted in negotiation, reciprocity, and relational ethics, might not be recognised as agency within more individualistic or oppositional feminist frameworks. In doing this, nego-feminism enables African feminist scholarship to be shaped by those it has too often spoken for, rather than with. While many feminist frameworks identify structures of oppression, race, class, and gender, nego-feminism goes further by attending to how these categories interact in the enactment of everyday agency.

B. Addressing Critiques of Nego-feminism

Despite its contextual strengths, nego-feminism has drawn critique from scholars who question whether its emphasis on negotiation and relationality risks reinforcing patriarchal structures. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for instance, critiques what she terms "Feminism Lite", a model of conditional equality that, in her view, appeases rather than transforms: "You either believe in the full equality of men and women, or you do not" (Adichie, 2017, in Lomotey, 2024)). Scholars like Lomotey argue that compromise can dilute feminist goals and that African feminisms must pursue more direct confrontations with patriarchy. However, these critiques risk collapsing contextually grounded strategies into political compromise. Nnaemeka (2004) responds that feminism in African contexts cannot be divorced from the lived conditions of women who must navigate overlapping forms of domination and care, exclusion and interdependence. As she writes, "the African feminist must tread carefully in a terrain that is simultaneously patriarchal, colonial, and communal". Rather than enforcing a singular mode of resistance, nego-feminism encourages a spectrum of strategic responses embedded in local social logics. In Kinshasa, such resistance often takes the form of tactical engagement, which this thesis interprets through nego-feminism as agency-in-negotiation.

Given this, nego-feminism offers a valuable lens for examining agency in African contexts marked by social complexity and systemic constraints. Its emphasis on interdependence, adaptation, and pragmatism provides an alternative to both liberal individualist and radical confrontation models. The framework affirms that feminist agency can be expressed in culturally meaningful ways that do not always conform to dominant paradigms of activism or resistance. By grounding theory in localised practices, nego-feminism moves beyond binary paradigms of victimhood versus resistance. It highlights how women act as agents within relational worlds, continuously reshaping the terms of access, survival, and social belonging. In this way, nego-feminism offers more than a critique of dominant feminism, it provides an analytical tool for reinterpreting the agency of women whose strategies have long been undervalued or misunderstood. This makes it particularly relevant to the present study. While nego-feminism captures the ethical and cultural logic underpinning women's practices, it does not fully account for the broader structural frameworks, such as land policy, economic precarity, and legal pluralism, that shape and constrain those practices. To analyse this dynamic interplay between structure and agency, the next section turns to Giddens' structuration theory, which offers a broader sociological framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between agency and structure.

C. Structuration Theory: Understanding Agency Within Constraints

As discussed in earlier sections, feminist and development discourses, particularly those shaped by GAD and postcolonial critique, have long debated the concept of agency. While nego-feminism provides a culturally grounded framework for interpreting how women in African cities negotiate power through relational and ethical strategies, it is equally important to analyse the broader social forces that shape, and are shaped by, these practices. To analyse this dynamic interplay, this section draws on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which offers a sociological framework for conceptualising agency, not as opposed to structure but as mutually constituted by it.

At the heart of social theory, agency is often positioned between two poles: voluntarism and determinism. Voluntarist perspectives assume that individuals act freely and autonomously, largely independent of structural constraints. This view is rooted in liberal individualism, exemplified by Weber's (1978) theory of social action, which prioritises individual motivations

and subjective meaning-making. Such a foundation has informed strands of liberal feminist thought that equate agency with autonomy, rational deliberation, and the capacity for free choice (Okin, 1989; Nussbaum, 2000). These models have been critiqued for their limited relevance to contexts shaped by systemic inequality, where women do not enjoy unfettered options (Borovoy and Ghodsee, 2012). Conversely, deterministic perspectives portray individuals as entirely shaped by external forces, such as institutions, social norms, economic systems, or culture, leaving little room for autonomous agency. This approach is historically associated with structuralist and functionalist traditions in sociology and anthropology, notably in the works of Émile Durkheim (1895–1982) (Durkheim, 2014) , who emphasised the coercive power of social facts over individual behaviour. Similarly, Louis Althusser's (1971) structural Marxism framed individuals as "interpellated" subjects, constituted through ideological state apparatuses. These perspectives view agency as largely an illusion, subordinated to the reproduction of existing power structures. In the African context, this tendency has been widely critiqued for reinforcing homogenising narratives of victimhood. Ella Shohat (as cited in Tamale, 2020) describes this as a "homogeneous feminist master narrative", which casts Third World women as passive subjects, stripped of voice and choice. Such framings erase the nuanced and often subtle ways through which women resist, adapt, and act within their constraints.

To move beyond the binary of voluntarism and determinism, Giddens developed structuration theory (1984), which conceptualises agency and structure not as opposing forces but as interdependent. Central to this theory is the duality of structure: structures – such as land tenure systems, gender norms, or economic institutions – are not only constraining but also enabling. They shape the conditions within which individuals act, yet are simultaneously produced and transformed through those actions. As Giddens, (1976, p.161) asserts, "structures must not be conceptualised as simply placing constraints on human agency, but as enabling". This framing is especially relevant for understanding the strategies of women in Kinshasa's urban farming sector. While they navigate structural constraints – limited access to land, poor infrastructure, and socio-economic exclusion – they also act reflexively and creatively within these limitations. Their practices, far from being passive or reactionary, reflect a dynamic interplay between constraint and adaptation.

Structuration theory also challenges conditional definitions of agency, such as those advanced by Kabeer, (1999), who links agency to the ability to exercise "meaningful choice" among alternatives. Although Kabeer recognises that agency can manifest in negotiation and resistance under constraint, her framework tends to foreground autonomy and strategic intent as core indicators. Within such a framing, actions driven by necessity or constrained options may appear reactive or lacking intentionality. By contrast, this thesis, drawing on structuration theory, argues that agency does not require ideal conditions of freedom or abundance of choice. Rather, it often emerges precisely through the act of manoeuvring within constraint. Agents are never wholly free nor fully determined; they act with awareness of their circumstances, and through their practices, they simultaneously reinforce and reshape the structures that govern them (Giddens, 1984). To assume that African women become agents only when liberated from patriarchal traditions or economic hardship risks reinforcing a deficit-based lens – one that frames them as perpetually lacking or waiting to be empowered. Bawa, (2016) critiques such autonomy-centred models for their failure to recognise how African women continuously negotiate forms of agency within systems marked by inequality, tradition, and limited choice.

D. Critiques of Structuration Theory and the Need for Localisation

While structuration theory offers a compelling lens for examining the interplay between agency and structure, it has been widely critiqued for its Western-centric assumptions and limited contextual sensitivity. As Oyěwùmí, (2005 , p.13) asks, "On what basis are Western conceptual categories exportable or transferable to other cultures that have a different cultural logic?". This critique reflects a broader concern: the abstract universalism of much Western social theory often obscures or distorts the lived realities of non-Western societies. There is a pressing need to interrogate how such theories "travel" and how they may inadequately capture the socio-historical conditions to which they are applied.

Critics have pointed out several limitations. Bhaskar, (1979) challenges Giddens' assumption that structures exist only through human reproduction, arguing instead that some systems – such as colonial legal orders or global capitalism – possess autonomous and enduring force. Archer, (1995) and Smith, (1988) expose how structuration theory downplays positionality and erases gendered knowledge, while Connell (2007) critiques its epistemological parochialism and calls for a "Southern theory" rooted in subaltern epistemologies. These

critiques are especially relevant in the context of Kinshasa's urban farming sector, where women continue to navigate entrenched legacies of land commodification, patriarchal legal frameworks, and the economic fallout of neoliberal reforms. Historically, precolonial agricultural systems in the Congo region afforded women substantial socio-economic authority, particularly through kinship-based land access and control over food production. As Lauro (2020, p.2) notes, these systems embedded women's agency in local ecological knowledge and reciprocal social obligations. However, colonial governance redefined land as private property and systematically excluded women from cash crop sectors and formal training. These ruptures persist today, shaping women's marginalisation in both policy and practice. Such layered, historically rooted constraints reveal the limits of structuration theory in accounting for the unequal distribution of power and the depth of structural violence. While its emphasis on the duality of structure, where structures both constrain and enable action, is useful, it insufficiently captures how deeply embedded systems of inequality, especially those rooted in colonial and gendered hierarchies, can restrict or even foreclose agency altogether. These limitations point to the need for complementary frameworks that foreground historical injustice, relational world views, and culturally grounded expressions of agency. In this thesis, such a perspective is developed through the integration of nego-feminism and localised African philosophies. These frameworks better reflect the situated strategies of female farmers in Kinshasa and offer more contextually resonant tools for interpreting their agency.

E. Grounding Agency: From Structuration and Nego-feminism to Vernacular Ethics

While structuration theory offers insight into how structures constrain and enable action, its limitations – particularly its abstract universalism – make it necessary to ground it in more context-sensitive frameworks. Nego-feminism provides one such corrective, emphasising relational agency, negotiation, and interdependence as central to African women's strategies. Yet the ethical logic underpinning such practices does not arise in a vacuum. It is deeply embedded in long-standing African humanistic philosophies that organise social life and shape relational expectations. Philosophies such as Ubuntu in Southern Africa – "I am because we are" (Bhuda and Marumo, 2022) – and Taa Bonyeni in Ghana's Wa region – "we are one people" (Akurugu, 2024) – foreground ancestral belonging, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. These are not merely cultural expressions but ontological systems that define

personhood, power, and obligation. They provide the deeper philosophical grounding from which relational theories like nego-feminism draw conceptual strength.

In the context of Kinshasa, similar relational logics shape how women navigate their socio-economic worlds. Though distinct in form, these logics share a common emphasis on negotiated obligation, mutual recognition, and embeddedness in social relations. As later chapters will show, such principles are central to how women exercise agency within urban agriculture, often in ways that challenge both institutional expectations and imported theoretical assumptions. To offer a grounded and context-sensitive lens on agency, this thesis brings structuration theory into dialogue with nego-feminism. Structuration theory illuminates how structures both constrain and enable action, while nego-feminism offers a framework for understanding ethical negotiation and relational agency. Together, these frameworks help trace the contours of African women's agency as shaped by both constraint and creativity. As the empirical chapters will demonstrate, women's strategies are not mystical or accidental but rooted in vernacular ethics of agreement and interdependence that reflect lived, situated forms of power.

2.6 Conclusion: Rethinking African Women's Agency in Context

This chapter has critically examined how African women's agency is frequently misrepresented in dominant development and feminist discourses, particularly when viewed through frameworks that prioritise formal land ownership, individual autonomy, or universalist assumptions. Such framings often obscure the relational, negotiated, and contextually embedded strategies through which African women sustain livelihoods and assert power. By engaging African feminist thought, especially nego-feminism, and placing it in conversation with structuration theory, this review has argued for analytical approaches that attend to both structural constraint and situated agency. While structuration theory reveals how systems of power are reproduced or reshaped through everyday practices, nego-feminism foregrounds ethical interdependence, negotiation, and the moral logic of survival within context. Yet even these frameworks require deeper grounding in local ontologies. As explored in this chapter, African humanistic philosophies such as Ubuntu and Taa Bonyeni offer foundational world views centred on reciprocity, collective responsibility, and relational personhood. These logics help explain why African women's responses to constraint are not passive or mystical, but

strategic, intentional, and socially meaningful. Together, these debates underscore the importance of developing conceptual tools that are grounded in lived realities. The next chapters take up this challenge by examining the narratives of women in Kinshasa's urban farming sector, where agency is practised through negotiation, social reciprocity, and adaptive strategies that resist simplistic or deficit-based interpretations.

3 Decolonial Feminist Ethnography – Methodology

> *Lorsque tu ne sais pas où tu vas, regarde d'où tu viens. (When you do not know where you are going, look to where you come from.) – African proverb*

At the outset of this PhD, my goals were primarily pragmatic: to complete the research, earn the degree, and move forward. I approached the work as a means to an end, guided more by the structure of the academic journey than by any deep personal investment in the process. However, once I entered the field, this orientation shifted dramatically. The people I encountered, their resilience, their openness, and the realities they shared, challenged my assumptions, not only about the research but also about myself as a researcher. These encounters disrupted my original motivations and invited a deeper, more reflexive engagement with the project. There were moments when I questioned whether I could complete the thesis at all. Yet in those moments of doubt, it was the strength and generosity of my participants that grounded me. Their stories reminded me of the responsibility I carried and the importance of completing this work with integrity, humility, and pride in contributing something meaningful.

This chapter outlines the methodological orientation that guided my research into the experiences of women navigating constraint to remain active in Kinshasa's urban agriculture sector. It outlines the methodological approach that shaped the study. It details how data were gathered through conversations, participant observation, and co-produced forms of knowledge, and how analysis unfolded as a reflexive, iterative process. Alongside the practical dimensions of data collection, the chapter reflects on the ethical, emotional, and epistemological questions that emerged in the field. Particular attention is given to how my position as a Congolese woman, entrepreneur in urban farming, and returning researcher shaped access, relationships, and interpretation. In this way, the chapter remains accountable to the localised, relational, and negotiated nature of knowledge production in Kinshasa's urban farming sector.

3.1 Research Paradigm and Epistemological Positioning

This study is grounded in a decolonial feminist paradigm, drawing primarily from African feminist epistemologies and decolonial feminist ethnography (Manning, 2016), which reject universalist assumptions about objectivity, authority, and representation. Instead, they call for

knowledge to be co-produced, relational, and accountable to those whose lives it seeks to understand. In this spirit, I approached the research not as a neutral observer, but as a participant-scholar, embedded in the same socio-political landscape as many of the women whose narratives I documented.

Ontologically, the study adopts a relational world view (Wilson, 2008; Escobar, 2020), where reality is not fixed but is produced through the interplay of people, land, memory, and precarity. This is especially relevant in Kinshasa's urban farming sector, where women navigate overlapping constraints shaped by colonial legacies, gendered land dispossession, and shifting informal economies. Epistemologically, the study aligns with feminist and decolonial commitments to situated, embodied, and dialogical knowledge (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012; Santos, 2014). It rejects relativism, but insists that marginalised ways of knowing, such as storytelling, emotion, and land-based experience, must be recognised as analytically valid. I drew on feminist ethnographic practices (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007), emphasising dialogue, humility, and responsiveness rather than data extraction. These commitments are consistent with the study's theoretical grounding in nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004), which emphasises relational agency and negotiation, and structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), which conceptualises agency as operating within and through structure. Together, they supported a research approach that foregrounds women's own frameworks of meaning and action. A central concept that emerged through this epistemological and theoretical grounding is Toyokani, a local ethic of negotiation that was not introduced through theory but revealed through women's everyday narratives, observations, and informal conversations. While spirituality was not the primary focus, occasional references to it, particularly in contexts of endurance and land loss, were treated as part of the broader epistemic landscape rather than as incidental beliefs. These moments underscored the importance of epistemic justice and methodological openness (Haraway, 1988; Tuck and Yang, 2014), allowing for multiple and sometimes contradictory forms of meaning-making to coexist.

3.2 Theoretical Framework Integration

This study is anchored in two interwoven theoretical frameworks, nego-feminism and structuration theory, which together offer a relational and context-sensitive lens for understanding how women navigate land constraints and sustain farming livelihoods within

Kinshasa's urban agriculture sector. These frameworks were not imposed on the data from above; rather, they evolved in dialogue with field realities, particularly through the emergence of Toyokani, a local ethic of negotiation and agreement.

Nego-feminism, articulated by Nnaemeka (2004), offers a distinctly African feminist perspective that emphasises negotiation, relational intelligence, and the ethics of give-and-take. It resists confrontation and individualism, instead focusing on how women work through social relationships to maintain presence and continuity. Within Kinshasa's urban farming context, nego-feminism provided a lens through which women's actions, such as gift-giving, appeals to sympathy, or informal cooperation, could be interpreted not as acquiescence but as strategic and intentional forms of agency enacted within constraint. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) complements this perspective by emphasising the duality of structure, the idea that social practices are both shaped by and reproduce the very structures they inhabit. This framework helped make sense of how women operate within overlapping systems of kinship, informal tenure, gendered labour, and authority. Rather than being purely constrained, their everyday practices, such as negotiating land access or managing farming partnerships, also subtly shift these systems, reinforcing or bending norms through repeated action. These frameworks provided the conceptual grounding to address the study's central research question: How do women sustain farming livelihoods within conditions of land insecurity, shifting authority, and limited formal recognition? Where structuration theory reveals how practices are structured and structuring, nego-feminism draws attention to the ethical, affective, and negotiated dimensions of those practices. Women's ability to remain present on land, access produce, or build trust-based relationships was not opposed to power but exercised through locally legitimate forms of engagement.

While rights-based or liberal feminist frameworks often emphasise legal empowerment or direct resistance, they risk obscuring the relational negotiations through which agency is practised in Kinshasa's urban farming economy. Nego-feminism and structuration theory, by contrast, allow for a reading of agency as embedded, negotiated, and responsive to multiple forms of power. As the study unfolded, the term Toyokani, translated as "we agreed as such" in Lingala, surfaced repeatedly in women's narratives. Used to describe informal arrangements, mutual understandings, and reciprocal obligations, Toyokani became more than a linguistic expression; it emerged as a situated feminist analytic, capturing how women negotiate presence

within unstable systems through local relational ethics rather than formal rights. It bridged nego-feminism's emphasis on negotiation with structuration theory's account of social reproduction through practice. While the study was initially shaped by feminist and decolonial commitments, it was in the field that the approach was adapted, guided by local logics, informal negotiations, and the ethic of Toyokani. These frameworks not only shaped how I listened and responded in the field but also informed later analysis, structuring the thematic focus on negotiation, land access, embedded obligation, and agency within constraint, as explored in chapters five to seven.

3.3 Research Design and Rationale

This research did not unfold from a rigid blueprint. While the project began with a focus on female farmers' access to land, particularly within cooperative structures, the field had other lessons. As fieldwork progressed, attention shifted towards a broader set of actors in urban farming: open-air cultivators in Kilambu Village, middlewomen navigating produce flows, and those whose practices were neither formally organised nor institutionally recognised. What initially seemed peripheral gradually revealed itself to be central. This reorientation was not incidental; it reflected the epistemological commitments of the study: to remain close to lived experience, to let the field speak back, and to remain open to rethinking my own assumptions. The design was grounded in a qualitative, ethnographic approach shaped by African feminist and decolonial epistemologies. Rather than predefining the field, I let it define the terms of engagement. Drawing on feminist ethnography (Manning, 2016; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2014), the design emphasised ethical proximity, humility, and presence over control. It was not theory that dictated method, but method that evolved through relationships, interruptions, and embodied learning.

In line with these commitments, participant engagement did not follow a formal sampling protocol. Instead, it emerged organically through early-morning routines, familiar faces, and the quiet repetition of presence. As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2014) suggest, and Chilisa (2012) affirms from within African Indigenous frameworks, trust and responsiveness often matter more than procedural adherence. Robertson (2023) similarly highlights that familiarity can be strategically leveraged to build rapport and gain access, and that a researcher's positionality is dynamic, shifting as relationships develop. I met women as they walked to their farms, often

identified by the empty basins they balanced on their heads-sometimes with a machete inside-and occasionally by the water containers they carried in their hands. When they were open to conversation, I joined them on their walk, as illustrated in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Ma Gode (female farmer), whom I had just met, showing the road to her farm

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Over time, recognition built, and others began to approach me. Some relationships deepened into long-term dialogue, while others remained fleeting, yet no less instructive. Participants were not treated as fixed cases, but as narrators of their own worlds, each story offering situated insights into how land, produce, and presence are negotiated (Tuck and Yang, 2014). These included gifting, kinship, informal rentals, and spiritual appeals, as well as the more overlooked practices of middlewomen whose relational agility anchored key parts of the farming economy. Alongside these narratives, I engaged with land brokers, NGO workers, planners, elites, and

officials to situate these everyday practices within broader structures of governance and power. The design did not discard planning, but it refused to cling to it when the field demanded adaptation. I had considered using a field assistant, but the presence of a third party would have disrupted trust and intimacy. I chose instead to move alone, relying on shared language and relational rhythm. Similarly, when my initial site at Lemba Imbu was lost to land sales, the shift to Kilambu Village was not a detour but a continuity of the story itself: of displacement, navigation, and re-rooting. The field did not derail the study – it became the study.

My own assumptions did not disappear. I entered with an entrepreneurial lens and a limited idea of what counted as urban farming. I overlooked open-air, scattered plots as viable sites of research, saw middlewomen as peripheral street vendors rather than integral actors, and viewed crop-sharing as a sign of inefficiency rather than strategy. These assumptions shaped my early judgements about land, value, and who counted. But through sustained presence, correction, and relational dialogue, my perspective shifted. The middlewomen I once overlooked became key informants. I came to understand that sharing was not a sign of inefficiency but a relational practice with material and social returns. The spaces I had initially dismissed became some of the richest sites of negotiation, revealing a logic of urban farming grounded not in formal structures but in adaptability, reciprocity, and relational intelligence. This evolution was not incidental, but integral to the research design. As I became more embedded in the field, my assumptions shifted, reshaping the very focus of the study (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). In sum, this research design was not imposed but inhabited. It provided enough structure to pursue core questions yet remained open to emergence. It mirrored the very reality it sought to understand that in Kinshasa's urban agriculture, continuity is sustained not through fixed plans but through relational improvisation. This ethos underpins the life histories and thematic reflections in chapters four to seven, where research becomes not simply the pursuit of knowledge but an act of co-presence, humility, and learning to see differently.

3.4 Field Site and Participant Selection

A. Field Site Selection

I selected the Mission Française d'Urbanisme (French Urban Mission) (MFU) site in Lemba Imbu as my primary research location. My decision was shaped not only by its agricultural productivity but also by its political significance. In March 2022, the governor of Kinshasa

visited the site and publicly declared that farmers had the right to cultivate the land, reaffirming that all agricultural and public land fell under state ownership. He explicitly warned customary chiefs against evicting farmers (Masiala, 2022). However, it was also clear that the situation remained complex, as the customary chief continued to contest this resolution. Going into the field, I was aware of these conflicting claims and the ongoing tension. Rather than undermining my interest, this ambiguity reinforced my sense that Lemba Imbu was an ideal site to study the lived dynamics of land ownership, negotiation, and contestation in a contested urban space, one where the state had, at least publicly, taken the side of farmers.

I arrived in Kinshasa in October 2022 and settled in the Ndjili Kilambu district, with this research plan in hand. To begin the project, I asked a local friend, someone familiar with Lemba Imbu, to accompany me on a scoping visit to the site. With no reliable public transport available and unwilling to take a motorbike taxi for safety reasons, we walked for over an hour to reach what I had assumed was a nearby location. Once there, we spent another 20 minutes circling the area, searching in vain for the farming cooperative. I could not believe it was gone. All I found were new constructions. I was stunned; this proposal had been written only four months earlier. The MFU cooperative and its surroundings were no longer active. The site I had designed my entire research around had effectively vanished. This marked the beginning of my lesson in field-based unpredictability and methodological flexibility. I began to reflect more deeply on the fragility of urban farming and how rapidly spatial dynamics shift in Kinshasa.

A few mornings later, still recovering from the shock of the disappearance of the Lemba Imbu cooperative, I recalled that my brother had mentioned owning land where farmers were working. Reluctantly, and unsure of what to expect, I agreed to visit. At the time, I did not perceive him as an “elite”, just as someone with a few scattered plots, but I was cautious about being associated with his authority. To avoid raising assumptions, I asked one of his staff to accompany me. As we walked through Kilambu Village, I noticed vegetable plots lining both sides of the road. I initially dismissed them; they looked like roadside gardens, not the kind of urban farming I had imagined. I still held on to a narrow idea of what a legitimate site should look like. But the agronomist managing my brother’s land explained that many of the displaced farmers from Lemba Imbu had settled here. That changed my perspective. While I chose not to focus directly on my brother’s land, Kilambu Village began to emerge as a compelling site, shaped by displacement, negotiation, and the very dynamics I had hoped to explore.

However, as fieldwork unfolded, it became clear that his land holdings extended across much of Kilambu Village. Even when I avoided interviewing farmers working directly on his plots, his presence still shaped local dynamics in more subtle ways. Navigating this relational landscape became part of the methodological reality I had to work through. In the end, Kilambu Village proved even more suited to my research than Lemba Imbu. The site offered practical advantages: it was within walking distance of where I lived, eliminating the need for transportation; it was accessible from the main road, allowing me to arrive safely during early-morning hours; and the presence of landowners' security guards offered a degree of protection from the gang-related violence that affected other parts of Ndjili Kilambu, particularly Lemba Imbu. What had begun as a fallback option became a richly informative and ethically grounded site of inquiry, one that I could not have anticipated at the start of this project.

As I continued scoping Kilambu Village, one moment shifted my thinking. I was sitting quietly by a field when I noticed a group of men approaching, carrying folders – an unusual sight. Curious, I asked a nearby farmer who they were. She looked up and said, "Probably sent by the land chief, scoping the land for sale. Just look at their folders." Their presence, and the casual certainty of her answer, unsettled me. The men had not said a word, yet their papers already spoke power. The farmers, in contrast, held no documentation, only their crops and presence. I walked home uneasy, wondering what my own arrival with research forms might signal. I was still grappling with my brother's influence in the area, and while farmers did not yet know of our connection, they eventually would. What would that mean for trust in the field? This geographic pivot demanded more than just a change in location; it forced me to rethink my entire approach to research. The structured tools I had carefully prepared, ethics consent procedures, interview guides, sampling plans, and timelines, began to feel misaligned with the realities I encountered. There was no cooperative structure to anchor the research as I had originally planned. Instead, I found myself in a space where attentiveness, flexibility, and ongoing reflexivity became essential for meaningful engagement. This was when methodological reflection began – not after fieldwork, but within it. In what follows, I reflect on how this transformation unfolded, how Kilambu Village became a site not just of fieldwork but of methodological learning.

Kilambu Village, a locality within Ndjili Kilambu district approximately 26 km from Kinshasa's city centre, does not conform to formal planning categories. It stretches loosely

along the Ndjili River corridor, though its total size is difficult to estimate due to the absence of cadastral mapping. Most plots measure between 200 and 400 m² and are primarily used to cultivate leafy greens, cassava, and other root crops, as discussed in Chapter Four, which provides further insight into these practices. Water is sourced informally, drawn from hand-dug wells or carried manually from the river. The landscape itself shaped how the research unfolded. There is no single, clearly bounded farming zone. Instead, Kilambu is marked by a dispersed patchwork of plots, interwoven with residential construction and contested land. Houses and fields exist side by side, often on land awaiting development or owned informally. In this sense, farming becomes a temporary but essential use of urban space, reflecting broader dynamics of precarity and adaptation. This physical layout mirrored the fragmentation of tenure and authority: some farmers worked on plots secured through informal verbal agreements, while others operated under more ambiguous arrangements involving elites or customary actors. These dynamics prompted me to abandon rigid sampling plans and instead adopt an emergent, relational mapping approach, allowing conversations, walking routes, and social ties to guide the research process.

Given the informal and decentralised nature of Kilambu Village's landholding, access to formal leadership structures was limited. I met with the local chief (chef de localité) to explain the project and announce my presence, but there was no central authority through whom access could be coordinated. In fact, formal introductions often raised suspicion, as local authorities were frequently associated with conflict or land-related problems. As a result, and in line with the organic, relational approach described above, participant engagement unfolded through day-to-day proximity, shared routines, and informal conversations. Participants were not predefined actors but emerged from overlapping social roles, as farmers, sellers, landholders' helpers, focus / rest group members, or neighbours, often shifting between these categories. This approach reflects what Chilisa (2012) terms an "African relational ontology" and aligns with feminist ethnographic principles that prioritise contextual responsiveness over procedural access (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2014). Importantly, the site offered more than logistical access: it became a space of epistemic insight. It was in Kilambu that the concept of Toyokani, first surfaced through informal exchanges. Participants often moved fluidly across roles: a vegetable seller might also assist a landholder, contribute to a rest group, or play a role in informal land redistribution. These intersections challenged the neat categories I had initially brought into the field and forced me to reconsider who counted as a "participant" and what counted as data.

At times, my own presence in the field was shaped by relational associations, particularly through my brother, an elite figure who owned several parcels of land in the area. Even when I deliberately avoided interviewing farmers working on his land, his influence remained. For some, he was remembered as a generous figure who had helped build roads and supported locals; for others, he represented a land-buying elite associated with displacement. Certain farmers still recalled recent evictions, their memories vivid and emotionally charged. These conflicting perceptions shaped how I was seen and reminded me that access was never purely logistical. It was relational, ethical, and historical. As Nnaemeka (2004) reminds us, feminist inquiry, especially within African contexts, requires attentiveness to social location, memory, and the often-unspoken structures of power that shape interaction. This site was not simply where fieldwork took place – it shaped what fieldwork became. The methodological approach that follows did not precede the research but emerged from it. In this way, the field itself became a methodological condition through which negotiation, rhythm, vulnerability, and situated agency could be studied (Childers, 2013). This layered and relational terrain shaped not only where research happened but also how participants came to be involved, as discussed in the following section.

B. Participant Selection

As outlined in the research design (Section 3.3), participant engagement in this study followed an organic, presence-led approach rather than a predefined sampling frame. Participants were encountered through observation, proximity, and shared daily routines, rather than formal recruitment. Early-morning interactions with women carrying farming tools often became points of entry. When open to conversation, these women allowed me to accompany them to their fields, introduced me to their colleagues, and even walked me to zones I did not know existed and places I could not have reached alone. Over time, my visible and consistent presence in the area led others to approach me directly, some having heard about the thesis and wanting to share their stories. In some cases, I deliberately sought out participants whose names or stories repeatedly surfaced in conversation. While some interviews occurred in person, others had to be conducted by phone due to scheduling challenges. These engagements were shaped by timing, rapport, and availability, resulting in a mix of presential and virtual conversations. Some participants shared in-depth life histories, while others offered partial

reflections or single exchanges. This flexible approach allowed for the inclusion of a broad range of actors with varying forms of land access.

As fieldwork progressed, I came to understand how roles in urban farming were fluid: a female farmer might also work as a landowner's helper, just as a male farmer might assist a female farmer – both relying on the same middlewoman to sell their produce. These relational overlaps led me to reconsider what counted as a "participant", shifting my focus away from fixed categories – such as "female farmer" – towards how various individuals influenced women's farming lives. While the study remained centred on female farmers' strategies, it became necessary to engage others involved in the urban farming economy, including male farmers, agronomists, middlewomen, and helpers. Some of these encounters unfolded organically – middlewomen, for example, became central figures – while others, such as NGO staff, land chiefs, and municipal authorities, were intentionally approached to better understand the broader institutional and spatial conditions shaping women's access and agency.

Access to certain actors was facilitated by my existing relationships. Urban elites and landowners, for instance, were often encountered informally during weekend visits to the residence where I stayed. Introduced as my brother's sister, I used these moments to initiate field conversations. Similarly, national officials and urban planning agents were approached through introductions or office visits. These participants were not included for technical triangulation (Abu-Lughod, 1990), but because their perspectives offered critical insights into the layered and relational nature of tenure, power, and negotiation in Kinshasa's urban farming landscape. Being a woman shaped my field access in enabling and constraining ways. Approaching female farmers or middlewomen near their fields or on footpaths was generally unproblematic; my presence was met with curiosity and openness, particularly when I approached with humility. Many women invited me to walk with them or sit nearby during breaks. With male participants, it was more appropriate to initiate conversations once already within the field rather than on the road, where it would have been considered improper for a woman to start a conversation. Access to formal offices was more challenging. I was frequently asked inappropriate questions – about my marital status, why I was not wearing a ring, or why I was conducting research in that area. Some gatekeepers even requested my phone number or imposed arbitrary costs, dismissing my interview requests. Unlike in the field, where I moved freely without invoking my social ties, navigating bureaucratic spaces required me to leverage

status. Only after introducing myself as the sister of a respected elite figure did access become smoother and I was treated with more respect by officials, land chiefs, and state actors.

Participant engagement was never entirely straightforward. It required careful navigation, knowing when to invoke social ties, when to approach with humility, and when not to approach at all. Trust became central to keeping the research open. Any misstep or suspicion could have jeopardised access. Navigating the field meant being not just present but also attuned to cues, silences, and relationships. In this sense, participant selection mirrored the relational and flexible nature of the research context itself. An incidental outcome of this approach was that, although no age group was particularly targeted, most participants were around fifty years old on average, a pattern also evident in the case studies presented in the findings chapters. This distribution arose naturally from the field context, where this age group predominated among those accessed through random and snowball sampling (Emerson 2015). It is possible that this concentration influenced the perspectives captured, as participant characteristics can shape qualitative findings (Patton, 2015; Emerson, 2015). This issue is discussed further in the discussion and conclusion chapters. Table 3.1, below, presents a summary of participant roles, interview settings, and contextual notes.

Table 3.1 Summary of data collection methods

Participant Role	Number of Interviews	Average Interview Duration	Notes
Female Farmers	15	45–90 mins	Out the 15 women, 7 are widows, 2 are divorced, 2 are married and 2 are single. Most are over 50 years old (n=13), with the remainder over 35. Family sizes range from 1 to 11 children, and several women also care for grandchildren in their households. Educational backgrounds vary: 2 never received formal schooling, 7 completed primary school, 5 completed high school, and 1 attended university.

			Farming is their core livelihood, though some supplement their income through bread selling, wood selling, nursing, or NGO work.
Middlewomen	8	40–70 mins	Most of the participants are between 30 and 45 years old with 3 over 50. Among the 8 women, 7 are married and 1 is a widow. Family sizes range from 3 to 9 children, and some women also care for grandchildren in their households. In terms of education, 5 completed formal schooling while 3 never received formal education. Selling vegetables is their core livelihood, and all have prior experience in farming.
Male Farmers	7	30–60 mins	Most of the participants are between 35 and 50 years old, with two over 70 years old and one over 50 years old. Family sizes range from 0 to 8 children, and some men also care for grandchildren in their households. Regarding education, 4 completed high school and 3 completed primary school. Farming is their main livelihood but supplemented by activities such as bricklaying or assisting other farmers.
Elites	4	30–45 mins	They were identified through various contacts in the field, including family members and farmers, informal interactions. Mostly off record (Mostly landowners who hold multiple plots but do not necessarily live in the area-Ndjili Kilambu)
Land Chiefs	4	60–90 mins	Interviews were conducted through organised meeting, and informal

			encounters, and, in one case over the phone when an in-person meeting was not possible. (Land chief of Kilambu village, Mitendi an Lemba Imbu-including his secretary)
Agronomists	2	45–60 mins	Conversations extended to post-field virtual exchanges
Local Authorities	5	30–50 mins	Sensitive conversations; mostly informal or off-record
Assistants / Helpers	4	30 mins	Mostly incidental and informal, encountered in the field when they had time to talk.
Focus Group	6	Varied	Some groups were formally organised, but most emerged naturally in resting places or in the field. Most off record.
Local NGOs	3	Varied	Engaged throughout the fieldwork as necessary, serving both as key informants and as participants in the study.
Anthropologist	1	90 mins	Consulted post-field to clarify emerging themes

(Source: P. Tshomba, fieldwork, 2023)

Over the course of eight months of fieldwork, around 22 women, including female farmers and middlewomen, were engaged through ongoing presence and informal interaction. From these, eight were selected for deeper narrative inquiry based on the richness, diversity, and relevance of their experiences. Their stories, which span dynamics of land access, negotiation, and produce distribution, are featured in the findings chapters. Several other women contributed

through focus groups or informal conversations. I did not aim for data saturation. In a setting where each woman's story is shaped by unique negotiations around land, labour, constraint, and access, the notion of saturation felt incompatible. To suggest the field was "saturated" would imply that the range of experience had been exhausted – yet each narrative revealed new relational dynamics. As Braun and Clarke, (2021) argue, the goal in reflexive and narrative research is not saturation, but rich, contextualised insight. The data I gathered was sufficient because it illuminated the core dynamics this thesis set out to explore. Crouch and McKenzie, (2006) note, in feminist and relational research, sufficiency is reached when the material offers analytical depth and coherence, not uniformity. I left the field on the basis of a methodological and ethical judgement: not because the stories had ended, but because it was time to begin interpreting them.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

This study employed a range of qualitative methods, including conversational interviews, direct observation, informal dialogue, life history interviews, and focus groups – or rest groups, as I refer to them. While I began with a prepared guide, translating questions and planning formal interviews, I quickly realised this approach felt intrusive or could be misinterpreted, particularly in a context marked by land insecurity and mistrust towards external inquiries. The tools I used became adaptive techniques, evolving in response to field dynamics and participant preferences. At the heart of this approach was a commitment to presence, flexibility, and dialogue. Conversations were shaped by when, where, and how participants were willing to speak. I worked with broad thematic prompts and let discussions unfold in situ, in alignment with feminist and narrative methodologies that understand interviews (narratives) as co-produced encounters embedded in power, culture, and emotion (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Tamale, 2020; Manning, 2022). These interactions were dialogic rather than extractive, grounded in trust and shaped as much by participants' rhythms as by my research themes.

Audio recording was used sparingly: only with consent and when conditions allowed. Even with approval, visible devices often made participants uneasy, particularly given fears around land dispossession and surveillance. To reduce discomfort, I sometimes concealed the recorder discreetly. But environmental noise, movement, and cautious speech often limited the quality of recordings. As a result, transcripts were supplemented by memory-based reflections, post-

interview audio notes, and field observations. These adaptations were not merely logistical; they were ethical. Recording was never a neutral act but part of a broader negotiation of trust and visibility. I learned to revisit consent regularly, to choose quiet and safe moments, and to adjust device placement with care. Over time, I realised that what mattered most was not the structure of the interview but the relational context in which meaning was created.

Across all data collection practices, the emphasis remained on responsiveness: listening more than questioning, following more than leading. In this sense, data collection was not simply about gathering information. It was a process of learning, adapting, and earning the right to hear what women chose to share. The sections that follow unpack each method, conversation, observation, life history, group dialogue, and visual co-production, highlighting how they worked together to illuminate the everyday negotiations that sustain women's presence in Kinshasa's urban agriculture.

A. Conversations as Method

Adopting conversational methods was an intentional decision, grounded in feminist and decolonial epistemologies that centre relationality and lived experience (Smith, 2012; Bhambra, 2014). This approach also reflected a commitment to attentiveness and reciprocity in feminist research practice (DeVault and Gross, 2007). Rather than approaching participants as subjects of inquiry, I engaged them as narrative agents whose reflections actively shaped the research. In practice, most data emerged through unstructured and often unplanned conversations, while walking to farms, resting under cassava trees, harvesting crops, or waiting at roadside stalls. These were not passive disclosures, but dialogic, relational encounters shaped by trust, caution, and shared presence. I did not guide these exchanges with a predetermined list of questions. Instead, I followed participants' lead – asking clarifying questions, responding to their curiosity about my presence, and introducing study-related themes only when appropriate.

At times, participants turned the lens on me. In one exchange, a woman asked how my husband could allow me to spend so much time in the field while he was abroad. I laughed and replied, "He has no reason to be jealous; I'm here to study." I then asked, "And you – being here all day, isn't your husband jealous?" The group erupted in laughter. One responded, "Jealousy?

Will he take care of me 100% to be jealous of my work?" Another added, "If he wants me home, he'll have to meet my list of needs first including supporting my farming!" This playful yet pointed moment opened a deeper discussion about the value of women's work, the role of extended family, and how autonomy and interdependence are not contradictory, but coexisting and mutually sustaining realities. Such exchanges revealed that meaning did not arise from formal structure, but from the conditions under which dialogue unfolded: informally, relationally, and often through humour, challenge, or shared labour. These conversations taught me to listen not only to what was spoken but also to what was implied, withheld, or redirected – revealing how women negotiated the blurred lines between obligation, strategy, and choice.

Consent, too, was treated as a relational process. I did not use formal consent forms, which many participants associated with risk or bureaucracy. Instead, I relied on ongoing verbal consent, often revisiting it in the form of casual check-ins. When a woman asked, "Do you need to know that too for your study?" I would explain again – kindly and clearly – that she was under no obligation to share and could stop at any time. These small negotiations reflected the ethic of trust and care that underpinned all field encounters(Ellis, 2007; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Tamale, 2020). In this study, conversation was not a technique – it was a practice of presence. Meaning emerged through long-term engagement, humility, and attentiveness. What mattered most was not asking the right questions but being there long enough for the questions themselves to shift (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Smith, 2012; Bhambra, 2014).

B. Observation and Embodied Presence

Participant observation in this study was not a secondary tool to complement interviews; it was a central mode of engagement, learning, and knowledge-making. I did not watch from a distance. I walked to farms before sunrise, sat beside women during breaks, helped with harvesting, and bore witness to the quiet, everyday negotiations that animate Kinshasa's urban agriculture. These included women waiting for a landowner's mood to soften before speaking, silently adjusting to rumours of dispossession, or tactfully renegotiating access through indirect means.

In one instance, I accompanied a farmer negotiating for manure, her urgency met with the supplier's indifference, which laid bare the power asymmetries embedded in input access. On

another occasion, I sat in a car while a landowner threatened to arrest a farmer I knew over spoiled fruit, exposing the intimate entanglements of fear, dependency, and dispossession. These were not isolated episodes, but relational events that revealed the everyday dynamics shaping the sector. At times, the dynamics were more subtle. A male farmer once told me he disliked working with his wife and often worked independently. Days later, I observed him interact warmly with a woman at a moto taxi stop, and I later learned she was both his wife and a key middlewoman in his value chain. This moment revealed not only the performative nature that interviews can take, with participants selectively disclosing information for their own purposes, but also, through observation, the household arrangements by which husbands and wives collaborate in urban farming livelihoods. These unspoken practices of collaboration often revealed the ethic of Toyokani, long before I had the language to name it.

Many of these interactions unfolded under physically demanding conditions, with long hours under the sun, steep hills, heavy rains, and muddy terrain. My own physical limits often became part of the encounter. When women asked me to sit while they continued working, or slowed their pace to accommodate my exhaustion, these gestures quietly revealed logics of resilience, care, and social relation. These embodied experiences shaped my understanding not only of what women do, but also of how they carry themselves, endure, and relate to one another in the process. I came to learn not just by listening but also by sharing time, navigating contested urban spaces, and adapting to the rhythms of those who let me walk alongside them, an approach grounded in relational and situated ways of knowing. Crucially, observation was never one-sided. I, too, was being observed. My presence was interpreted through shifting lenses: at times, I was seen as a daughter; at others, a potential business partner or political outsider. These shifting perceptions shaped how participants behaved around me, what they revealed through action, what they withheld, and how they positioned themselves in my presence. I came to understand these dynamics not as disruptions but as central to the epistemological grounding of this study. From a decolonial ethnographic perspective, the intent is not to extract knowledge but to engage in a process where knowledge is offered, negotiated and recognised as always partial(Connell, 2014). Observation was thus not a neutral gaze but a form of relational immersion, demanding attentiveness to gesture, atmosphere, and the textured realities of everyday urban farming.

C. Life Histories and Fragmented Narratives

Life history interviewing, a feminist approach that recognises participants as narrators of their own lived experiences and meaning-makers in their own right, contributed to this study. These narratives were often shared in a single sitting, although some unfolded gradually across multiple visits. In both cases, they were rarely linear. Women moved fluidly between moments in time, beginning, for instance, with how they came to farm a particular plot, then drifting into memories of childhood displacement, marital breakdown, and land loss, or even offering me personal advice as certain topics arose. This non-linear, participant-led storytelling reflected the flexible and relational structure of the research and was consistent with the epistemological commitments of the study and the principles of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Most narratives emerged through informal, conversational encounters as described earlier. While the thematic focus of the research was predefined, interviews unfolded as unrehearsed, often heartfelt conversations grounded in presence. I offered gentle prompts but allowed participants to guide the direction, tone, and pace. Some questions were met with laughter, smiles, or inquisitive looks. At times, a woman would pause to ask whether a particular question was truly necessary. In such moments, I would gently revisit the study's purpose and reaffirm that participation was entirely voluntary, reinforcing their freedom to engage on their own terms. What these narratives revealed was how women made sense of land, authority, disruption, and continuity. Their fragmented, emotionally layered nature offered insight into the historical and affective terrain of urban farming in Kinshasa. These stories were preserved in different ways – sometimes through full transcription, when audio recordings were possible, but more often through field reflections, voice memos, and later stages of analysis. They shaped my understanding of strategies like Toyokani, not as abstract responses to constraint but as lived, relational practices grounded in memory, loss, faith, trust, and endurance.

D. Focus Groups and Informal Collectives

Early in fieldwork, I trialled more structured focus group discussions. Although these sessions yielded some insights, they often introduced a performative dynamic. Even after I rearranged the seating into a circle and used more relaxed language, the atmosphere still resembled a learner–teacher setting. Participants often sought to give the "right" answer rather than speak from experience, while others focused on showcasing what they could offer. This performativity limited the emergence of authentic insight. As (DeVault and Gross, 2007) note,

structured group settings can encourage strategic or self-protective responses, which conflicts with the dialogical and relational orientation of this research. Nonetheless, these discussions were recorded and included in the analysis – with caution and contextual sensitivity, guided by reflective notes taken during and after each session. In contrast, collective spaces, such as rest groups of farmers and post-harvest gatherings of middlewomen, functioned as the primary informal focus groups in this study. These settings emerged organically before, during or after labour: women would gather under trees, near water points, or beside plots to share jokes, frustrations, meals, work and updates, pictured in Figure 3.2. Among middlewomen, similar spaces formed while preparing or portioning vegetables for sale. Though casual in appearance, these interactions were rich with purposeful dialogue, mutual advice, and relational humour. Conversations often began before I arrived, and I would be welcomed into a pre-existing rhythm of exchange. In one instance, a group of middlewomen recounted how they avoided a Kuluna gang during their sales route. As they joked and retold the story to a latecomer, while also planning their next selling strategy, I asked a clarifying question. They responded without shifting tone. These unscripted interactions revealed far more than any structured prompt could: they animated the layered dynamics of risk, coordination, and care embedded in their everyday livelihoods.

In such moments, I avoided disrupting the flow. When appropriate, I gently asked, “This is helpful for my study – can I record it?”, always reminding them that participation was voluntary. Even with familiarity, I remained cautious; a single “no” could shift the group dynamic, especially if someone did not know me well. Often, I chose not to record and instead relied on memory notes, many of which, due to the emotional weight or novelty of the stories, remained vivid long after fieldwork ended. These informal collectives offered more than observational insight; they were generative sites of knowledge. Toyokani came into view not as abstract theory but as everyday practice – negotiating land, dividing produce, debating fairness, and building strategies through relational consensus. Through disagreement, humour, and storytelling, these gatherings illustrated the communal and embodied dimensions of agency that animate urban agriculture in Kinshasa.

Figure 3.2 Women organising peanuts after harvesting

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph of focus group, Ma Flo (middlewoman, left), Ma Marlene (farmer, right), and Patricia (field research, front centre) preparing peanuts after harvesting. More participants were present, only these three are captured here.

E. Co-produced Visual Artefacts

One of the most significant non-verbal methods that emerged during fieldwork was the co-production of a hand-drawn map (Figure 3.3), initiated by four participants – two male farmers and two female farmers, who offered to "show how things are now" in the Ndjili Kilambu district. The resulting sketch traced farming sites, landholdings, roads, and key institutions across Lemba Imbu and Kilambu Village. Although not a formal cartographic tool, the map served as a political narrative: a visual rendering of space, power, and exclusion. It was through this process that I first grasped the extent of my own brother's land ownership – it linked previously unconnected sites such as fenced plots, clinics, and schools through informal knowledge networks, later confirmed in conversations with elites.

Created through participant memory and drawn over several meetings across a month, the map reflected locally validated spatial knowledge shaped by lived experience and negotiation

histories. Participants actively debated boundaries, clarified ambiguous areas, and traced informal tenure arrangements. It revealed how land is accessed, held, and contested – especially by women navigating blurred lines between formal and informal systems. The map served multiple functions:

- It offered a shared geographic reference to situate life histories and case studies.
- It visualised power dynamics, showing who controls or influences particular zones (e.g., the "Ila site" named after a prominent landowner).
- It illustrated how women operate across formal and informal boundaries through relational roles, improvised tenures, and negotiation.

While the map was not used for technical spatial analysis, the mapping process itself was a relational and epistemological act – what Turnbull, (2000) describes as a form of relational, embodied cartographic knowledge. Grounded in trust and dialogue, it revealed how spatial imaginaries function as both data and method. As further explored in the findings, the map illuminated not only land distribution but also the entangled relationships between farmers, elites, and landholders – many of whom operated through informal and guarded channels of control. The ethic of Toyokani, though unnamed at the time, became visible through this mapping: farmers knew who owned what, where, and how – not out of mere curiosity, but through their embedded roles in landholding systems. Some served as gatekeepers, others were involved in informal land sales, and many – particularly women – navigated this terrain through prior tenancy or long-standing relationships. From a decolonial feminist perspective, the map was not just a research tool but a co-produced expression of situated knowledge – shaped by relational presence and rooted in local ways of knowing.

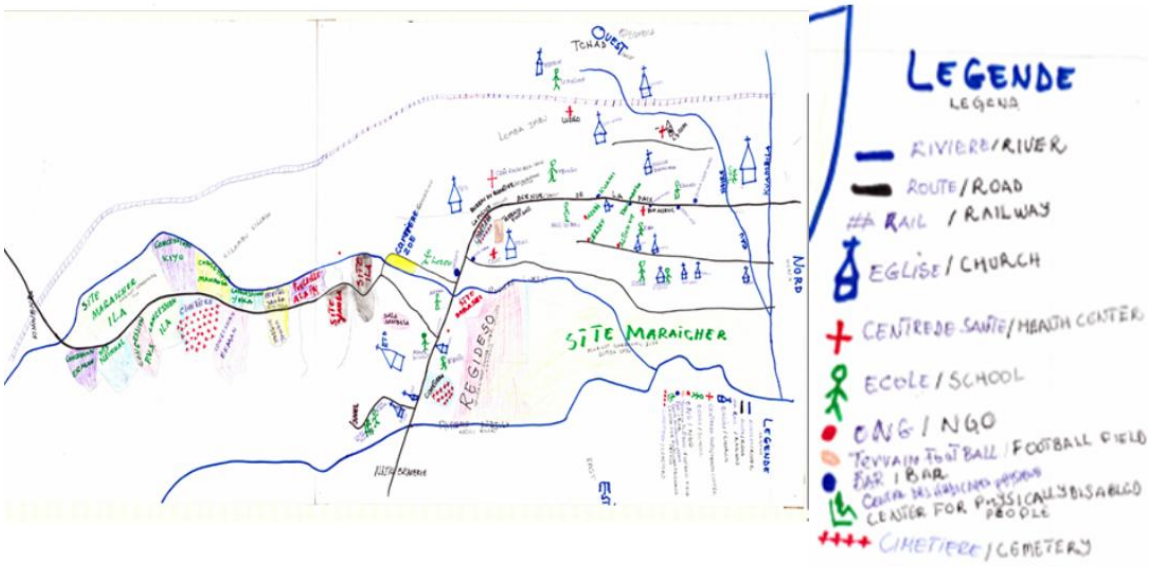

Figure 3.3 Participatory map of Kilambu farming zone, co-produced with participants

(Source P Tshomba, fieldwork 2023)

This sketch map was created in collaboration with local farmers during fieldwork. It reflects collective knowledge of farming sites, residential areas, key infrastructures, and perceived land boundaries in the Kilambu area / Lemba Imbu.

Figure 3.4 Participatory mapping session with farmers in Kilambu Village

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

The photograph was captured during one of the fieldwork days, this photograph shows participants – including Ma Marie – engaged in co-producing a hand-drawn map of farming and residential areas in Kilambu Village and Lemba Imbu. The session took place in the informal outdoor setting where I was living, creating a relaxed space for collective reflection on land use, ownership, and boundary shifts. The map functioned both as a spatial reference and as a tool for dialogue about displacement, memory, and land insecurity.

In sum, this study approached knowledge as emergent, relational, and situated – never fixed or fully knowable. Methods such as conversational dialogue, narrative inquiry, embodied observation, and co-produced visual tools were shaped by presence, trust, and attentiveness. Flexibility was constant: I adjusted daily to the rhythms of the field, listening more than questioning, following more than leading, and documenting only what could be ethically and safely recorded. The resulting dataset was shaped as much by silences, gestures, and hesitations as by spoken words. This, too, is part of what Toyokani means – the ongoing negotiation of access, not only to land or produce, but to meaning itself.

3.6 Data Analysis

Given the narrative and ethnographic nature of the study, analysis began during fieldwork, not after it. As stories were shared, events observed, and relationships built, emerging themes were documented in fieldnotes and reflective memos. These memos captured not only what was said but also tone, gestures, body language, silences, and spatial context. This iterative approach aligns with feminist narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007) where meaning is understood to be co-produced and situated, rather than extracted. Rather than applying a fixed coding framework, I adopted a flexible, open-ended process. I listened repeatedly to recordings, noting connections, contradictions, and shifts in tone. Because recording quality varied, some transcripts were partial, requiring me to draw on memory and post-interview reflections to interpret context and meaning. Many participants moved while speaking, worked while talking, or spoke softly, all of which demanded embodied attention to sound, silence, and gesture. Emergent themes were first captured in a research diary, then developed into more structured documents.

Particular attention was paid to:

- how women narrated constraint and adaptation
- the terms they used to describe agreements or disputes
- how structural power was negotiated through relationships, silences, or symbolic acts

In the early stages, I employed open thematic analysis to allow categories to arise organically, guided by sensitivity to negotiation, agency, and structural reproduction. Transcripts, detailed fieldnotes, and key dialogic events were manually coded to maintain proximity to the narratives and preserve analytical responsiveness. This approach was consistent with the study's grounding in relational and decolonial feminist epistemologies.

A multi-stage coding strategy followed:

1. Open coding: Early codes were applied without restriction to capture emergent ideas (e.g., "eviction memory", "negotiated access", "shared labour", "gifting metaphors", "emotional appeal").

2. Axial coding: Related codes were clustered around core relational themes (e.g., "access through kinship", "trust-based tenure", "negotiated produce flow").

3. Theoretical coding: Themes were refined through the study's conceptual frameworks, identifying patterns of agency, duality of structure, and negotiated strategies consistent with Toyokani.

This process was loosely informed by grounded theory traditions, particularly Charmaz's (2006) framing of coding as an interpretive rather than procedural act. While Corbin and Strauss's, (1998) technical model offered structural foundations, my approach aligned more closely with Charmaz's flexible orientation and with a decolonial feminist stance that treats analysis as relational, situated, and embedded in participants' vocabularies and lived

experiences. A major analytical shift occurred with the recognition of Toyokani, a term initially encountered as casual or commonplace, but which increasingly revealed itself as a core expression of relational logic. Rereading early transcripts and fieldnotes through this lens allowed me to reinterpret moments once seen as incidental – silent transactions, deferred payments, emotionally framed requests – as part of a deeper ethic of negotiated presence. This evolving framework laid the groundwork for the analytical chapters that follow.

Following the case-based analyses, themes were compared across participants to identify shared practices, divergent strategies, and structural conditions shaping women's agency. For instance:

- Women embedded in long-standing kin networks employed different strategies from newcomers reliant on market relations.

- Middlewomen used forms of negotiated access to produce that differed from land-focused strategies, yet their practices were still underpinned by the logic of Toyokani.

- Some women invoked spiritual or ancestral protection in land conflicts, reframing structural violence as morally and relationally negotiable.

This cross-case synthesis enabled the emergence of higher-order themes, including:

- presence without ownership

- negotiation across power asymmetries

- spiritual, emotional, and moral forms of relational agency

- the fragility and endurance of informal land arrangements

- differing perceptions of farming, land, and success

- embedded economic rationalities – how financial decisions are shaped by social relations and values

These insights did not emerge in a linear or procedural way. Thematic structuring involved continual movement between transcripts, fieldnotes, and a range of field documents, including participant-produced maps, informal videos, photographs, police and legal records, landholder notebooks, and cartographies. These materials helped contextualise narratives within broader political and economic structures, especially where participants used silence, metaphor, or caution to navigate sensitive topics.

Much of this re-engagement was shaped by supervisory dialogue, recursive memo-writing, and the iterative nature of narrative inquiry. For instance, I initially overlooked the role of middlewomen in Kinshasa's urban farming value chain, despite having conducted life history interviews with them and accompanying their daily activities. Similarly, I hesitated to engage with spiritual discourse, even as many women invoked divine protection or prayer when recounting eviction, constraints, or success. These omissions reflected the framing I brought into the field, one that privileged female farmers and materially grounded strategies, rather than the full spectrum of actors and meaning-making logics present in urban agriculture. The shift from focusing narrowly on female farmers' land access to a broader understanding of how diverse women navigate constraints emerged through sustained, recursive engagement with data: what Clandinin and Connelly, (2000) describe as a process of returning, revisiting, and reinterpreting meaning with consideration of evolving insights. This process was not aimed at verifying a single truth through triangulation but at remaining present with complexity: what decolonial and feminist scholars describe as reading with, rather than through, the field (Lugones, 2010; Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2012). In this study, analysis was not about decoding hidden meanings or testing hypotheses; it was about paying sustained, situated attention to the ways women narrated and enacted agency, and allowing those meanings to guide interpretation. While the later chapters build on this interpretive approach by tracing connections between strategies, silences, and shifting structural conditions shaping women's participation in Kinshasa's urban agriculture, the following section highlights how this process enabled the gradual emergence of a key field-based concept -Toyokani- which proved central to understanding how women navigate constraints and sustain farming in practice

3.7 The Emergence of Toyokani as a Field-Based Concept

Toyokani did not enter the study as a predefined analytical concept. Rather, it was progressively recognised, not through a single defining moment, but cumulatively, as repeated encounters revealed its role in shaping everyday interactions. At times, it appeared explicitly. During a harvest observation early in my fieldwork (January 2023), a middlewoman responded to my question about the price she had paid for spinach by stating:

"*Toyokani boye na mukolo bilanga (we agreed as such with this farmer). I gave him money so that he would plant this spinach plot for me. As it grew, I came to harvest it. That was our agreement, regardless of the current market price*."

Here, Toyokani articulated a pre-arranged and mutually understood agreement that shaped production and pricing beyond market norms. In other moments, the logic surfaced tacitly. For example, during an early morning encounter later that month, I met a female farmer walking slowly while her colleague was a few steps ahead. She explained:

"*Those of us who live furthest leave home earlier and walk along the road, meeting the others one by one. By five in the morning, we are already on the road so that we can arrive at the farm by seven. We walk together for safety, because walking alone at that time can be dangerous*."

Although Toyokani was not mentioned directly, this account demonstrated negotiated coordination grounded in relational obligation. Across the duration of fieldwork, similar enactments appeared in everyday practices, ranging from coordinating movement to and from farms or markets, negotiating labour or payment terms with landholders, pooling manure contributions, and establishing borrowing agreements within savings systems. While these practices varied according to participants' roles within the urban farming value chain, they were consistently underpinned by the same relational logic of Toyokani. Although at that early stage I interpreted such accounts as routine descriptions of practice, repeated exposure to the expression and observation of its enactment gradually led to deeper reflexive consideration.

I then began asking participants whether such arrangements were intentionally negotiated. Their responses, often accompanied by laughter or a matter-of-fact tone: "*that is just how we do it*", indicated that agreement and negotiation were taken for granted in everyday practice. This recognition prompted me to start documenting Toyokani more systematically in my field reflections. Through iterative memo-writing and analytical dialogue, my understanding evolved from treating Toyokani as everyday speech to recognising it as a vernacular logic that appeared to underpin relational coordination and contribute to the ongoing sustainability of urban farming practices. This recognition guided subsequent data analysis, where the recurrence of agreement as a theme, often accompanied by direct or indirect reference to Toyokani, confirmed its central role in structuring farming practices and sustaining activity despite uncertainty. As I engaged more deeply with the data, Toyokani gradually moved from vernacular use toward analytical relevance, later aligning with negotiation-based logics articulated within Nego-Feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) and with the relational dynamics between agency and structural constraint conceptualised in Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984). The theoretical implications of this alignment are introduced in Chapter Two and further elaborated in the analysis presented in later chapters.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the University of Leeds Ethics Committee. However, ethical engagement in the field extended far beyond institutional protocols. As Manning (2022, p.16) asserts, "the power and politics of a decolonial feminist ethnography demand ethical responsibility on behalf of the researcher". Guided by this principle, I approached ethics not as a checklist but as an ongoing, situated practice grounded in trust, responsiveness, and relational attentiveness. In Kinshasa, where land access is precarious, evictions are frequent, and mistrust of outsiders is widespread, ethical practice was not procedural; it was lived. It required me to read the field moment by moment, to embrace ambiguity, and to prioritise dignity and narrative respect over extractive efficiency. My commitment was not only to "do no harm" but also to create space for voice and care, even when that meant relinquishing control.

Participants were informed of the aims and scope of the research in Lingala and, where appropriate, in French (particularly for institutional or stakeholder interviews). Given the sensitivity of land issues and widespread distrust of formal paperwork, verbal consent was

prioritised. This consent was not a singular act, but a dialogic, ongoing process. In several instances, participants paused mid-conversation to ask clarifying questions or seek reassurance; these moments often deepened trust and opened space for richer storytelling. Anonymisation in this study was a relational and situated act: not a universal procedure, but a reflection of the trust and responsibilities negotiated with each participant. In practice, most participants expressed a strong preference not to be anonymised. Many explicitly requested that their names, and, in some cases, photographs, be associated with their narratives. While institutional ethical protocols often emphasise anonymity as a protective standard, I recognised that imposing it indiscriminately could undermine the epistemological foundations of a decolonial feminist methodology, which seeks to honour participants' agency, relationality, and narrative authorship.

Accordingly, I respected participants' wishes to be named, except in cases where I judged that identification could cause harm. In such instances, I selectively anonymised or withheld details – not as a blanket rule, but as a context-specific ethical decision shaped by the dynamics of each encounter. These decisions inform how narratives are presented throughout the thesis: where names appear, they do so in accordance with participants' explicit preferences and with attention to contextual safety. Where names or identifying details are omitted, it reflects not a rigid commitment to anonymity but a situated ethical judgement grounded in the realities of land contestation, gendered risk, and the politics of narrative ownership.

Audio recordings were made only with participants' consent, using my phone placed discreetly in a bag to avoid drawing attention to it. I deliberately avoided using visible recording devices or notebooks during interviews, particularly in public or sensitive locations. When recording was declined or impractical, I relied on post-interview reflections and fieldnotes written later in private. While background noise and participant movement sometimes compromised sound quality, I accepted these conditions as part of the ethical terrain, prioritising participants' comfort, autonomy, and safety over ideal data capture. Photographs and videos were taken only with participants' direction and explicit consent. These were not treated as extractive data but as part of a relational exchange in which participants actively guided what was documented and often reviewed or approved the images taken. All interviews and fieldnotes were personally transcribed and transferred to secure storage on the University of Leeds M: Drive. Audio files, transcripts, and visual materials were stored privately with restricted access on my personal

university account. While the study did not collect highly sensitive data, all materials were managed with care and discretion, in line with the ethical commitment to protect participants and uphold relational trust.

A. Compensation, Reciprocity, and Ethical Relationality

While my research aligned with the University of Leeds's ethical approval, which included a non-compensation policy due to concerns about coercion or undue influence, my ethical decisions in the field were shaped less by formal protocol and more by relational and contextual dynamics. This approach reflects the broader decolonial feminist epistemology guiding this study, which prioritises relationality, responsiveness, and situated ethics over rigid proceduralism (Manning, 2022).

In practice, introducing financial compensation could have undermined the trust and kin-like familiarity that developed between myself and participants. This is not to suggest that compensation is inherently unethical, but rather that, in this context, where relationships were deeply relational and grounded in everyday exchange, formalised payment risked disrupting the informal reciprocity and dignity that were central both to participant engagement and to the spirit of this research. At the same time, I remained aware of the structural asymmetries between myself and participants – my ability to leave the field, my affiliation with an international university, and my connection to a locally influential family member (my brother), all of which may have shaped how even small gestures of support were received and interpreted.

Still, participants did not express expectations of compensation, and participation remained fully voluntary throughout the study. What emerged instead were situational, reciprocal exchanges that were relational rather than transactional. For instance, when a participant explained she was harvesting cassava leaves to earn 5,000 francs to pay her child's bus fare, I offered to buy a portion of the leaves, sometimes taking only half while encouraging her to sell the rest. Similarly, when participants invited me to tea or offered to share food, I would respectfully decline while also contributing, saying, "I already had my breakfast, but let me get you some extra bread," a culturally appropriate way of returning hospitality without setting compensation expectations. These gestures were never pre-planned or universally applied, but

emerged organically in moments where care, relational trust, or ethical discomfort prompted me to respond. I also took care never to offer more than 5,000 francs (approximately USUS$2.50), a sum that aligned with the daily income many participants earned from farming, to ensure support remained grounded in local economic realities and did not create future dependency or distort power dynamics. This relational and situated approach to reciprocity aligns with what Chilisa (2012) describes as a relational ethic of care, one that centres responsiveness, dignity, and mutual recognition in researcher–participant engagements. As Manning (2022) reminds us, ethical responsibility in decolonial feminist ethnography demands that researchers remain attentive to power, care, and presence rather than retreating behind institutional protocol. In this study, that meant honouring both the participants' autonomy and the relationships we built, supporting immediate needs when appropriate, without compromising the voluntary nature or ethical integrity of our interactions.

Ethical practice in this study was not defined by rules but by responsiveness. It required being present, accountable, and adaptable, recognising that research, particularly in contested spaces, must be shaped by care rather than control. In a context marked by land precarity, historical dispossession, and gendered vulnerability, ethics was not a technical obligation but a relational practice. It unfolded through trust, reciprocity, and situated judgement, grounded in the decolonial feminist ethos that informed every aspect of this study.

3.9 Positionality: Negotiating Constraint, Perception, and Relational Presence

I am Congolese. I speak Lingala fluently and have lived and worked in Kinshasa, including as an urban agriculture entrepreneur. These connections gave me initial access. In many ways, I was seen as a local, and welcomed as a daughter, a student, or someone "from the area". Yet those same ties did not erase the distance created by class, education, or my affiliation with a foreign university. Some participants assumed I had political influence or expected me to provide material support. Others viewed me with cautious curiosity. These contradictions reminded me that familiarity does not equal sameness. As Beoku-Betts, (1994) notes, there are moments when "Black is not enough" – when shared racial or national identity does not bridge the structural divides shaped by class, migration, or institutional privilege.

My position was layered and shifting, I was a returnee, a researcher, a landholder, and someone with the freedom to leave. As Mao and Feldman, (2019) caution, symbolic power often operates

subtly, through the values we carry, the institutions we represent, or the assumptions we unintentionally project. I was not always aware of how these dynamics played out, but they shaped every encounter. And because this research is grounded in decolonial feminist ethnography, where the researcher's presence is never neutral, these tensions were not side notes to the study but part of its analytical core. These differences were particularly stark in my relationship to land and farming. While I was involved in urban agriculture, it was as an entrepreneur: someone who owned land and hired others to farm. The women I interviewed, by contrast, were often landless or cultivated precarious plots under constant threat of eviction. They were farmers and market sellers navigating layered systems of uncertainty and exclusion. Although we shared an investment in urban farming, the structural and material disparities between us could not be ignored. Navigating this complexity required me to adapt continuously, reading each space, adjusting my presence, and responding without overstepping. Like the women I walked with, I too had to move carefully, like a chameleon, aware that remaining present required negotiation, humility, and restraint.

As a result, my presence in the field was read in multiple, sometimes conflicting, ways. Some participants saw me as a student deserving of support as a "daughter" whose success would reflect well on the community. Others regarded me as a potential business partner, hoping I might invest in their ventures. Still others, aware of my elite family background, viewed me with suspicion, associating me with the very forces that threatened their access to land. A few feared I might be aligned with government agendas or collecting data for a political campaign. These perceptions, whether grounded or imagined, shaped the contours of our conversations. They influenced what people chose to share, withhold, or test. I was constantly negotiating these identities: clarifying my intentions, building trust, and learning to move between roles without collapsing into any one of them. Speaking Lingala fluently allowed me to enter certain conversations with ease, yet language alone did not dissolve power dynamics. Fluency granted access but not always belonging.

Conducting fieldwork also meant navigating physical, emotional, and infrastructural constraints. I lived alone in a compound with no regular electricity. After long days in the field, I often returned late, needing to write notes in the dark or find creative ways to conserve energy to charge my phone and laptop. A local friend eventually helped me set up an improvised system – a car battery and energy box – to store electricity during the rare times it was available (see Figure 3.5). I learned to mix fuses, ration power, and adapt. Still, my phone and laptop

batteries failed multiple times, and I had to replace them just to stay connected and continue working. In those moments, I was not outside the system – I was inside it, negotiating my own forms of constraint in order to sustain my presence. It was here that structuration theory's concept of duality became not just a framework but something I lived. Like the women I worked with, I too had to navigate overlapping constraints to sustain my own form of agency: this time, the agency of completing a PhD.

Figure 3.5 Fieldwork electricity management system

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph showing the improvised electricity system used during fieldwork. A battery (yellow box), charged externally via a vehicle, is connected to a converter (blue) to transform 12V into 240V, with the current then stabilised (red) before powering essential devices. When public electricity was briefly available, the stabiliser was connected directly to the grid while concurrently recharging the battery.

Meanwhile, on weekends, elites would arrive in the compound where I was staying – people tasked with managing or representing the local population. These interactions, often in social spaces where electricity was suddenly guaranteed, exposed troubling gaps. In conversation, it became clear that many of them had little knowledge of, or interest in, the lived realities of the women working in the fields. I was disturbed by the apathy and overwhelmed by a growing sense of injustice and disillusionment. I began to wonder whether this research could make any

difference at all if those in power simply did not care. I struggled with existential questions about justice, inequality, and the value of my work. As my supervisor reminded me during a moment of deep doubt, “Don’t give up! this is how you can help.” That reminder, along with the voices and resilience of the women in the field, reframed the purpose of this research. It was no longer simply about collecting data. It became about honouring those voices, navigating the tensions of power and privilege, and contributing, however modestly, to broader conversations about justice and visibility. I now see this as one of the possibilities that decolonial feminist ethnography creates. These positional insights did not remain in the background; they actively shaped my methodological choices, from how I conducted interviews to how I navigated consent and representation.

Acknowledging my positionality is not an attempt to resolve the inherent asymmetries of research but an attempt to be transparent about how they shaped this work. My identity, background, and personal journey influenced the questions I asked, the trust I was granted, and the meanings I drew from the field. As Robertson (2023) observes, researchers must navigate a tension between challenging their own familiarity to uncover hidden practices and using familiarity strategically to build rapport and gain access. This thesis is therefore not a neutral account but a situated and partial perspective, shaped by relational, emotional, and ethical entanglements, and by the ongoing labour of listening, adapting, and being accountable to the field relationships that made this knowledge, and this work, possible.

3.10 Methodological Limitations

While this study was designed with epistemological coherence and ethical care, its qualitative and field-based nature carries inherent limitations. By prioritising depth over breadth, the findings remain context-specific and not generalisable. The study engaged women across both rainy and dry seasons but did not include all actors in the urban farming value chain – such as market vendors or hired helpers – whose inclusion could have added further insight. While the study included both farmers and middlewomen, some past events (like evictions or land changes) were recalled by participants rather than being directly observed during the fieldwork. My presence as a Congolese woman, and my perceived affiliation with local elites, may have shaped how participants spoke, what they chose to share, or how they positioned themselves. Rather than viewing these dynamics as distortions, I treated them as meaningful relational performances embedded in the research context. Spiritual dimensions, though significant for

many women, were often expressed symbolically or indirectly, and thus remain only partially explored due to both analytical constraints and respect for participants' boundaries. These limitations also reflect the evolving nature of the methodology, which was shaped more by field realities than by preset protocols. Collectively, they reaffirm the study's commitment to grounded, respectful, and reflexive feminist inquiry.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations of the study, detailing the ethnographic approach, sampling strategies, including random and snowball sampling, and the reflexive stance taken to address issues of positionality, ethics, and knowledge production. By foregrounding a decolonial perspective, I have emphasised that knowledge is not extracted but offered, negotiated, and always partial, shaped by the relational dynamics of the field. These decolonial ethnographic methodological choices allowed women's voices and ways of doing to be prioritised. They enabled me to observe everyday practices and broader local dynamics shaping women's urban farming livelihoods in Kinshasa, while also recognising the partial and situated nature of the knowledge produced. To situate these findings, the next chapter turns to the social, economic, political, and historical contexts in which these livelihoods unfold, providing a foundation for understanding the dynamics discussed in this study.

4 Contextualising Urban Agriculture in Kinshasa

This chapter responds to the first sub-question of the study: What are the socio-economic and organisational dynamics of urban agriculture in Ndjili Kilambu? It provides the spatial, structural, and historical grounding necessary to understand how urban farming unfolds in Kinshasa and sets the foundation for analysing women's agency within this context. The chapter begins by outlining Kinshasa's broader spatial and administrative configuration to situate the peri-urban zone of Ndjili Kilambu, the site of this research. It then examines the district's agro-environmental and demographic characteristics to illuminate its role within the city's evolving urban landscape.

Subsequent sections explore the localised dynamics that shape urban farming, including local vocabulary, spatial and temporal logics, and the economic rhythms that underpin cultivation. These sections offer a grounded understanding of how urban agriculture is practised and understood in Ndjili Kilambu. A historical overview follows, tracing the evolution of urban agriculture from colonial planning through post-independence reforms to the current informal systems, highlighting both structural transformations and shifting state involvement. The chapter concludes with an examination of land governance, emphasising the blurred boundaries between farming and residential land, and the entanglement of statutory, customary, and informal systems that shape access and ownership. This contextual framing lays the groundwork for the empirical chapters that follow, which examine how women experience and navigate land constraints as expressions of agency, and how their practices reframe dominant perceptions of urban farming in Kinshasa.

4.1 Urban and Administrative Dynamics of Kinshasa

Kinshasa, the capital and largest city of the DRC, has held since 1923 a dual status as both city and province (ville-province), governed by a provincial governor. Spanning approximately 9,965 km² (Goossens, 1997), the city stretches over 30 km from east to west and over 15 km from north to south (Kinkela, 2001), with its administrative and commercial hub centred in Gombe. Kinshasa's exponential demographic growth has fundamentally reshaped its urban and peri-urban landscape. The last official census was done in 1984; however, faced with the rapid

and uncoordinated expansion of the city, Kinshasa has expanded from an estimated population of 400,000 in 1960 to over 17.7 million inhabitants in 2024, largely due to internal rural-to-urban migration (World Population Prospects 2024 Revision, 2024). This dramatic increase, shown in Figure 4.1, has taken place in the absence of coordinated urban planning or a recent national census.

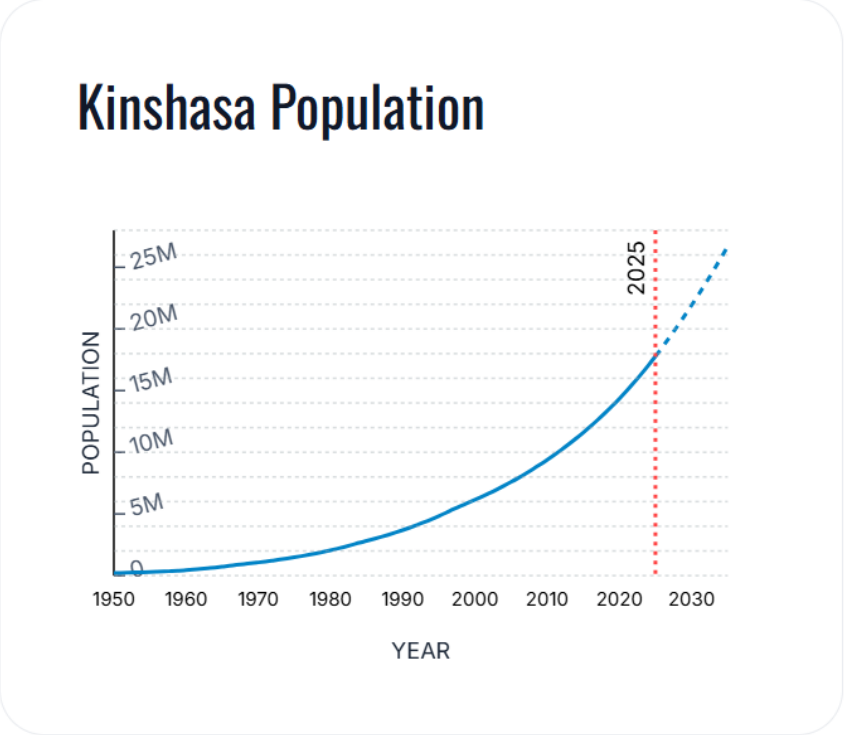

Figure 4.1 Kinshasa population growth (1960–2024)

(Source: World Population Prospects, 2024 Revision)

Kinshasa comprises 24 communes, grouped into four administrative districts – Lukunga, Funa, Mont-Amba, and Tshangu – and further categorised into six socio-spatial macro-zones based on historical development, infrastructure, and economic function. Figure 4.2 provides a clear visual overview of Kinshasa's administrative structure, showing its 24 communes arranged within these four districts. It highlights the southern peri-urban communes, including Mont-Ngafula, where this study is situated. These macro-zones include central residential communes (e.g., Gombe, N'Galiema), colonial-era cités (e.g., Barumbu, Lingwala), post-independence housing zones (e.g., Kalamu, Ngiri-Ngiri), southern urban extensions (e.g., Ngaba, Bumbu), peripheral communes (e.g., Kimbanseke, Masina), and peri-urban communes such as Mont-Ngafula, Maluku, and N'Sele (Bogaert and Halleux, 2015; Nzuzi, 2020). These last three peri-

urban zones, often referred to as semi-ruraux communes, occupy over 50% of Kinshasa's surface area. Characterised by lower population density and greater environmental diversity, they support land-based livelihoods rarely seen in central communes, including subsistence farming, livestock rearing, and forest product extraction. As transitional spaces where rural and urban identities converge, these zones are also sites of informal housing, speculative land investment, and evolving tenure practices. They embody the contradictions of urban sprawl: governed administratively as part of the city yet shaped by infrastructural and economic dynamics more typical of rural areas (Bogaert & Halleux, 2015). It is within this blurred urban–rural interface that the present study is situated, focusing on the commune of Mont-Ngafula – one of the largest and most prominent areas in Kinshasa's southern peri-urban belt, located approximately 30 km southwest of the city's urban core.

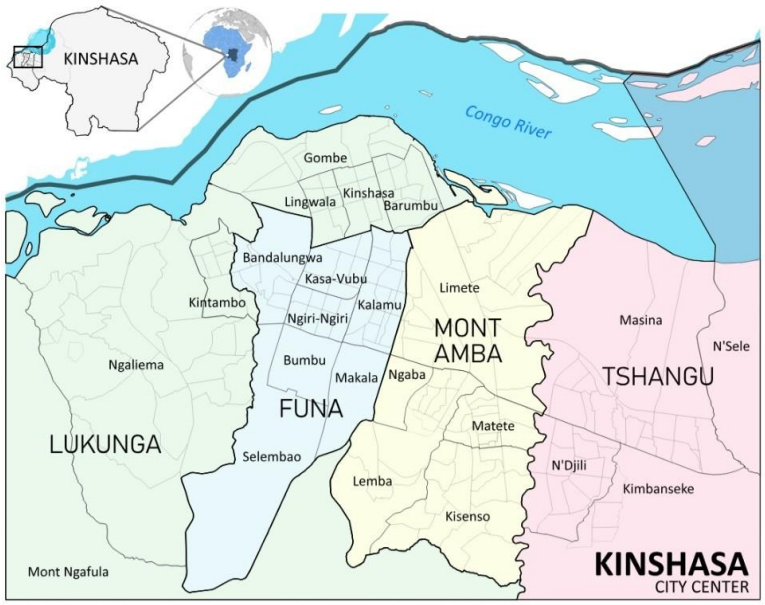

Figure 4.2 Administrative map of Kinshasa showing its 24 communes and four districts, and highlighting Southern peri-urban communes, including Mont-Ngafula

(Source: Belani Masamba et al., 2023)

4.2 Locating the Study: Mont-Ngafula and Ndjili Kilambu

Officially designated as a commune urbano-rurale in 1968, Mont-Ngafula spans approximately 359 km², making it one of Kinshasa's largest communes by land area (ACP, 2024). It is

bordered by Makala to the north, Lemba and Kisenso to the east, Selembao to the west, and the territory of Kasangulu in Kongo Central Province to the south. The commune extends westward to the Congo River and is intersected in the east by the Ndjili River. Its southern zone includes the fertile Lukaya Valley, long associated with agricultural activity and now shaped by rapid peri-urban settlement. Among its quartiers (districts) are Kindele, Kimwenza, Matadi-Mayo, Lutendele, and Ndjili Kilambu – the latter forming the focal site of this study.

As a space where land scarcity, farming practices, and informal expansion converge, Ndjili Kilambu offers a particularly rich lens for examining the dynamics of urban agriculture. It is also one of the peri-urban zones where the state has historically allocated land through agricultural concessions and designated certain areas as reserves or protected zones for farming-related activities (SSADR, 2010, p.12). Figure 4.3 shows Mont-Ngafula's spatial configuration, including the location of Ndjili Kilambu in relation to other quartiers and natural features such as rivers and valley systems.

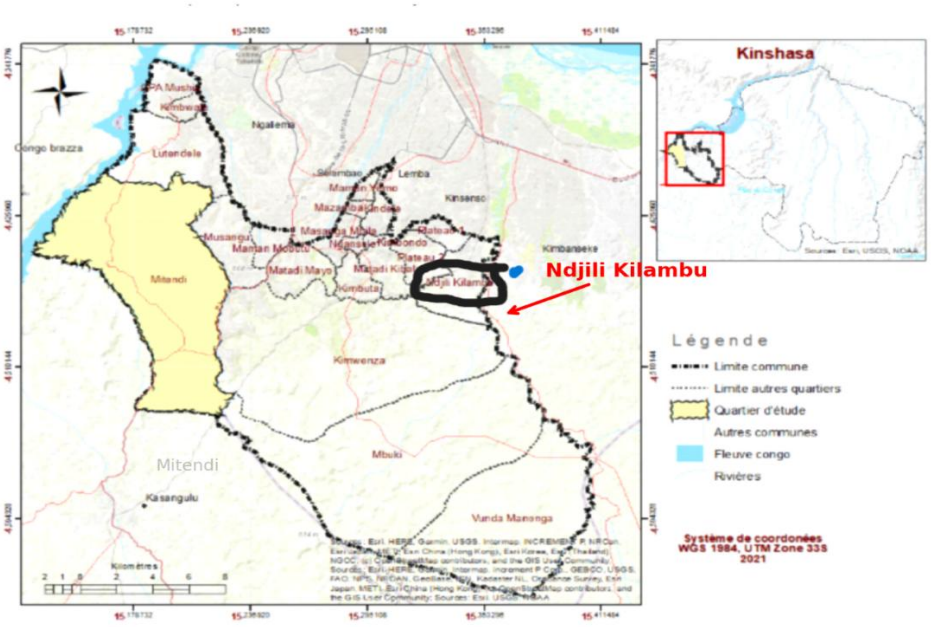

Figure 4.3 Map of Mont-Ngafula commune in Kinshasa, highlighting the study site of Ndjili Kilambu (red arrow)

(Source: Adapted by P. Tshomba from Miankoma, 2020)

The map shows main quartiers, commune boundaries, rivers, and proximity to Kinshasa's peri-urban frontier

A. Geographic and Environmental Characteristics

Ndjili Kilambu, a district (quartier) within Kinshasa's peri-urban belt, presents a semi-urban landscape shaped by wooded savanna, fertile valleys, and numerous watercourses. The terrain combines soft, whitish sandstone hills with fine yellow ochre sand and silty, moisture-retaining valley soils – conditions highly favourable for cultivation. The soil profile is typically of the A–C type, with a dark organic topsoil (A horizon) overlying a rocky sub-layer (C horizon), a structure common in Kinshasa's southern zones (Mufwaya and Muchuru, 2016). These physical features ease tillage and reduce the need for mechanised tools or hired male labour, making cultivation more accessible for women. As Mama Wivine, a farmer from Bandundu, explained, "I didn't want to stay in Plateau [Plateau de Batéké, a rural area in the Maluku commune of Kinshasa Province] because I would need to find a new husband to help with farming. Farming there is more challenging than it is here."

Her comment underscores how the favourable terrain supports women's autonomy in farming, lowering labour demands and costs. Waterways such as the Lukaya River – originating in Ntampa (Central Congo) and flowing into the Ndjili River – along with its tributaries (Luhamba, Kibansala, and Otraco), further enhance agricultural viability and serve as natural boundaries. This irrigation potential is illustrated in Figure 4.4, which shows a woman cultivating near a narrow stream in Ndjili Kilambu. Taken together, these features make the area a strategic site for urban agriculture along Kinshasa's peri-urban frontier.

Figure 4.4 Ma Nao harvesting vegetables beside a Lukaya River tributary in Kilambu Village

(Source: Photo by Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Ndjili Kilambu shares Kinshasa's tropical climate, characterised by distinct wet and dry seasons with moderate annual variation. Average temperatures range from 24°C to 26°C, with cooler conditions (15°C to 20°C) in elevated zones. July is typically the coolest month (c. 20°C), while November is the warmest (c. 27°C) (Mufwaya & Muchuru, 2016, p.2026). Relative humidity remains consistently high, averaging 79% (Muzingu, 2009). Rainfall averages around 1,500 mm annually, unevenly distributed throughout the year. November is the wettest month, with up to 268.1 mm of rainfall, while a short dry season usually spans late December to mid-February, followed by a secondary rain peak in March and April; on average, Kinshasa experiences rainfall on 113 days per year (Muzingu, 2009; Ebengo Bokako Christian et al., 2024). While these seasonal patterns once structured agricultural planning, farmers now report increasing climatic irregularity. A recurrent theme in interviews was the unpredictability of rainfall. Many attributed this shift to climate change, stating that "the rains no longer come as they used to". Whether this reflects recent climatic change or a long-standing feature of rain-fed agriculture remains difficult to verify. However, the widespread perception of change aligns with farmers' broader experience of precarity. Irregular rainfall has contributed to water scarcity, with some irrigation sources drying up. During dry periods, farmers must walk long distances to fetch water, an exhausting and time-consuming task that delays planting and reduces yields. In addition to prolonged dry seasons and late rains, farmers reported unseasonal

heavy downpours that damage crops and disrupt planting cycles. For some female farmers, these burdens can be especially demanding. In the absence of family or social support, they often have to hire additional labour to cope with the increased workload – raising production costs and adding further pressure to already fragile livelihoods.

B. Demographic and Migration Patterns

Ndjili Kilambu was officially established as a district in 1963 and covers approximately 14 sq. km. Ndjili Kilambu's population was estimated at 18,187 in 2022, according to the local district office – the only available official source of population tracking in the area. It is historically recognised as Humbu territory, with all local land chiefs (chefs coutumiers) drawn from this ethnic group. In earlier decades, the area received Téké and Lari migrants from Congo-Brazzaville, though this influx declined after a sleeping sickness epidemic in the 1950s. Today, the population reflects diverse internal migration patterns, with most residents originating from other provinces of the DRC. The district also has a notable female majority, comprising approximately 62% of the population (Local District Office, Ndjili Kilambu, 2022). The district is bordered to the north by Kisenso (separated by the Kuambila River), to the south by the Ndjili River, and to the west by the Plateau / Campus neighbourhood. Administratively, it is divided into 10 localities: Kilambu I and II, Kilambu Village, Lemba Imbu, Kintuadi, Lemba-Lukaya, Lususa, Pikas, SNEL, and Babo. Lemba Imbu functions as the district's administrative hub, hosting key institutions such as the local district office, police station, schools, and health centres. It also has the highest population concentration, reflecting its central role in governance and service provision.

C. Informal Settlement and Land Use Trends

While the terrain and climate of Ndjili Kilambu are favourable to vegetable cultivation, farmers remain highly vulnerable to fluctuating conditions. Insecurity adds another layer of difficulty. Ndjili Kilambu is marked by persistent socio-economic instability, including land disputes, crime, and gang violence. The presence of street gangs known as Kuluna poses direct risks to farmers. Participants reported theft of crops and instances of intimidation, including being pressured to hand over produce, such as peanuts, without compensation. Although police and administrative agents operate in the quartier, their role is often perceived as ambiguous or

exploitative. Farmers recounted being stopped at informal checkpoints and asked for bribes, with refusals sometimes leading to confiscation of produce or temporary detention.

Market access presents another constraint. Ndjili Kilambu lacks a centralised produce market, requiring farmers to travel more than 25 km to reach major urban markets like Matete or Zigida. While some rely on small informal markets (wenze), such as Eau Noire, these spaces are limited in capacity and unsuited for high-volume sales. As a result, many producers depend on middlewomen (maman ndunda/manoeuvre), who purchase crops directly from farms and transport them to city markets. Although this arrangement reduces farmers' profit margins, these intermediaries serve a critical role in bridging producers and consumers – a dynamic explored in later chapters. Land access also remains a core challenge. This study originally began in Lemba Imbu, historically home to the MFU cooperative farming site. However, due to the site's closure and broader security concerns, fieldwork shifted to Kilambu Village, a transition discussed in Chapter Three. Although Kilambu Village remains a key site for vegetable cultivation, most farmers do not reside there. Instead, many commute daily from other parts of the quartier, especially Lemba Imbu and the neighbouring Kisenso commune, returning home in the evening after working their plots. Together, these constraints demonstrate that while Ndjili Kilambu's natural environment offers agronomic advantages, the broader practice of urban farming remains deeply precarious. Women must navigate not only environmental unpredictability, but also insecurity, limited market infrastructure, and complex land governance. The next section introduces the specific dynamics of urban farming in Ndjili Kilambu, situating the quartier within Kinshasa's broader agricultural history.

4.3 Understanding Urban Agriculture in Kinshasa

A. Defining Urban Farming and its Local Practice: Scope and Local Vocabulary

Urban, intra-urban, and peri-urban agriculture are often defined based on spatial and functional criteria (see Margiotta, 1996); and Chapter Two of this thesis). Typically, distinctions hinge on proximity and connection to the urban core. However, in Kinshasa, where urban expansion is fragmented and uneven, and often described as a gradient from upstream to downstream, fixed boundaries between urban and rural are difficult to establish (Trefon, 2011). As a result, the practical distinction between urban and peri-urban agriculture becomes blurred. In this context,

agricultural activity across these zones is commonly referred to collectively as urban agriculture, especially when its main function, producing and distributing food for the urban population, remains consistent. Urban agriculture in Kinshasa includes both crop and livestock production across urban and peri-urban areas (see Figure 4.5). Among its various forms, market gardening, locally referred to as *bilanga ya ndunda* (vegetable fields), emerges as the most prominent. This subsector alone is estimated to meet nearly 90% of the city's fresh vegetable needs (Musibono et al., 2011; Minengu et al., 2018).

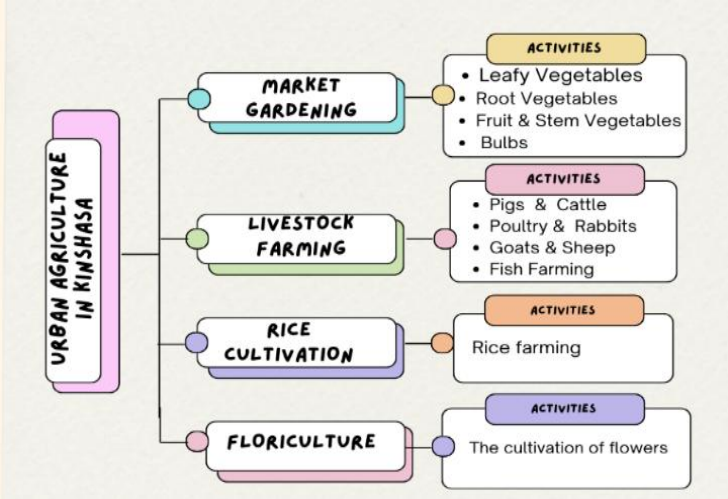

Figure 4.5 Main sectors and activities of urban agriculture in Kinshasa

(Source: Adapted by P. Tshomba from Minengu et al., 2018, p. 63)

Given the central role of market gardening in food security and household livelihoods, this study focuses primarily on this form of food production. Throughout this thesis, the terms urban agriculture, market gardening, and urban farming are used interchangeably to refer to the cultivation and distribution of vegetables within Kinshasa. While these terms may carry distinct meanings in other contexts, their use here reflects both the overlapping practices observed on the ground and the way local actors themselves describe these activities. Importantly, urban agriculture in Kinshasa extends beyond cultivation to include a broader value chain, encompassing input supply, production, transport, selling, and resale. In this study, the term "women in urban agriculture" refers to all women engaged across these interconnected stages, whether as farmers (*maman ya bilanga*), middlewomen (*maman ya ndunda*, *maman manoeuvre*), helpers, or others involved in related activities. By contrast, "female farmers" (*maman ya bilanga*) is used more specifically to describe those directly responsible for

planting, cultivating, and managing vegetable plots. These distinctions reflect not only the organisation of Kinshasa's urban agriculture system but also the ways participants themselves described their roles, using Lingala terms rooted in everyday practice (see Figure 4.6).

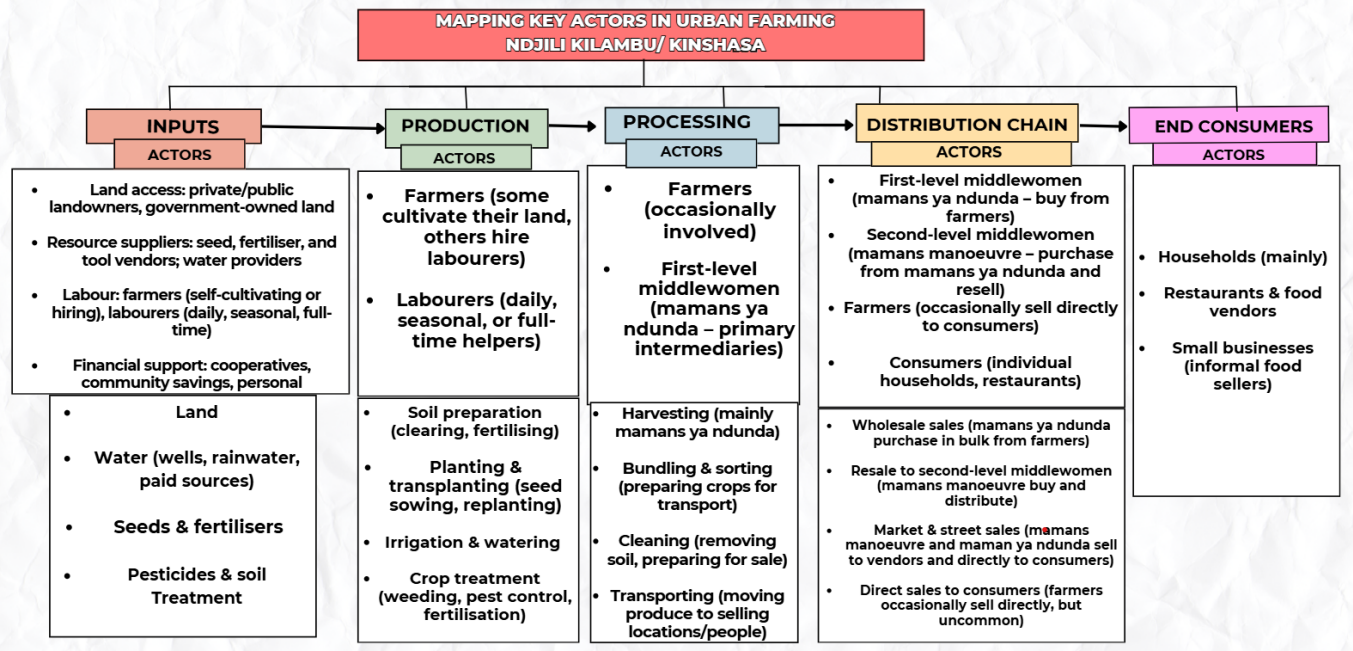

Figure 4.6 The urban farming supply chain in Ndjili Kilambu / Kinshasa

(Source: P. Tshomba, 2023, based on fieldwork)

Building on the urban farming value chain outlined above, which highlights the varied roles women play across the system, it becomes essential to examine how these roles are enacted on the ground, particularly by female farmers.

B. Localised Spatial Logics of Urban Farming: Practices and Land Use

In Ndjili Kilambu, farmers commonly differentiate between "gardening" and "farming"; while both fall under the broader category of market gardening, this is a distinction that carries important practical implications. This local distinction reflects differences in crop types, environmental conditions, land use, and labour demands. For those renting land, it also affects how plots are selected and how payments are calculated. Although gardening and farming often overlap in practice, sometimes even within a single field, they are locally understood as distinct cultivation approaches. The section that follows outlines these practices, beginning with gardening before turning to farming.

B.1 Gardening Practices

Gardening (*bilanga ya ndunda*) in Ndjili Kilambu typically refers to the cultivation of water-intensive vegetables such as sweet potato leaves, amaranth, aubergines, scotch bonnet, and spinach – some of the most commonly grown crops in the area. These vegetables require regular watering and are usually cultivated on plots located near rivers like the Lukaya or its tributaries, where irrigation is more accessible. Their growth cycles are relatively short, with most reaching maturity within 30 to 45 days. The basic production unit is the Mukala – a raised vegetable bed measuring approximately 1.20 m by 20 m (about 14.4 m²). As shown in Figure 4.7, the Mukala is designed to facilitate easy watering and plant spacing. While this size is widely recognised as a standard, farmers frequently adjust the width to suit their needs. As one participant explained, “With one and a half metres or more, it’s easier to water from one side. But with two metres, I must go around to reach the other side. I can’t just water from one side. However, some farmers choose this dimension because they believe it helps them sell better.”

Despite this flexibility, 15 Mikala (plural of Mukala) is commonly cited as the informal benchmark for small-scale gardening. This measure represents both a manageable workload for one person and a reference point for hiring farm labour and calculating pay, even though it is not officially codified.

Figure 4.7 Layout of a single Mukala (vegetable bed)

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Among farmers who rent land for gardening, monthly payments are typically expected. This assumes that short-cycle vegetables enable consistent monthly income, though many farmers contest this claim in practice. Nonetheless, this gardening system, shaped by short harvest cycles, spatial proximity to water, and labour expectations, forms a crucial pillar in women's broader agricultural strategies.

B.2 Farming Practices

By contrast, "farming" (bilanga) in this context refers to the cultivation of rain-fed crops such as cassava (grown for its tuberous roots rather than its leaves), peanuts, and occasionally maize, three of the most cultivated crops in the area. These crops are typically planted in hilly zones, farther from rivers or irrigation sources, and have longer growth cycles, often taking six months to a year to mature. Farmers also grow sorrel in these zones, a short-cycle crop that, while less water-intensive, thrives without regular irrigation. The standard plot size for farming is approximately 50 m x 50 m, though actual cultivation depends on farmers' available labour and inputs (see Figure 4.8). Unlike vegetable beds, farming plots (as shown in Figure 4.7) are less structured, with wider spacing and fewer irrigation needs. Farming is often perceived locally as a women's activity, partly because it is seen as less labour-intensive than gardening, which demands constant watering and close monitoring. Farming land is typically rented on an annual basis. This arrangement is often referred to locally as "buying" the land, in contrast to "renting", which is typically used to describe gardening plots. The term "buying" reflects a perception of longer-term use and investment. These plots, however, are often left fallow after two consecutive growing seasons to preserve soil fertility.

Figure 4.8 Spatial layout of a cassava roots field in Kilambu Village

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

B.3 Intercropping and the Overlap Between Gardening and Farming

While gardening and farming differ in crop types, water needs, and spatial organisation, they frequently overlap in practice. A common strategy among female farmers in Ndjili Kilambu is intercropping – the cultivation of multiple crops within the same plot to maximise land use and optimise returns.

Figure 4.9 Intercropping across multiple vegetable beds (Mikala) in Ndjili Kilambu

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

The image shows cassava interplanted with early-stage amaranth and sweet potato leaves along the edges. It illustrates the use of Mikala (raised beds) for intercropping – demonstrating how farmers maximise spatial organisation and yield within a single plot. Farmers often choose crops like cassava leaves, sweet potato leaves, and sorrel for both their market value and their capacity to absorb residual nutrients from compost applied to primary crops like spinach or amaranth. This nutrient synergy reduces the need for additional fertilisation, cutting input costs while enhancing overall productivity. A clear example of this adaptive logic comes from Ma Marie-Jeanne, who explained, “The peanuts planted in January will be harvested from April to July. Then we replant in October during the rainy season – but still in the same area… The money often comes from the extras. After harvesting peanuts, I still have sorrel that I planted between the peanuts. In the dry season, it takes two and a half weeks to grow. If it’s raining, it takes three weeks. The sorrel keeps growing after each harvest until the end of the season, and I make money from that.”

Her strategy highlights how farmers stagger short- and long-cycle crops – combining what might be categorised as gardening (e.g., sorrel) and farming (e.g., peanuts) – to ensure income continuity across seasons and reduce risk. In short, these overlapping practices demonstrate that while distinctions exist between gardening and farming, local actors view them as part of

a flexible and adaptive system, collectively referred to as urban farming. This framing reflects the strategic pragmatism with which women navigate resource constraints, environmental cycles, and livelihood demands. Understanding this dual logic – both ecological and economic – is essential for grasping how women organise their agricultural work across space and time. The next section builds on this foundation by examining how seasonal rhythms influence planting strategies and income flows.

C. Situated Temporal Logics of Urban Farming: Seasonality and Crop Timing

As Ma Bibi explained, pricing decisions in urban farming are shaped less by macroeconomic forces than by seasonal shifts and rainfall patterns: “I was talking about how vegetables get expensive. For instance, amaranths get expensive due to rainfall. Amaranth prices don't depend on the economy… we don't depend on the economy; we depend on the season for our pricing.” This reflection captures a localised economic logic – one rooted in lived environmental cycles rather than formal market structures. The heatmap below visualises typical growing and off-season periods for commonly cultivated crops in Kinshasa.

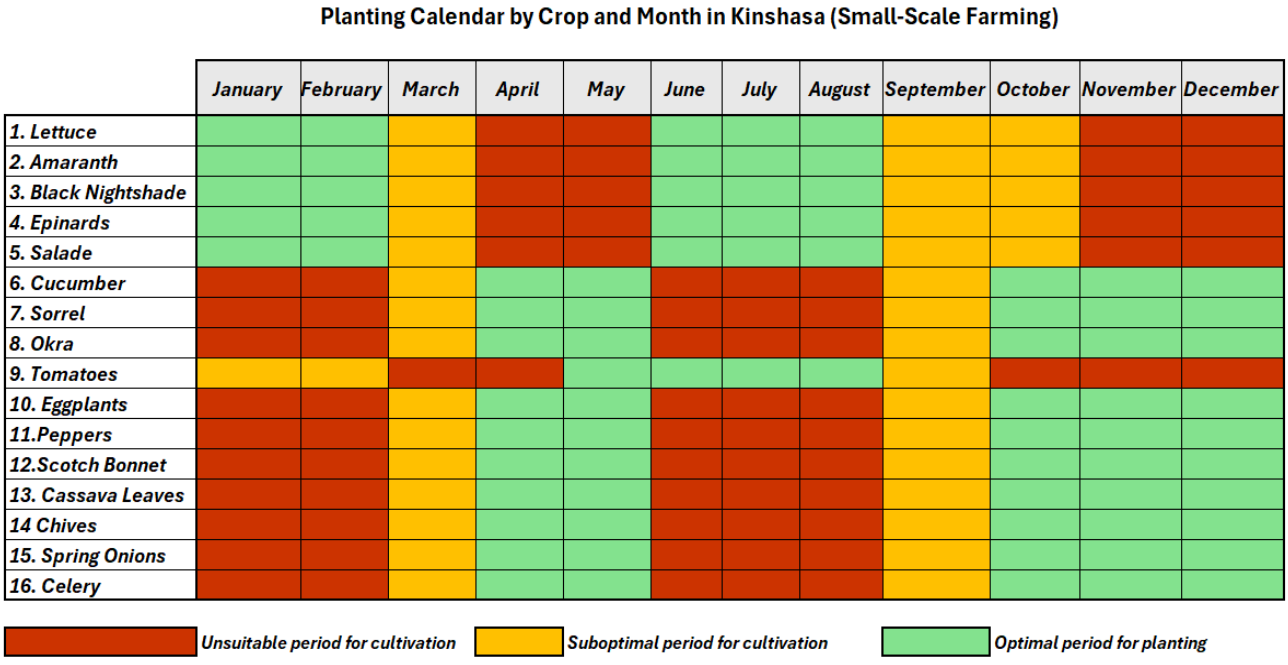

Figure 4.10 Planting calendar by crop and month in Kinshasa (small-scale farming)

(Source: P. Tshomba, field data, co-constructed with farmers in Ndjili Kilambu, Kinshasa, 2023)

While the planting calendar serves as a useful guide, it is not strictly followed. Farmers make planting decisions based on embodied knowledge, input availability, anticipated rainfall, and market fluctuations. Some farmers plant counter-seasonally, either from necessity or to benefit from higher prices during scarcity. Others shift planting schedules in response to unpredictable rains or extended dry spells. In practice, the calendar functions less as a fixed timetable and more as a flexible framework. This allows women to stagger planting cycles, layer crops, and maintain income throughout the year, even under uncertain environmental conditions.

D. Situated Economic Practices in Urban Farming: Inputs and Daily Returns

To understand the financial logic underpinning urban agriculture in Ndjili Kilambu, it is crucial to examine both input costs and daily returns – what many participants described as their enterprise. Rather than offering a universal model, the cost table that follows (Table 4.1) reflects a locally embedded economic reasoning, grounded in field observations, participant testimonies, and crop cycle records. The data reveal that while urban farming requires regular financial input, it can yield modest yet meaningful returns in the context of Kinshasa's informal economy. Spinach, frequently cited by participants as one of their most cultivated leafy vegetables, offers a useful case for analysing production costs. Table 4.1, below, summarises typical direct input expenses for cultivating spinach on a single Mukala (20 m x 1.5 m) – the standard unit of production – and then scales these figures to 15 Mikala, a surface area commonly managed by female farmers Kinshasa, as discussed above.

Table 4.2 Estimated input costs for spinach cultivation on one Mukala and across 15 Mikala

	Cost Category	Quantity (1 Mukala)	Total Cost (FC)	Total Cost (USD)
1	Spinach seeds (measured by 'boîte de tomate', ~100g)	2.08	312.0	0.14
2	Manure	58.2	11640.0	5.06
3	Fertilizers (NPK, Urea)	0.21	1050.0	0.46
4	Crop treatment	1.0	5333.33	2.32
5	Cassava stem cuttings (1m)	26.0	11960.0	5.2
6	Sweet potato vine cuttings	1.0	50.0	0.02
7	Labor (estimated per Mukala)	1.0	10750.0	4.67
8	Total for 1 Mukala		41095.33	17.87
9	Estimated Total for 15 Mikala		616429.95	268.01

(Source: P. Tshomba, 2023, based on fieldwork)

While the per-unit costs presented in Table 4.1 reflect actual prices on the ground, the overall estimates should be understood as indicative rather than definitive. Many key inputs, such as labour, land access, equipment, and seed recovery, are highly variable across contexts. For instance, some women may pay up to US$70 per month for hired labour, while others depend on unpaid household contributions or reciprocal labour arrangements negotiated through Toyokani (agreement). Most farmers already own basic tools, and many reduce seed costs through seed-saving practices or the use of natural pest treatments. As such, these figures offer a general framework rather than fixed totals. They reflect an adaptive, negotiated mode of farming shaped by improvisation, resource availability, and embodied knowledge, and underpinned, most importantly, by social capital, as further discussed in Chapter Seven.

Table 4.2 provides an estimate of income from a single spinach harvest, again scaled from 1 Mukala to 15 Mikala based on a single harvest.

Table 3 Estimated earnings per Mukala and scaled projection for 15 Mikala

(Source: P. Tshomba, field data, 2023)

	Product	Price per Mukala (FC)	Price per Mukala (USD
0	Spinach (Normal quality)*	50000	21.74
1	Spinach (High quality)*	70000	30.43
2	Spinach (Average quality)*	60000	26.09
3	Sweet Potato Leaves*	15000	6.52
4	Cassava Leaves (Caoutchouc Variety)*	5000	2.17
5	Estimated Total Income (1 Mukala, avg. quality)*	80000	34.78
6	Estimated Total Income (15 Mukala, avg. quality)*	1200000	521.74

Note: Income estimates are based on a single harvest per Mukala. However, crops like spinach, sweet potato leaves, and cassava leaves often support multiple harvests per cycle. Spinach, for instance, can be harvested two to three times following the initial 35-day cycle, depending on soil quality. Sweet potato leaves are typically harvested every 10 days after an initial 26-day growth period, while cassava leaves begin yielding after approximately 2.5 months, with subsequent harvests every 10 days. These additional harvests usually require no new inputs apart from weeding, meaning that actual returns are often considerably higher than single-harvest projections indicate.

While Table 4.2 shows gross earnings, actual profits vary due to fluctuating costs, soil quality, and seasonal conditions. Still, these earnings are significant within Kinshasa's local economy. For context, many informal workers – including domestic workers, street vendors, and some public servants – report earning between US$50 and US$150 per month (ILO- Organisation internationale du travail, 2020; World Bank, 2024). A single off-season spinach harvest from 15 Mikala can yield upwards of US$600, with lower-end in-season revenues still exceeding US$350. Even after accounting for input costs, urban farming provides a meaningful income stream – especially for women who harvest multiple times per year or combine farming with

other activities. While modest in absolute terms, these earnings play a vital role in the local economy, supporting personal and household needs, education, and reinvestment in farming or informal savings. For many women in Ndjili Kilambu, urban agriculture is a skilled and strategic livelihood that they actively shape and sustain through both financial investment and embodied knowledge. Yet, these present-day dynamics are not spontaneous; they are rooted in deeper historical and structural processes. The following section traces how these foundations were laid – beginning with colonial and postcolonial institutional frameworks and evolving through shifts in gendered and social participation.

4.4 Historical and Structural Foundations of Urban Agriculture

A. Precolonial and Colonial Agricultural Patterns Kinshasa

Urban agriculture in Kinshasa predates colonial intervention. While not labelled as such, organised peri-urban and settlement-based farming was practised extensively by the Téké-Humbu populations around Pool Malebo, particularly along the Congo and Ndjili Rivers (Vansina, 1973).These systems were rotational, rooted in communal land tenure, and guided by seasonal rhythms tied to ecological knowledge and spiritual beliefs (Muzingu, 2009; Makisosila, 2018). Colonial urban planning reshaped these practices through the introduction of a ceinture verte (greenbelt), first proposed in 1912 by Georges Moulaert. The greenbelt aimed to encircle the city with agricultural zones supplying fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy to European settlers. It included “neutral zones” 400–800 m wide meant to separate Indigenous and European areas (Nzuzi, 2011; LeLoutre and Vigneron, 2015). Over time, these buffer zones were informally settled by Indigenous populations and Mediterranean traders, leading to contested land uses and multiple urban plans – from Moulaert (1920) to Riquier (1930, 1949) and Schoentjes (1933). Most plans were only partially implemented, with some buffer areas repurposed into recreational and commercial spaces, such as the botanical garden and zoo in Gombe (De Sejournet, 2010, as cited in (Bode, 2021).

By the 1950s, colonial policy shifted towards formalised, large-scale market gardening, beginning with a project on the right bank of the Ndjili valley aimed at supplying Léopoldville (now Kinshasa) with fresh vegetables. Spearheaded by Belgian agronomist Voldeker, the initiative covered 28 hectares divided into 21-are plots. In 1956, the project expanded with the

establishment of the Kimbanseke perimeter as an extension of the Ndjili site. Voldeker oversaw the demarcation of both zones. In each location, cooperatives were organised to support production and marketing, with gardeners receiving extensive technical supervision (Muzingu, 2009, p.57; (Redwood, 2009). These centres primarily focused on cultivating European vegetables to meet the dietary demands of colonial settlers. However, while colonial authorities institutionalised market gardening for European consumption, Congolese women sustained local food systems through informal and often-overlooked agricultural practices.

B. Post-Independence Institutionalisation of Urban Agriculture

In the post-independence period, particularly during the 1970s, the Congolese government expanded institutional support for urban agriculture, often in partnership with foreign technical advisers. In 1972, the Centre de Commercialisation des Produits Maraîchers et Fruitiers (CECOMAF) was established in Ndjili to coordinate vegetable marketing, input distribution, and local production (Wagemakers Inge et al., 2010). By 1977, CECOMAF was formally integrated into the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Rural Development (Ministère du Développement Rural) was also established that same year to further support agricultural initiatives (SSADR, 2010). A further step came with the 1989 decree (Arrêté no. SC/60/BGV/89), which mandated that each official market gardening zone be affiliated with a cooperative. These cooperatives were grouped under the Union des Coopératives Maraîchères de Kinshasa (UCOOPMAKIN), which worked closely with CECOMAF to distribute seeds and fertilisers, and provide technical assistance.

At its peak, CECOMAF managed 101 hectares of farmland across 12 designated sites, including Lemba Imbu, Ndjili, and Funa, and supported over 4,300 primary producers and more than 8,000 farmers in total (Goossens, 1997; Wagemakers et al., 2010). This period is often referred to as the golden age of urban agriculture in Kinshasa. The state provided subsidised inputs, organised transport to markets, and maintained essential agricultural infrastructure. Urban farming gained social recognition, economic viability, and increasing professionalisation during the 1970s and 1980s through cooperative structures supported by the state (Wagemakers et al., 2010). However, by the late 1980s, institutional support began to unravel. PASMAKIN replaced CECOMAF as the primary coordinating body, introducing new

emphases on farm management, cooperative governance, and adult literacy. Yet its impact remained limited (Redwood, 2009; Masiala Bode et al., 2018).

In 1996, the Ministry of Rural Development launched the Service National de l'Horticulture Urbaine et Périurbaine (SENAHUP) under Arrêté Ministériel no. 26/CAP/MIN/AGRI DR AL/96 du 18/09/1996. Supported by international partners such as the FAO, SENAHUP aimed to coordinate horticultural activities, promote cooperative organisation, and supervise fruit and vegetable production in Kinshasa(Muzingu, 2009; FAO, 2010; Minengu et al., 2018). Importantly, SENAHUP prioritised female farmers, recognising that increases in women's income tend to benefit entire households (Suka and Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022, p.3). Yet in practice, SENAHUP's services have remained largely ineffective due to persistent shortages of material, financial, and sometimes human resources (SSADR, 2010, p.10; FAO, 2011). While these institutional efforts were intended to structure and professionalise urban agriculture, they unfolded alongside broader social and economic transformations that reshaped who participates in the sector and why.

C. Gendered and Social Shifts in Urban Farming Participation

According to SENAHUP's 2002 report, approximately 18,831 urban farmers were active in Kinshasa at the time, 10,391 of whom were women (Minengu et al., 2018). While there is no precise recent data on the number of people currently involved in urban farming in Kinshasa, the FAO (2010) estimated that, across five Congolese cities including Kinshasa, the sector employed approximately 60,000 people along the value chain. However, due to the informal nature of much of this work, the actual number may be higher. Gender-disaggregated figures remain limited, but existing studies suggest that men's presence in urban farming increased notably by the late 1990s following the economic collapse (Wagemakers et al., 2010). Historically, women were rarely employed in the industrial sector, as colonial and capitalist systems relied on their informal labour and access to land to offset the costs of social reproduction (Roberts, 1981). This structural division positioned women as the primary actors in agriculture, particularly in peri-urban and rural settings.

The broader collapse of the Congolese economy in the early 1990s, marked by hyperinflation, looting, and the closure of many companies and the withdrawal of investors (Goossens, 1997),

triggered mass layoffs that disproportionately affected men due to their concentration in formal employment. As a result, there was a significant influx of male participants into urban farming. Once considered supplementary, urban agriculture increasingly became a primary means of livelihood. Consequently, many Kinois(e) (refers to inhabitant of Kinshasa) perceive men's engagement in agriculture as something done "by default", in contrast to the enduring association of farming with women, a perception documented by Mankondo Idrissa and Musalu Sikisa, (2021). While this perception persists, urban farming increasingly attracts participants from diverse educational and social backgrounds. For example, whereas those seeking agricultural land concession before the 1990s typically had only secondary-level education, Bode (2021) notes that since 2000, university-educated individuals have become more involved. The sector now includes professionals such as Mr Massamba, a government schoolteacher and head of Kilambu Village; Marlene, a registered nurse who cultivates vegetables near her home; and a local pastor who serves as president of a farming cooperative. These examples illustrate how urban agriculture continues to function not only as an economic buffer but also as a socially valued and adaptable livelihood within Kinshasa's changing urban landscape. Nevertheless, women remain dominant across the urban farming value chain, particularly in sales, where male participation is still very limited. While urban agriculture in Kinshasa offers women a central and strategic role in sustaining livelihoods, despite limited government support and a long history of adaptation, it unfolds within a complex and contested land landscape. The following section explores the governance structures that shape land in the city's farming spaces.

4.5 Land Governance and the Meaning of Ownership

Gaddis et al.,(2018, p.4) argue that land ownership holds less relevance in urban contexts, where housing can be rented and employment is largely detached from agriculture. They caution against comparing land and housing ownership across rural and urban settings. However, this assumption overlooks the realities of urban agriculture in Kinshasa. While this study does not attempt a direct comparison between rural and urban systems, it shows that land use in Kinshasa, particularly within urban agriculture, is often more fluid and multifunctional than in either rural areas or formal city zones (Suchá et al., 2020). In Ndjili Kilambu, residential plots are routinely used for farming, while land previously designated for agriculture is increasingly converted into housing. As a result, residential and agricultural land become

practically indistinguishable in both function and value for urban farmers. This subsection examines the dynamics of land ownership in Kinshasa to contextualise the structural conditions that shape women's agency in urban agriculture.

A. Historical Evolution of Land Governance in the DRC

Land governance in the DRC is shaped by a complex interplay of customary traditions, colonial legacies, and post-independence legal reforms. This historical layering has created a pluralistic and often contradictory system that affects how land is accessed, managed, and owned, particularly in urban and peri-urban zones like Kinshasa.

A.1 Precolonial Communal Stewardship and Kinship Authority

In the precolonial period, land in what is now the DRC was governed communally through kinship-based systems. Land use rights were collectively held by clans or lineages, and plots allocated based on familial ties and practical needs (Muswamba, 2006; Bode et al., 2019). These governance systems varied significantly across regions. Some groups operated as acephalous societies, lacking centralised authority and organised through horizontal, segmentary lineage structures (Battory, 2020). Others developed more hierarchical formations through processes such as conflict resolution, alliance-building, or territorial consolidation (Mwilo-Mwihi Watuta, 2018). One notable example of centralised organisation was the Kingdom of Kongo, a polity that stretched along the Atlantic coast from the late 14th to the mid-19th centuries, encompassing parts of present-day western DRC, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon (Lauro, 2020). Its political structure was anchored in matrilineal Kandas, which are perpetual, exogamous corporate groups with distinct names, traditions, and internal governance systems. Each Kanda managed collective affairs related to land use and surplus distribution through lineage-based committees, typically headed by two leaders, one male and one female, though male authority increasingly dominated over time (Lauro, 2020; Hilton, 1983). The Kanda ideology emphasised the continuity between living and ancestral members, with land rights embedded in descent relations rather than individual ownership. While the system could be hierarchical, with leaders appropriating surplus and exercising authority, it could also operate as an egalitarian network where chiefs acted as representatives of lineage councils (Hilton, 1983).

In contrast, in South Kivu in the eastern DRC, the Bulega, for instance, organised political and land authority around patrilineal clans composed of multiple lineages and extended families. Authority resided within the clan, typically led by the eldest male, with no overarching chief above the clan level. Unlike regions where lineages functioned independently, in Bulega the clan served as the primary political unit – a localised polity or is – rather than a subdivision of a larger tribal structure. Leadership was intrafamilial, based on seniority, and often tied to ritual associations such as Bwami (Mwilo-Mwihi Watuta, 2018). Clan leaders were seen less as rulers and more as elder brothers, whose authority was exercised relationally rather than coercively. Land was held collectively by families and lineages, with each household managing its own domain. There was no centralised figure responsible for allocating land. Boundaries between clans were conceptualised not as fixed borders but as cultural transition zones, fostering relational exchange with neighbouring groups (Mwilo-Mwihi Watuta, 2018).

While the structural differences between the Bulega's patrilineal clan system in the east (South Kivu) and the Kongo Kingdom's matrilineal Kanda system in the west were significant, particularly in terms of kinship organisation and the governance of land and political authority, a core principle unified these diverse systems: the inalienability of land. Land was considered ancestral and sacred, deeply tied to memory, identity, and intergenerational continuity, and therefore could not be sold or permanently transferred. Access to land was granted through occupation and sustained cultivation, while unused plots could be reclaimed by others (Yamba Yamba, 2014; De Boeck, 2020). This relational and conditional mode of access was not limited to local users – it also shaped interactions with external actors. During early Portuguese contact in the 16th century, particularly in the Kongo Kingdom, land was only granted on a temporary basis. Once vacated, it automatically reverted to the kin group (Bode et al., 2018). In gender terms, both men and women held user rights to land, rather than ownership. However, women's modes of access and degrees of control varied significantly across regions. In some areas, such as the Kongo Kingdom, women exercised substantial authority over land-related decisions. In others, their access was mediated through male relatives, fathers, uncles, or husbands (Muswamba, 2006; Lauro, 2020). These variations reflect a broader precolonial ethos in which land governance was rooted in stewardship, relational responsibility, and localised autonomy, operating entirely outside capitalist property regimes (Trefon, 2004; Wagemakers Inge et al., 2010). Colonial interventions, most notably the generalised imposition of the chefferie system, displaced these kinship-based structures with centralised hierarchies and bureaucratic authority

across the DRC (Battory, 2020). In doing so, they reconfigured both the political structures of land governance and gendered power relations through the commodification of land, as discussed below, laying the groundwork for many of the land-related tensions and exclusions explored in the chapters that follow.

A.2 Colonial Appropriation and the Legalisation of Expropriation

The imposition of colonial rule fundamentally transformed land governance in Congo. Following the 1885 Berlin Conference and the establishment of the Congo Free State under King Leopold II, colonial authorities sought to appropriate land not deemed "actively cultivated" by European standards (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004). The 1885 Décret sur les terres vacantes (Vacant Land Decree) institutionalised land appropriation through procedures such as the enquête de vacance, a bureaucratic process that ostensibly involved local consultation but redefined Indigenous practices like shifting cultivation and fallowing as abandonment. This enabled the colonial state to classify vast areas as terra nullius (Boelaert, 1956; Maximy, 1984). Communal lands were systematically reclassified as vacant and registered under statutory law, making them available for private purchase. This reinterpretation marked a decisive break from precolonial systems in which land was inalienable and embedded in ancestral relations (Bode et al., 2018). When Belgium annexed the Congo Free State, renaming it the Belgian Congo in 1908, it did not dismantle existing land governance frameworks; rather, it entrenched them further (Anstey, 1966). The 1910 Decree and subsequent reforms integrated customary chiefs into the colonial administrative hierarchy, turning them into what Roger Anstey (1966) described as "the bottom rung of European authority". These land chiefs were positioned as intermediaries, simultaneously representing colonial authority and local customary leadership, but their dual role primarily served Belgian interests by facilitating the implementation of land policies and reinforcing control over Indigenous populations (Tunga-Bau, 2010; Van Bockhaven, 2019). By 1953, a colonial decree formally established four categories of land tenure – private, state, communal, and concessionary – deepening legal pluralism and institutionalising a fragmented system in which colonial, customary, and private regimes overlapped, often in contradiction. This reinforced both institutional ambiguity and the commodification of land (Wagemakers Inge et al., 2010; Boone, 2014; De Boeck, 2020). Within this framework, colonial land policies entrenched gender inequalities by codifying patriarchal norms and reinforcing a division of labour that positioned men as landowners and

women as unpaid or informal agricultural workers. The influence of the Roman Catholic Church and the maternalist ideology of Belgian authorities shaped a distinctly gendered colonial project, in which women were targeted by restrictive legal and social reforms (Lauro, 2020).

These reforms were rooted in the 1804 Napoleonic Civil Code – adopted in Belgium and extended to the Congo during colonial rule – which formed the legal foundation of the Congolese civil system. Operating under the doctrine of puissance maritale, this code rendered married women legally incapacitated, barring them from entering contracts without their husbands' consent (Muswamba, 2006; De Ruysscher, 2014; Butedi et al., 2025). These restrictions were formalised through colonial land administration procedures. For instance, land applications required civil status verification, and married women were legally obligated to obtain spousal consent (Yamba Yamba, 2014, p.175). Even when granted, this consent remained conditional and revocable, reinforcing women's legal vulnerability and contributing to their exclusion from formal land ownership (Yamba Yamba, 2014; Muswamba, 2006). This legal restructuring imposed rigid categories that privileged male authority and curtailed women's autonomy, in contrast to precolonial systems where land access and control were embedded in kinship ties and communal responsibilities, as discussed earlier. By the time Congo gained independence in 1960, these colonial policies had entrenched gendered exclusions and introduced a fragmented system of land governance – dynamics that continue to complicate land access and ownership, as examined in the following section.

A.3 Post-Independence Reforms and the Centralisation of State Authority

The Fundamental Law of 1960 recognised customary authority as part of local governance, a role further defined in the 1961 framework outlining the powers of customary chiefs. The 1964 Constitution, the first post-independence legal instrument on land tenure, reaffirmed their authority and laid the foundation for the Bakajika Law, enacted in 1966 and expanded in 1971 and 1973 (Wagemakers et al., 2010). The current legal basis remains Law no. 73-021 of July 20, 1973, amended by Law no. 80-008 of July 18, 1980. This law declared all land to be state property, granting the government exclusive rights to allocate it through perpetual or temporary concessions. Yet even under this centralised model, customary approval is still required before administrative validation of land transactions (SSADR, 2010). The enduring role of traditional

authorities has since been reinforced by the 2006 Constitution, the 2015 decentralisation laws, and the 2022 National Land Policy, which reaffirmed state ownership while formally recognising customary actors in land governance (GLTN, 2022). Together, these developments reflect a plural and overlapping system of land tenure, where different regimes coexist and interact. Drawing on Ferrari and Tshimbalanga's (2015) typology, three dominant forms of landholding currently operate in the DRC:

Customary ownership: Based on ancestral lineage, inheritance, and long-term social recognition. Customary chiefs continue to allocate land, especially in peri-urban zones like Ndjili Kilambu, using unwritten norms and relational authority.

Documented (semi-formal) ownership: Includes receipts, handwritten sales agreements, and attestations issued by neighbourhood committees. These are accepted locally but lack full legal standing in national courts or registries.

Formal legal ownership: Titles issued by the national cadastre. While these provide the strongest legal protection, they are costly, difficult to obtain, and largely inaccessible to most Congolese.

This legal pluralism underscores a broader reality: land ownership in the DRC is constituted through multiple forms of recognition: legal, customary, social, and relational. While some women hold formal land titles, others rely on customary or informal arrangements that would render them invisible if landholding were assessed solely through official documentation (Bomuhangi et al., 2011; Alden Wily, 2018). It is within this fragmented terrain that the 2011 Agricultural Law (Law no. 11/022 on Fundamental Principles Relating to Agriculture) was introduced, aiming to regulate agricultural production through new guidelines on land use planning, cooperative organisation, and rural livelihoods. It formally recognises the customary land rights of local communities, defining their domains of use (e.g., cultivated fields, fallow land, pastures, and forests) and affirming that these rights do not require formal land registration (Ferrari & Tshimbalanga, 2015, p.21). Yet this recognition coexists uneasily with the state's authority to allocate land for other purposes. Large tracts are regularly distributed as agricultural, forestry, or industrial concessions, while other areas are designated as protected zones or buffers between urban and customary territories (SSADR, 2010, p.12). These

overlapping claims are poorly coordinated due to weak vertical communication between national and local institutions and fragmented horizontal collaboration across ministries such as Agriculture, Interior, Justice, Land Affairs, and Environment (Ferrari & Tshimbalanga, 2015, p.34). These contradictions are particularly evident in Kinshasa, where, to officially acquire usufruct rights to a small horticultural plot, farmers are required to pay a fee to the provincial land registry, obtain an operating contract from the Urban Division for Rural Development, and secure an agricultural operating licence from the municipal Inspection of Rural Development and Agriculture. These rights are conditional on continuous cultivation and subject, in theory, to annual inspections. In practice, however, enforcement is weak: inspections are rare, cadastral records are incomplete, and most land used for urban farming is not shown on official maps, rendering the entire process largely informal (De Boeck, 2020).

As a result, while customary rights are acknowledged on paper, land is frequently reclassified or repurposed without consultation or compensation, particularly in urban and peri-urban contexts. Much of the land used for urban farming in Kinshasa remains undocumented or ambiguously categorised, rendering it highly susceptible to elite appropriation. The Cité du Fleuve project, for example, transformed 600 hectares of marshland, previously used by local farmers for rice and fish, into a luxury housing complex marketed as “the Dubai of Kinshasa” (De Boeck, 2011), with property prices ranging from US$150,000 to US$300,000 (Nzunzi, 2020). Similarly, the Kin-Oasis project in Bandalungwa appropriated 30 hectares of loosely regulated farmland, displacing over 1,000 urban farmers to build high-end residences with monthly rents between US$2,200 and US$6,700 (Nzuzi, 2020). These examples highlight how the absence of cadastral mapping and the informality of much urban farmland create loopholes that enable its conversion into lucrative real estate, despite the legal protections outlined in agricultural legislation.

B. Gender, Law, and the Practice of Land Access

In legal terms, neither the 1973 Land Law nor the 2011 Agricultural Code explicitly discriminates against women. The land law does not prohibit women from requesting land, transferring rights, or receiving concessions. Similarly, Article 10 of the 2011 Agricultural Code guarantees equitable access to agricultural land and tenure security for all, while Article 16 outlines acquisition procedures that do not include gender-based exclusions (Mudinga and

Bikungu, 2021, p.343). The Family Code of 1987 had already granted inheritance rights to surviving spouses and children regardless of gender. This was further strengthened by a 2016 amendment, which removed the long-standing colonial and postcolonial requirement for married women to obtain spousal authorisation to enter legally binding contracts or act as legal representatives (Braunmiller and Dry, 2022; Butedi et al., 2025). However, in practice, land governance in the DRC rarely adheres to a uniform or consistently applied legal framework. It functions instead as a hybrid system shaped by colonial legacies, legal pluralism, and ongoing local negotiation. As Mwilo-Mwihi Watuta (2018) observes, laws often serve more as formalities than as effective instruments of governance. Legal pluralism in the DRC is not merely theoretical: it is a lived reality shaped by vast geography, limited state reach, and weak institutional capacity. Land ownership is highly localised and fluid, mediated through overlapping claims influenced by socio-economic status, geography, political ties, and gender. These fragmented systems persist in part because the state lacks both the authority and capacity to enforce a unified legal regime. It is within this context that urban agriculture in Ndjili Kilambu unfolds.

4.6 Spatial Dynamics in Ndjili Kilambu: Between Formal Ownership and Negotiated Use

In Ndjili Kilambu – as in much of Kinshasa's peri-urban fringe, customary authorities (chefs de terres) continue to wield substantial influence over land tenure. These leaders remain central to enabling land access and facilitating urban expansion, while administrative authorities typically intervene only after a transaction has taken place, primarily to formalise documentation or facilitate registration (De Boeck, 2020). Since 1967, the district has been formally overseen by the chef de quartier administratif, Chief Boniface Babu Mukelampuya. However, actual access to land remains largely governed by a network of four land chiefs (chefs fonciers), each responsible for a different locality with its own lineage and history of land governance. In the administrative locality of Lemba Imbu, Davin Mavumba has served as land chief since 2008. His authority extends over Kingampio and includes the Luzizila area. In Kilambu Village – the primary site of this study – the current land chief is Momi Miche Manzeku, known locally as KOT KOT, who assumed the role in 2018. According to his account, the land of Kilambu was historically acquired through conflict: his ancestor, Mfumu Mbeka Mbakua, was granted the territory as a reward for assisting the people of Maguila in a

battle against those from Kimwenza (Interview with Chief Manzeku, April 2023; Local District Office, Ndjili Kilambu, 2022). Additional jurisdictions fall under Chief Nsimba, whose authority spans the area around the Lukaya River up to River Village, and Chief Landu, who oversees the remaining localities within the district (Urban Officer, 2023, fieldwork data).

All four land chiefs are members of Kinshasa's original Humbu ethnic group (Trapido, 2016). Although Humbu succession to land authority follows a matrilineal principle – offices commonly pass from a mother's brother to her sister's son – this does not mean that women typically hold the position. Rather, descent is traced through women while incumbency usually remains male. In some cases, a doona (a sister of a deceased land chief) may assume interim stewardship during transitions before passing authority to the designated heir (De Boeck, 2020). Despite these succession pathways, I found no documented instance of a woman serving as a substantive land chief in Kilambu Village, and interviewees were unsure whether any woman had ever held such a role elsewhere in the district. This gap between matrilineal transmission and male officeholding underscores the gendered character of customary authority – even in systems that, on paper, privilege descent through women. These overlapping and uneven arrangements of customary land chiefs and state administrative leadership remain central to how land is accessed, claimed, and negotiated in Ndjili Kilambu.

Formal zoning across the district remains ambiguous. Aside from the Lemba Imbu agricultural centre, which has since been repurposed for residential development, there is no reliable cadastral mapping to determine whether plots are officially designated or registered for agricultural or residential use. Approximately 35% of parcels are listed as "unoccupied houses". In practice, however, many of these are vacant lots, left undeveloped due to land speculation or financial constraints. Even among some inhabited plots, particularly in areas with large landholdings, only small structures are built, often merely to signal ownership, while much of the land remains unused. These underutilised spaces, sometimes fenced (see Figure 4.11) or simply marked with pancartes (hand-painted signs) staked into the ground to assert ownership (see Figure 4.12), have become essential to local urban agriculture. Farmers informally repurpose these areas, effectively transforming speculative residential plots into de facto farmland. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Kilambu Village, where land is organised not by street address but by blocs, spatial units recorded in local district data that often encompass extensive tracts. Although it is difficult to verify the exact dimensions of

privately held plots, local accounts suggest that some exceed 65 hectares. A few elite landowners reported controlling such expansive tracts. The visual mapping co-produced with farmers (see Chapter Three) offers further insight into the distribution and scale of these holdings, many of which are informally identified by the names of their owners.

Figure 4.11 Fenced plot informally cultivated by farmers in Kilambu Village

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

The image shows a fenced tract of idle land where crops are cultivated by local farmers. While the land's official purpose is unconfirmed, its fencing and partial development suggest possible speculative residential intent, as some locals have indicated. The photo illustrates how such underutilised spaces are repurposed for agriculture despite lacking formal zoning or designation for farming.

Figure 4.12 Pancarte asserting private ownership on cultivated land in Ndjili Kilambu

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

This photo shows a hand-painted sign / pancarte marking the land as privately occupied, referencing a military colonel and official cadastral documentation. While the formal restriction notice ("entrée interdite") is intended to deter unauthorised access – particularly from non-permitted users – local farmers have previously cultivated the land through informal agreements with the owner. Its current fallow state, visible in the untended vegetation and wild tuber growth, reflects the intermittent nature of such arrangements and the shifting status of land use in Kinshasa's peri-urban farming zones

While no formal or gender-disaggregated records exist to track land ownership, the combination of large plot sizes, regulatory ambiguity, and spatial flexibility has allowed urban agriculture to persist – particularly in Kilambu Village – outside formal planning frameworks and across dispersed pockets of land. These conditions have attracted both local and commuting female farmers from within and beyond the district, including women who own land but, due to structural constraints (explored in Chapter Five), are unable to cultivate it. It is within this constrained and shifting land landscape that urban farming takes place in Kinshasa.

4.7 Conclusion: Framing the Terrain of Precarious Landholding

In addressing the dynamics of urban agriculture in Ndjili Kilambu, this chapter has shown that the practice is deeply embedded in Kinshasa's spatial, historical, and legal evolution, with state interventions oscillating between periods of support and prolonged neglect. As a result, urban farming is shaped by localised dynamics, spatial organisation, environmental conditions, and informal socio-political arrangements that structure how cultivation unfolds on the ground. Ndjili Kilambu, due to its ecological suitability and relatively open land, appears to be a favourable site for farming. Yet this apparent suitability is also accompanied by broader contradiction: land access in Kinshasa cannot be understood through a binary distinction between residential and farming space. In practice, both are often used interchangeably, shaped by informal arrangements in a spatial and environmental context where boundaries are fluid and regulation uneven. This complexity is compounded by the fact that land access cannot be explained through a singular institutional framework. It must be situated within the layered legacies of precolonial kinship-based stewardship, colonial restructuring, and post-independence legal fragmentation, a terrain where legal pluralism, speculative development, environmental precarity, and gendered exclusions intersect. These overlapping structures set the stage for the next chapter, which grounds the analysis in the lived realities of landholding female farmers in Ndjili Kilambu. Their experiences reveal that ownership is often conditional, relational, and insecure, shaped by overlapping claims, power asymmetries, and socio-political dynamics that render agricultural activity deeply precarious, even for those who nominally hold land.

5 The Complexities of Land Ownership and Women's Agency in Peri-urban Kinshasa

Land is a crucial resource for agriculture and fundamental to the continuity of urban farming. This chapter addresses the second research sub-question: What are the structural and historical constraints, including land access, that shape women's participation in urban agriculture? While land ownership is often treated as a definitive indicator of agency, this chapter argues that, in practice, ownership is neither stable nor singular. Instead, women's landholding experiences in Kinshasa are shaped by a complex interplay of gendered norms, class hierarchies, social capital, elite interference, spiritual beliefs, and bureaucratic fluency. Through the life histories of three urban female farmers, Ma Mbuyi, Ma Marie Noel, and Ma Mbanzola, the chapter explores how these women navigate these intersecting forces. Legal title, while symbolically significant, is often secondary to informal recognition, negotiated legitimacy, and embedded social ties. What emerges is a portrait of urban agriculture defined by a paradox of ownership: land tenure is simultaneously enabled by relational systems and undermined by structural inequalities. Continued access to land is not guaranteed by documents, but contingent on women's ability to manoeuvre through fragmented legal, customary, and informal arrangements.

This chapter conceptualises land ownership not as a static possession, but as a dynamic and contested process that both enables and constrains women's agency. Rather than presenting ownership as a fixed endpoint, it emphasises the strategic and moral labour women perform to remain on the land despite insecurity and exclusion. Their experiences challenge dominant narratives that equate ownership with power, revealing instead a terrain where agency is enacted through presence, negotiation, and resilience (see Chapter Two). The chapter unfolds in two parts. The first presents the life histories of three women, each facing distinct yet interconnected forms of tenure insecurity. The second section offers a cross-case synthesis, analysing how women's agency is shaped by overlapping systems of constraint and the everyday work of maintaining access. Grounded in structuration theory, the chapter shows that land ownership operates as both a resource and a site of struggle, requiring constant relational and strategic navigation.

5.1 Illustrating the Paradox: Women's Narratives of Land Ownership

Building on the broader contextualisation of Kinshasa's urban agriculture presented in Chapter Four, this chapter now turns more directly to the lived complexities of land tenure and women's agency in peri-urban Kinshasa. While earlier discussions traced the spatial, historical, and economic contours of urban farming, the focus here narrows to explore how land, both as a material asset and a social claim, structures women's ability to farm. Rather than beginning with statutory definitions, the chapter centres women's narratives to show how ownership is constrained through informal agreements, customary inheritance, elite interference, and spiritual logics. We begin with the story of Ma Mbuyi, whose inherited land claim was gradually destabilised by pressures that lie beyond the reach of formal law, revealing the uncertain foundations on which some landholding women in Kinshasa must build their agricultural lives.

A. Ma Mbuyi's Story: Farming and the Struggles of Land Inheritance

While most participants were comfortable having their identities and information included in this thesis, Ma Mbuyi specifically requested confidentiality. To protect her privacy and safety, her real name has been changed, and any identifiable details have been removed.

A.1 Background: Early Life and Family/Entering the world of farming.

Ma Mbuyi was born in the 1960s in a village. Following the death of one of her parents, she moved to Kinshasa at a young age with her surviving parent and siblings. Later, after the passing of her remaining parent, she settled in a new area where she continues to live today. While still in school, Ma Mbuyi became pregnant and moved in with the father of her child, who later became her husband. Marrying young, she had several children early in life and is now a grandmother, with some of her children and grandchildren still living with her. Ma Mbuyi's direct involvement in farming began through her husband, who purchased farmland from the local land chief during President Mobutu's era. Although she does not recall the exact price, she remembers that a monetary transaction took place. While her husband focused primarily on farming, Ma Mbuyi dedicated herself to selling vegetables but also assisted on the

farm. As her vegetable-selling business grew, she was able to purchase her own residential plot in the same area. At the time, the couple also owned a joint residential home, which had been bought by her husband. However, after his passing in the 1990s, Ma Mbuyi's in-laws seized part of the property and sold it. The remaining portion, where one of her children still lives, remains insecure, as some of her husband's relatives continue to threaten to sell it. Ma Mbuyi inherited the farmland since her in-laws showed little interest in agricultural land. She fully committed herself to farming to sustain her family. At the same time, she moved onto the residential land she had purchased and gradually began constructing a home using the income she earned from farming.

A.2 Challenges with Land Ownership and Loss

For decades, Ma Mbuyi cultivated the farmland she had inherited from her husband. However, in early 2022, a new member of the land chief's family – who had taken over customary authority in the area – reclaimed ownership of the land. He demanded that she and other farmers pay again if they wanted to continue using the land. Ma Mbuyi described how many men fought physically to defend their land, but the chief insisted on payment. She could not afford to repurchase land she had legally inherited, especially given her financial responsibilities – she was supporting not just her children but also her grandchildren. She questioned why she should have to buy the land again when it rightfully belonged to her. Despite losing access to her farmland, Ma Mbuyi remains hopeful, saying, "I still believe we can reclaim the land, even though construction has already taken place." However, when asked about ownership documents, she hesitated, saying, "I have them somewhere at home. If needed, I can find them." Ma Mbuyi initially attempted to fight back by joining a group of farmers advocating for land rights, but their efforts were unsuccessful. She also recounted how farmers faced intimidation, beatings, and even arrests. Fearing for her safety, she ultimately stopped farming and shifted to selling bread in front of her house. She now does small-scale farming on her residential property, but it does not provide the same income as the farmland she lost. Initially, Ma Mbuyi felt reassured about her residential property, as she had registered it with the local neighbourhood office, with the help of her children. She believed that the land chief was more interested in selling farmland than residential plots. However, as the conversation continued, she admitted, "I don't want the chief to know I spoke to you about this situation. He might sell my residential land too." When reminded that she had legal documents for her home, she

responded, “It doesn’t work like that. They can still sell it… They don’t care.” This was the case despite her having owned land – both through her husband and her own earnings.

Ma Mbuyi’s experience illustrates the precarious nature of land ownership, particularly for some women in the Ndjili Kilambu locality. Although she once ran a productive farm and earned a good income, she has now been forced into low-income survival strategies, relying on small-scale bread-selling and farming in her backyard. Her age has also become a limiting factor; she can no longer travel long distances to farm, and her children do not want her engaging in physically demanding labour. Meanwhile, the land Ma Mbuyi lost has already been sold to higher authorities, with construction now taking place. Though she still clings to hope for justice, her story reflects the deeper vulnerabilities women in the area face in securing and maintaining land ownership. The land she personally owns is not entangled in family disputes – there are no in-laws to challenge her claim. However, the joint land she shared with her husband remains a source of conflict. She has distanced herself from the dispute, saying, “My son is too stubborn and is dealing with his father’s family.” To secure the future, she has made an oral will, explicitly stating her intention to pass her remaining land to her daughter, who lives with her. She firmly believes that her sons should secure land for their own families, just as she once did. Yet, the reality of land ownership in Kinshasa makes inheritance far from certain. Will she truly be able to pass it on? As our conversation unfolded, it became clear that ownership is never guaranteed. At any moment, the land chief could erase her intentions – whether out of personal motives, as a form of punishment, or simply due to the relentless push of commodification. Ma Mbuyi once believed in the principle of land inheritance – after all, she herself had inherited land. But in Kinshasa, ownership is dictated not by tradition or legal documents, but by power. Land can be given, but it can just as easily be taken away. This contradiction – the tension between inheritance and dispossession – is what I call the "paradox of Kinshasa’s ownership". The next section will explore how this paradox plays out, revealing how land, even when passed down, remains deeply insecure.

A.3 The Paradox of Inherited Land Ownership- Ma Mbuyi’s story

Ma Mbuyi’s story highlights the contradictions in ownership and inheritance. Her experiences with farmland, her husband's property, and her own land illustrate the fragile balance between ownership, access, and power. These layers of insecurity and control underscore the paradox

of ownership, where having land does not guarantee security or control. Her statements – “Why should I pay again for the land my husband already bought?”, “If the land chief hears me talking about the land, they [His people] can come for me or take my property”, and “I left the joint property to my son, who is stubborn and can fight his uncles!” – reveal the extent of her insecurity. Thus, Ma Mbuyi’s ownership was, and still is, an illusion – she is caught between customary power structures and gendered inheritance norms. While the land chief reclaimed her farmland under customary authority, gender bias meant that even if he had not, her in-laws could have contested her ownership. This demonstrates that even when women like Ma Mbuyi inherit or purchase land in Kinshasa, their rights remain fragile – always at risk of being overridden by those in power or by family structures that favour male ownership. This section explores the legal framework governing marriage and inheritance in the DRC, the customary laws that continue to shape land tenure, and how these persistent norms reinforce gendered land insecurity, as seen in Ma Mbuyi’s case. By applying structuration theory, we examine the duality of structure – how informal social systems initially created norms to secure ownership, yet these same norms have evolved into mechanisms that sustain land precarity.

In the DRC, women can acquire land through inheritance, marriage, gifts, or purchase. The legal framework governing land ownership in marriage is shaped by the Family Code, which provides three marital property regimes: Separation of Property, Community of Acquests, and Universal Community Property. Most couples follow the Universal Community Property regime, where all assets, including land, are jointly owned, ensuring equal stakes for both spouses (Mudinga and Bikungu, 2021). This system protects both partners, especially the non-primary earner, by ensuring equal division of property in cases of divorce or death (Yamba Yamba, 2014). The law also safeguards the inheritance rights of spouses in customary marriages, even if unregistered, through a forced registration process. On registration, the default "communauté réduite aux acquêts" regime applies, making property acquired during the marriage joint property (Malangu and Mutshi, 2014). Additionally, daughters and sons have equal inheritance rights, and surviving spouses are protected against disinheritance (Family Code, 2016)) . The Agricultural Land Rights Reform of 2011 (Loi agricole, 2011) further prohibits gender-based discrimination in land access, ensuring women’s rights to own and inherit land equally. These legal provisions provide robust protections for women to become landowners as daughters or wives and safeguard their rights in cases of divorce or spousal death. Regarding the DRC’s Family Code (Family Code, 2016)) the introduction of Loi no.

16/008 du 15 Juillet 2016 marked a significant legal reform, removing the requirement for wives to seek their husbands' authorisation.

However, despite these legal protections, women like Ma Mbuyi continue to face exclusion from land ownership, as customary institutions still dictate land tenure, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. Although the law grants women equal legal capacity to own and manage land independently, the gap between legal provisions and customary practices persists. Due to a lack of comprehensive data, it remains difficult to determine how many women successfully claim land ownership under these legal provisions. While customary laws – often referred to as "living laws" – are dynamic and evolve over time in response to socio-economic changes (Tamale, 2020), this fluidity means that women's land rights are continuously shaped by both individual circumstances and shifting customary practices.

A clear example of the evolution of customary inheritance practices is seen in how widows and their children access land. In patrilineal systems, widows are often excluded from inheriting their husband's property, as inheritance traditionally follows male-dominated structures. Land and other assets typically pass to male heirs, while women may only hold land in trust for their sons (Akinola, 2018). Similarly, in matrilineal systems, mothers and their children are often considered outsiders to the father’s clan and are likewise excluded from inheritance (Yamba Yamba, 2014). The expectation has been that widows and children would be cared for and granted land access through the mother’s side of the family. However, as families shift towards individual wealth accumulation, this custom has declined, often leaving widows and orphans without support from extended families (Muswamba, 2006). In response, men are increasingly including their wives in inheritance plans (Mianda, 1996). This is often done through oral wills, which are recognised and honoured within Kinzonzi – a traditional conflict resolution system used to mediate inheritance and family disputes (Malonga, 2021). These oral wills provide flexibility in selecting heirs, allowing women and children to inherit land and property even when traditional norms would have excluded them. This reflects the essence of "living laws" – where customary traditions remain flexible, continuously adapting to contemporary realities. The shift away from strict inheritance customs, where land automatically reverted to the extended family, has created new opportunities for women to own land, driven by broader socio-economic changes. However, while customary norms are evolving, they still do not guarantee secure land tenure for women. In Ma Mbuyi’s case, it was not shifting socio-

economic norms that protected her land, but rather the circumstantial fact that her in-laws had, until then, no interest in using the farmland themselves or in deriving financial benefit from its sale. Yet, they sold part of the joint property and only refrained from selling the rest when male heirs confronted them. This means that in Ma Mbuyi's case, elements of strict inheritance customs still applied, while patriarchal power structures, particularly the intervention of male heirs, ultimately determined the fate of the joint residence.

The fate of Ma Mbuyi's farmland was ultimately sealed by external power structures. While her in-laws did not contest ownership of the land, she was still unable to secure ownership due to customary authority. The land chief – acting within the flexible customary framework – reclaimed control, exploiting economic precarity and weak legal enforcement that is often used to benefit those in power, often under claims of customary entitlement or community redistribution. Despite legal reforms promoting gender equality in property ownership, entrenched cultural norms and customary systems continue to undermine women's land rights. These practices leave many women, including Ma Mbuyi, landless, preventing them from fully claiming inheritance. Had her in-laws been interested in farming, they might have contested her land as well. Yet she ultimately lost it through another form of exclusion – when the land chief exercised his authority to reclaim and resell the farmland, leaving her economically weak and without land for farming.

Ma Mbuyi claimed to have paperwork that proves her ownership but which she never updated, assuming that usage and inheritance would be enough to secure her rights. Yet, even if she had, would that have been enough? The absence of a clear, enforceable legal framework allowed the land chief to manipulate ownership rights, particularly for older women like Ma Mbuyi, who had fewer means to fight back or repurchase the land, and whose claims to ownership were already weakened by gendered customary norms. However, even for those with the financial means, repurchasing land does not guarantee ownership security, as external power structures can still intervene. The next case, that of Ma Marie Noel, explores this further, shifting from inherited land insecurity to the instability of purchased land ownership. However, before turning to her case, we first examine how Ma Mbuyi's land inheritance became a constraint through the lens of structuration theory, focusing on Toyokani (informal negotiated and embedded agreement) and the precarity of land ownership.

A.4 Toyokani, Structuration, and Land Inheritance Precarity

The duality of structure, a key concept in Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984), helps analyse Ma Mbuyi's inheritance land constraint. Structuration theory explains how social structures (rules, norms, institutions) both enable and constrain human agency, while individuals simultaneously reproduce or alter these structures. Although legal protections exist for women to inherit land, Ma Mbuyi did not undergo a formal legal process to validate her ownership. Instead, she relied on Toyokani – an informal agreement recognising land rights within customary systems. Through this system, her husband purchased farmland from the land chief, exchanging money for an informal agreement paper, which she believed was sufficient proof of ownership. After his death, she never pursued formal inheritance – possibly due to a lack of knowledge or resources, or simply the influence of local norms – thereby reinforcing Toyokani legitimacy as a customary practice.

By continuing to rely on Toyokani rather than seeking legal validation, Ma Mbuyi did not just reflect the existing structure – she also reinforced and sustained it. Her acceptance of informal agreements, like that of many others in her community, helped reproduce the very system that later undermined her ownership security. This illustrates Giddens' concept of the duality of structure, where individuals shape and are shaped by structures. As she farmed the land without contestation, she assumed her claim was secure. Yet, as land became more commodified, land chiefs – who previously upheld Toyokani as a customary norm – actively reinterpreted it to justify dispossession. This shift in power relations demonstrates how structures are not static but evolve to serve those who hold authority, reinforcing Giddens' assertion that structures change through social interactions and struggles for control.

This shift illustrates Giddens' concept of structuration, where structures evolve through power struggles and social interactions. While Toyokani initially legitimised Ma Mbuyi's ownership, it ultimately reinforced structural inequalities, leaving her vulnerable to dispossession. Customary inheritance norms have prioritised informal agreements over legal documentation, keeping women dependent on systems that offer access but no security. Weak legal enforcement has enabled land chiefs to override customary claims, maintaining their authority over land tenure. Gendered land norms have further restricted women's control, making ownership precarious even for those who inherited land or worked it for years. Thus, while Toyokani once

facilitated land ownership, its evolution has reinforced existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them. For women like Ma Mbuyi, land ownership remains constrained – not only by economic vulnerability but also by the dominance of customary authorities who dictate land rights through informal governance. Even when women inherit land, ownership remains uncertain. The lack of formal recognition, legal enforcement gaps, and entrenched gender biases keep women vulnerable to land loss, reinforcing the precarity of ownership in Kinshasa's urban and peri-urban farming contexts.

B. Ma Marie Noel's Story: Farming and the Struggles of Purchase

Ma Marie Noel is a farmer, urban agriculture advocate, and leader of COMELI, a women's NGO focused on farming and savings initiatives. She also serves as vice president of the farmer cooperative at Lemba Imbu in Ndjili Kilambu. Due to her activism against land reappropriation, she has been forced into hiding. While she does not wish to remain anonymous, this life story prioritises her safety by omitting sensitive details.

B.1 Background: Early Life and Family/Entering the world of farming

Born in 1962 in Ndjili Q1, Kinshasa, Ma Marie Noel spent part of her childhood in Kongo Central, where she completed primary school at a Catholic institution before returning to Kinshasa. She attended the Malandi Institute in Matete but had to pause her studies in her fourth year due to pregnancy. Determined to continue her education, she later enrolled in an accelerated programme in secretarial skills and stenography, which led to an internship at Régie des Voies Aériennes (RVA), where she worked in air operations. After earning her certificate, she held secretarial positions in various institutions, including a hospital. Seeking more stability, she transitioned into agriculture when her uncle, a cashier at CECOMAF, informed her of an opportunity at the Cooperative Agricole. CECOMAF, established in 1972 through French cooperation to strengthen urban agriculture in Kinshasa, was later integrated into the agriculture department in 1977. Ma Marie Noel successfully passed the selection process and became operations manager at the Lemba Imbu site, also known as the Mission Française d'Urbanisme (MFU) Centre. In 1987, after securing the job, she moved to Lemba Imbu, married a cousin of the local land chief, and built her career and family life. She has six children

– four sons and two daughters – most of whom have completed high school. After divorcing in 2007, she raised them as a single mother while remaining dedicated to urban agriculture.

Ma Marie Noel's interest in farming began at a young age, influenced by her mother and uncles, who were farmers. As a child, she worked alongside her mother in the fields, but she credits her time at the MFU Centre as the foundation of her agricultural expertise. The Lemba Imbu site, an 83-hectare area secured by the cooperative in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, became the centre of her work. As operations manager, Ma Marie Noel was responsible for overseeing the entire facility, handling bookkeeping, liaising with agronomists and directors, and ensuring the smooth operation of the cooperative. While her role was administrative, constant engagement with farmers and agronomists deepened her technical knowledge of urban agriculture. Reflecting on this period, she emphasised how transformative CECOMAF was in shaping her career: "CECOMAF provided me with numerous training sessions, and as the youngest member of the cooperative, I benefited a lot. Everything I have achieved, I owe it to CECOMAF!"

According to Ma Marie Noel, this was a time when urban farming in Kinshasa thrived, with strong institutional backing and minimal land disputes. Farmers had access to state support, resources, and training, making it easier to sustain their livelihoods. She describes this period as the "golden age" of urban agriculture – a time when collaboration between the government and farming cooperatives allowed urban agriculture to flourish. However, this period came to an abrupt end with the 1991 looting in Kinshasa, which halted all urban agriculture projects. Ma Marie Noel described this turning point: "My life became difficult. The looters burned things, but we carried on. I kept farming, but I had to purchase the land." With institutional support gone and land access becoming more uncertain, Marie had to navigate new challenges to sustain her role in urban agriculture.

B.2 Challenges with Land Ownership and Loss

The MFU Centre was initially allocated to farmers through an agreement between the cooperative and the local land chief, who had received the land in exchange for gifts. Potential farmers were invited to join, and cooperative members paid a contribution to receive a parcel sheet as proof of their participation. Many, including Ma Marie Noel, farmed their plots, and

she also worked as an operations manager at the centre. After the 1991 looting and the departure of the French, the cooperative continued its activities. However, the new land chief seized control, arguing that since the French had left, the land had reverted to a green space under his authority. Facing the risk of displacement and the uncertainty surrounding land rights, Ma Marie Noel took matters into her own hands. In 1992, she decided to purchase her own land outside the MFU Centre, choosing a flood-prone but available plot at the Lemba Imbu site. The land had originally been vacant and waterlogged, but early settlers had cleared and adapted it for farming. She bought 21 acres of land from a farmer who had settled there and received a deed of sale, which she described as "the typical document you receive when someone sells something to you". Later, she acquired an additional nine acres from a friend who had purchased land from the same seller but was unable to cultivate it due to severe flooding issues.

However, in 1993, the land chief, Davin, challenged Ma Marie Noel's ownership, claiming that the land was still subject to customary rights. He argued that the French had designated this area for the native "Humbus" and that no one could use it without his permission. According to him, this was a reserved area and had remained so under the original agreement with the cooperative. To continue farming, Ma Marie Noel and the other farmers working in the area were forced to renegotiate their land rights to avoid being completely displaced. Losing access to the land meant losing not only their crops but also their livelihoods and years of investment in farming the area. Initially, Davin demanded 300 million zaires (approximately US$150) per plot for continued use. After negotiations, he agreed to lower the cost to 250 million zaires (about US$131) for what he called the "big gardens" and 150 million zaires (about US$75) for the "small gardens". However, the garden sizes were arbitrarily determined, with no clear distinction between what was considered "big" or "small". Ma Marie Noel and the other farmers were given only one month to pay, and as she explained, "The cost was significant, and it was impossible to pay within a month as the land chief requested." Ultimately, it took them a year to complete the payment. With their ability to farm at stake, they had no choice but to comply. Once paid, Ma Marie Noel secured her land once again, and the land chief agreed that the flooded area – referred to as the "disaster area" – would never be resold, a commitment that was documented in the papers Marie later shared.

Ma Marie Noel continued to farm on the land, growing cassava leaves for export to France, a venture that generated enough profit for her to purchase the residential house where she now

lives. Both of her plots were in a flood-prone area, a situation worsened by sand extraction near the Ndjili River, which at times forced her to use a small boat to access her farmland. Determined to make the land more productive, Marie invested in irrigation, even digging her own well, since the existing system at the MFU Centre did not reach her plot. During a training session on land affairs, the Minister of Land Affairs advised the farmers, "When you have land, you must enhance its value." She planted palm, mangosteen, mango, and avocado trees, improving the soil and increasing productivity. She reflected that "These improvements have already added value to the land, and I even built a small house where someone can take shelter from the rain."

Despite her significant investments, the land chief continued to harass the farmers, demanding extra payments – even for unrelated matters – under the threat of eviction. In 2012–2013, he went as far as demanding money for his "future funeral expenses", a request met with disbelief. The farmers pushed back, questioning his demands: "You're not dead, so why should we bury you? We have already paid for this land." Ma Marie Noel, already exhausted from years of harassment, knew that even if they complied, the demands would not stop. She recalled, "We had already paid 250 million zaires, and he still didn't leave us alone." As the pressure escalated and the land chief renewed his threats to force them off the land, Ma Marie Noel knew that legal action was necessary. Drawing on the training she had received from various organisations that supported land rights, Ma Marie Noel and other farmers leveraged their advocacy skills and reached out to World Vision, an international organisation working in the area, to help mobilise legal support. With the assistance of lawyers, the farmers successfully defended their land in court and won the case, as documented in the final judgment Ma Marie Noel provided. The court ruled that the land was designated as agricultural land, which protected it from any land chief's interference. This ruling ensured that Marie and other farmers could continue farming without further threats. For Ma Marie Noel, the judgment solidified her ownership, confirming that, along with her purchase of the land from the land chief, the government decree legally protected farmers who had worked on the land for years.

By 2020, the land chief returned with new demands, leaving Ma Marie Noel and her fellow farmers vulnerable and confused. They could not understand why they were being forced to buy the land again after already securing it. This time, however, Ma Marie Noel found herself without legal representation. The lawyers who had previously supported them – whom the

farmers had been contributing to and relying on – now refused to take their case. Ma Marie Noel suspected corruption, explaining, "They've already bribed everyone involved. They've given lands to lawyers, like one or two hectares each, and those lawyers have sold those lands for profit. That's how things work in our country." Determined not to give up, Ma Marie Noel once again turned to advocacy, mobilising with friends to raise awareness about the ongoing land dispossession. "We approached all levels of government to address the land concerns and explain our situation," she said.

In March 2022, the farmers experienced a brief breakthrough when Governor Ngobila visited the site. He expressed his support and reassured them that their land would not be taken. During his visit, Ngobila declared, "It is inadmissible to sell this space, especially since market gardeners have the right to carry out their activities here. I will demolish all constructions in prohibited areas. As long as I am governor, I will ensure that none of these spaces are sold." He also publicly reminded land chief Davin that the site had been allocated by the state for market gardening and should not be exploited or taken. For a moment, Ma Marie Noel and the farmers felt a sense of relief, believing that the governor's intervention would protect their land. But their hope was short-lived.

Despite her relentless efforts, the land chief's influence over the police and government officials led to a gradual loss of land to powerful new buyers. Ma Marie Noel recalled the shocking turn of events: "Just a few weeks after the governor's visit, the land chief reinforced the military presence in the area. We were shocked! The number of military personnel doubled compared to before. It felt like a war zone. You should have seen them – heavily armed and ready to fire." It soon became clear that wealthy and powerful individuals had purchased the land, as police guarded different sections and construction progressed rapidly. Ma Marie Noel expressed her frustration: "Here, people don't even care. They just buy our lands as if we are mere dogs, as if this country doesn't belong to us." She knew this was just another cycle of fraudulent resales, explaining, "How can you sell the land, then later accept US$5,000 from someone else and give the land away again? After five years, will you take back those lands and claim that the money wasn't enough, then resell it for US$10,000? It doesn't work like that. You can only sell something once." Even those who gave in to the land chief's new demands were not guaranteed their land back. Ma Marie Noel recounted the painful experience of her friend: "Mama Guillaine paid him US$800, but she still can't farm on the land. He

scammed her." She also shared the heartbreaking reality that many farmers had died due to the stress of losing their land and livelihoods: "My daughter, many people have died because of this land situation! Most of the farmers died of heart pain as they saw their livelihood being taken away from them by this landowner." Ma Marie Noel herself lost the land she had already bought twice, as she was now expected to purchase it for a third time.

With no farmland of her own, Ma Marie Noel now rents land in two separate locations, paying approximately US$16 per month to continue farming and providing for her family. Meanwhile, the lands she once owned have been taken over by others and are now under heavy military guard, reflecting the powerful interests behind the dispossession. When I asked why she had not pursued another legal case, Ma Marie Noel sighed and explained, "We did consider it, but… the problem is, I'm just not available. One moment I'm around, and the next I'm hiding." Since the last incident in 2023, Ma Marie Noel has been forced into hiding, fearing for her life. She believes the land chief's grudge against her is not just about her land – it is about her unyielding advocacy for the MFU Centre as a protected agricultural zone. Her defiance in challenging land grabs and exposing corruption has made her a direct target: "They say I'm the strongest – because I embody a 'female / male' (mwasi mobali) approach, taking on any task that a man can do. And the cleverest one, the one who takes them to all these offices." Ma Marie Noel fears that the land chief may attempt to eliminate her – either through direct violence or by bewitching her. Yet, despite the constant danger, she is still trying to find ways to continue her advocacy, even though, at the moment, she has not yet succeeded: "I am still working. If God wants me to die, then I will die. But if not, I'll continue working for a just cause, and God will protect me." With resources exhausted and the land now occupied by powerful elites, her options are limited. Still, she remains convinced that if the right legal action is taken, the buildings can still be demolished, as the area is officially designated as a green belt for agriculture (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 Female farmer Ma Marie Noel

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph of Ma Marie Noel, who visited me at my location (safe space) from her temporary hiding place. She asked to be photographed in this way to show her strength and resilience despite ongoing challenges.

B.3 The Paradox of Purchased Land Ownership – Ma Marie Noel's Story

Ma Marie Noel's experience highlights the contradictions within Kinshasa's land tenure system, where legal recognition, financial investment, and government policies do not guarantee land security. Instead, ownership is dictated by shifting power structures, corruption, and gendered constraints. Her 30-year struggle to maintain her farmland reveals how power, rather than legal entitlement, determines who can claim and defend land. This interplay between individual agency and systemic constraints aligns with Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which explains how social structures both enable and restrict individual

action. In Ma Marie Noel's case, larger structural forces – such as customary authority, legal loopholes, and elite influence – ultimately overpowered her legal knowledge and persistence. Later, this will be explored in combination with Toyokani, a local negotiation-based system that initially facilitated her access to land but was later manipulated to exclude smallholders while reinforcing elite control.

One of the key structural forces shaping Ma Marie Noel's land insecurity was the customary land system, which continues to govern peri-urban land ownership in Kinshasa despite the existence of formal legal frameworks. While customary recognition initially provided security, it also left landowners vulnerable to dispossession, as land chiefs retained the power to challenge ownership by exploiting legal loopholes. One such loophole was the requirement for a registry certificate, which, under the 1973 Land Law, is the only official proof of ownership. However, corruption, high costs, and bureaucratic obstacles make this certificate inaccessible for most landowners (Ferrari & Tshimbalanga, 2015). As a result, local land transactions rely on informal documentation, which, while acknowledged within communities, lacks legal standing. Like many farmers, Ma Marie Noel navigated these contradictions by relying on customary agreements, but the very system that enabled her access to land also left her legally vulnerable. This contradiction – where customary authorities control land, but legal enforcement remains inaccessible – creates a cycle of dispossession. Land chiefs continue reselling the same plots, knowing that formal protections are rarely enforced, forcing smallholders into endless payments just to retain land they have already purchased. Ma Marie Noel's lack of legal security was not due to inaction but a structural failure – where legal protections exist on paper but remain unenforced in practice. Even when government policies, such as the 2011 Agricultural Law, recognised her farmland as part of a protected farming zone, elite interests ultimately dictated land control. Ma Marie Noel faced intimidation, political interference, and corruption, making legal claims meaningless against powerful actors. This contradiction was even acknowledged by an urban planning official I interviewed, who confirmed that Ma Marie Noel's land zone was indeed recognised as an agricultural zone. However, he admitted that challenging its illegal conversion was nearly impossible due to the involvement of high-ranking buyers. Despite knowing the legal risks of farmland conversion, he, too, remained silent, fearing repercussions for opposing those in power. This reinforces how legal frameworks alone cannot protect landowners when authority figures themselves are

constrained by elite influence, further illustrating the structural imbalance that governs land ownership.

Unlike the cooperative leader, who was arrested but later legally protected, Ma Marie Noel was forced into hiding, stripping her of the ability to fight for her land. Her experience reveals the gendered dynamics of land dispossession, adding another layer to the paradox of land ownership in Kinshasa. Violence was used to suppress resistance, but it disproportionately affected women, reinforcing gender norms that discouraged them from physical confrontation or imprisonment. Ma Marie Noel persisted for years through legal and customary challenges, but once violence escalated and she was individually targeted, she was forced to withdraw. Women like her and Ma Mbanzola, as will be seen later, faced the same constraints: when physical force became a tool of eviction, the risks made further resistance impossible. Though not all male farmers secured ownership, their ability to remain physically present in legal battles gave them greater opportunities to resist dispossession – opportunities systematically denied to women like Marie. This was evident in the case of Papa Nseka, a male participant interviewed during fieldwork, who persisted in returning to his farmland despite being beaten and arrested. During his trial, he was able to use his political party affiliation as leverage, prompting elite party representatives to advocate for him. His ability to navigate social networks, rather than legal channels, allowed him to maintain his land, while surrounding plots were sold off by the land chief. Similarly, the cooperative leader, though unable to recover his land, was able to fight his case openly. Even his arrest became an opportunity to continue resisting, as the judge granted him protection. In contrast, Ma Marie Noel was systematically pushed out through intimidation and fear for her safety, preventing her from even exploring alternative resistance strategies – whether through political leverage, NGO involvement, or negotiations with influential actors. Her resistance was cut short before she even had the chance to shift power in her favour, as gender norms and power structures ultimately dictated how far women could go in resisting dispossession.

B.4 Toyokani, Structuration, and Land Purchase Precarity

While Ma Marie Noel's experience underscores the paradox of land ownership – where legal and financial investment do not guarantee land security – her case also reveals how land governance in Kinshasa operates beyond formal legal frameworks. At the heart of this

governance system is Toyokani, a negotiation-based structure that shapes land transactions. Initially, Toyokani enabled farmers like Ma Marie Noel to secure farmland through negotiations and agreements. However, as power dynamics shifted, it became another tool for exclusion, reinforcing imbalances in land ownership. This shift demonstrates how informal governance structures can both facilitate access to land and serve as mechanisms of control.

For years, Ma Marie Noel and other farmers relied on Toyokani to establish ownership, navigate customary land tenure, and work collectively to secure agreements. This system enabled Ma Marie Noel to become a farmland owner by negotiating and making payments to local farmers and land chief. Through a collective agreement, she and other farmers gradually paid for land under a mutually accepted arrangement with the land chief, allowing them to maintain ownership for an extended period. To secure land, Toyokani also provided Ma Marie Noel with access to bureaucratic structures, which often operated through informal negotiations rather than strictly following formal legal procedures. It allowed Ma Marie Noel and other farmers to engage with NGOs and authorities in ways that formal procedures alone could not. Had they relied solely on official channels – such as seeking an audience with local authorities and following formal protocols – they might never have been granted access or recognition. These informal negotiations created opportunities for government officials to intervene in their land ownership dispute – something that may never have happened through formal bureaucratic processes alone. While Ma Marie Noel initially lacked direct political influence or elite power, Toyokani enabled her to navigate these constraints and gain access to decision-making spaces, gradually building enough influence to become a recognised figure in land negotiations. Her growing role eventually made her a threat to the land chief, highlighting Toyokani's role in enabling agency within land governance.

While Toyokani initially enabled Ma Marie Noel to own and secure her farmland, it also became a tool of control for the land chief, allowing him to consolidate power and weaken smallholders' claims. Instead of using Toyokani in good faith, as was customary, he weaponised it to strengthen alliances with high-ranking officials, lawyers, and military officers – ensuring that those in power aligned with him, further marginalising local farmers. Although the land chief appeared to be negotiating with farmers, his use of Toyokani ensured their ownership remained precarious, forcing them into a cycle of coerced compliance without security. For instance, farmers who continued engaging with him through Toyokani, such as Maman

Guilaine – who paid an additional US$800 – discovered that the system no longer worked in their favour. Instead, it became a mechanism to extract continuous payments from them while eroding their claims to ownership. By this point, the land chief had already secured agreements with high authorities, effectively excluding smallholders from meaningful negotiations and eliminating their ability to assert their rights. By providing land to high-ranking officials, the land chief maintained political influence and instilled fear and uncertainty among smallholders, further weakening their position. This selective application of Toyokani allowed him to negotiate where it benefited him while stripping farmers of their ability to use it as a tool for protection. A key example is how the land chief manipulated agreements with farmers' lawyers by offering them land, ensuring they withdrew support for the farmers.

Toyokani also became a strategic tool for securing military and police backing for evictions, even after the government had ruled that the land could not be transformed into residential zones. Once the land chief secured military support through Toyokani, he abandoned it as a tool for smallholders altogether. Negotiation was replaced with violence, leaving farmers with no structured way to resist. This marked a structural shift where land ownership was no longer determined through agreements but enforced through intimidation. Women were disproportionately affected, as they had even fewer alternatives for resistance compared to men, who could, in some cases, withstand physical confrontation – though this did not always secure their land. By reserving Toyokani for elites while removing it as a resource for smallholders, the land chief institutionalised land insecurity, ensuring that farmers had no viable means to assert ownership.

In summary, Ma Marie Noel's experience illustrates how structural forces in Kinshasa constrain individual agency, particularly for women in land ownership. Regardless of how much she paid, fought, or followed the law, her land ownership was never secure. She faced multiple layers of constraint, from legal loopholes and economic disadvantage to gendered expectations that limited her ability to resist. In Kinshasa, social structures – governed by Toyokani as a negotiation-based system – reinforce a cycle where formal and informal rules define ownership, but enforcement ultimately depends on power and influence. Meanwhile, access to resources – economic, social, or authoritative – determines who can resist dispossession or secure ownership. Ultimately, Ma Marie Noel's struggle exposes the paradox of land ownership in Kinshasa: even when land is legally purchased, those without structural power can never

truly own it. Her land loss was not just a legal failure but a consequence of structured inequality in how land is owned, contested, and protected.

Just as Ma Marie Noel's exclusion was shaped by structural constraints such as political marginalisation, economic hardship, and violence, Ma Mbanzola's story further illustrates how violence, destruction, unjust legal battles, spiritual intimidation, and the profound impacts of dispossession have made continued resistance impossible. For Ma Mbanzola, and many women like her, the cost of fighting for their land has simply become too high, undermining farming as a viable livelihood.

C. Ma Mbanzola's Story: Farming and the Struggles of Gifted Land Ownership

Ma Mbanzola's life story is unique; however, due to the sensitivity of certain experiences, she chose to frame her narrative collectively rather than individually. While her account reflects deeply personal events, it also represents experiences shared within her community. This collective approach was intentionally adopted to avoid embarrassment, create supportive dialogue, and preserve the dignity of everyone involved.

C.1 Background: Early Life and Family/ Entering the World of Farming

Ma Mbanzola was born in Matadi, Congo Central, in 1961. She was the eldest child of her father's first wife, who later divorced him. Eventually, her father married a total of 12 wives. Due to his work – initially as a newspaper editor and later as a government official – the family frequently relocated. As a result, Ma Mbanzola spent parts of her childhood in Kinshasa, Bukavu, Uvira, Kalima, and Kindu. Following local matriarchal traditions prevalent in Congo Central, her father prioritised providing university education to his nieces and nephews over his own children. Although education mattered greatly to Ma Mbanzola, she only completed high school. After graduating with a specialisation in commerce in the 1980s, she secured an internship and subsequently worked as a secretary at a coffee company. At age 24, Ma Mbanzola met an African-American man through her employment and married him. When her husband returned to the United States, they carefully planned for Ma Mbanzola to join him. Her husband was advised that she would first need to obtain several visas and learn English before becoming eligible for a spouse visa. Determined to reunite with him, Ma Mbanzola

travelled through several African countries seeking the necessary documentation and opportunities to improve her English. However, before leaving, Ma Mbanzola's father imposed a condition: her mother must agree to reunite with him before he would grant his blessing for Ma Mbanzola's departure. Her mother refused, assuring him that their daughter was already a grown woman who would not forget him, regardless of their relationship. Despite this reassurance, her father withheld his blessing. Ma Mbanzola deeply believed that this lack of paternal blessing affected her journey and its outcome. As she explained, "Since fathers are like gods on earth to us, I stayed in Nigeria for 15 years – with no success in reaching the US." During these difficult years abroad, she had two children but never succeeded in reaching the United States. In 2004, Ma Mbanzola returned to the DRC with her children. Facing unemployment and limited opportunities, she returned to farming.

Ma Mbanzola's farming experience began during her childhood, influenced by both of her parents. Reflecting on her early experiences, she explained, "When I was a child, my father had a farm in Kasangulu, and we used to go there on weekends to farm. My mother has also been farming all her life here in Lemba Imbu, and when I came home for holidays, we would farm together. So, farming wasn't new to me – I had learned it from a young age." On returning to the DRC in 2004, Ma Mbanzola joined her mother, who was already established as a farmer in Kimwenza, until their farmland was converted into residential property. Following this, Ma Mbanzola was recruited by World Vision, an international NGO, which provided female farmers with access to land, training, resources, and equipment. This experience enriched Ma Mbanzola's agricultural knowledge, especially through training in jardin parcellaire – a type of intensive home gardening. Describing the lasting impact of this training, she said, "Oh well, up to today, I still live off the training I received from World Vision. There were several things I didn't know before that I learned from them and still apply today."

Despite these benefits, Ma Mbanzola eventually left World Vision due to frustration with its practices. She shared her disappointment: "They always told us that we were the bosses since we were the community, but in reality, we were always in need, while those who were supposed to be working for us were earning the most. For example, we would go for farming training for a whole week, and for four days in a row, they wouldn't even give us a per diem. When we asked about it, they told us, 'It's for your own benefit.'" After leaving World Vision, Ma Mbanzola continued farming independently, though she initially had no land of her own. A

family friend who owned several plots in Lemba Imbu Centre generously gifted her a piece of land. Ma Mbanzola invested significantly in cultivating this plot, recalling proudly, “I had so much going on – I used to grow peanuts, cassava, maize, matembele [sweet potato leaves]. I made a lot of money.” However, her success was soon disrupted by emerging land constraints.

C.2 Challenges with Land Ownership and Loss

In 2022, Ma Mbanzola and other farmers in the area were ordered by the local land chief to vacate their farmland, regardless of whether they owned it or not. Even the family friend who had gifted Ma Mbanzola land and who owned several plots in the area was threatened with eviction. The land chief arbitrarily demanded that farmers – particularly those already holding land – repurchase their plots for US$1,500 each. However, collectively, the farmers refused this unjust demand. To pressure them into leaving, the land chief resorted to intimidation and violence, including destroying and stealing their crops. Ma Mbanzola vividly recounted, “People started harvesting our produce – the land chief and his children. They would sell our crops and keep the money for themselves or eat it. They did terrible things. They harvested what they didn’t even plant. They cut down safoutiers [butterfruit trees] and manguiers sende [wild mango trees] and sold them to bakeries as firewood.” Reflecting on these traumatic events, Ma Mbanzola explained her resistance: “I could not leave the land easily because it was my livelihood.”

Despite these aggressive actions, the farmers continued to resist collectively. They sought the assistance of féticheurs (traditional spiritualists), who performed rituals involving witchcraft and incantations, aimed at harming or even killing the land chief. In retaliation, the land chief invoked ancestral spirits, declaring, “This land belongs to us, and no one can take it away,” clearly signalling his intention to use spiritual means to eliminate the resisting farmers. Recognising the escalating danger, Ma Mbanzola decided to salvage what remained of her crops, moving them to her home garden. Explaining her difficult decision to leave the land, she highlighted the systemic injustice and powerlessness she faced: “I was afraid because I know our justice system will never help us. The land chiefs have money, and I would just end up paying fines [amends] for nothing. The land chief and his family deal directly with the authorities – not with people like us. For example, two members of the land chief’s family are currently in prison because they sold land belonging to a military general, who had them

arrested immediately. But a poor woman like me? How could I fight at that level? They measure themselves against the rich and powerful – not against people like me. I wouldn't want to lose my life so foolishly."

Some farmers continued to hold on to hope, even stopping the president's car to seek his direct intervention. Although the president promised action, Ma Mbanzola recalled bitterly, "But then, the police got involved, and at times, shots were even fired! Whenever someone came to sort out the issue, they ended up being bribed and staying silent." When asked why she did not rent land elsewhere to continue farming – given that farming had previously provided her with a good income – Ma Mbanzola explained that the barriers were not merely financial but deeply emotional as well: "It wasn't just about having the means to rent land. Some people completely broke down – they lost the will to continue. But I knew life goes on. I had survived before, and I would survive this too – unless God takes my breath away."

Today, Ma Mbanzola faces significant health challenges, particularly heart disease and high blood pressure. Her age and caregiving responsibilities limit her ability to travel far or engage in extensive farming. She has therefore turned to home gardening as her sole remaining livelihood. However, even home gardening has become increasingly challenging, as she lacks access to running water. Fetching water to sustain her plants has grown burdensome, further impacting her ability to support herself. In addition, even from the relative safety of her residential land, Ma Mbanzola remains acutely aware of ongoing threats. She explained how the land chief continues to actively survey residential plots in her area, dividing larger plots – like hers and her neighbour's – into smaller parcels, blatantly reselling them right before their eyes. In such situations, official documentation quickly loses significance, as she vividly described: "Haaa! Even with documents, if you own a big piece of land, they can still come and tell you that the value of the money you paid has expired. They will just find a high-ranking military official – a general or colonel – and sell it to them. Then you have to go and fight with someone in power. And if you're not careful, you might even end up in prison. And if you try to resist? They will kill you through witchcraft. They do a lot of ceremonies – sacrificing goats, using blood, all kinds of things. They do it all the time."

Despite these challenges, Ma Mbanzola acknowledges that she occupies a somewhat privileged position due to her family's long-standing ties with the land chief's family. She explained, "We

are in a privileged position because my sister is married into the land chief's family. Our grandparents and the land chief's grandparents were friends. One of their elders even wanted to be buried close to our grandfather. So, we have that advantage. My sister has 10 children with the land chief's cousin." Ma Mbanzola also confirmed that the farmland from which she and other farmers had been evicted has since been transformed into a luxurious residential area. The new streets bear the names of influential authorities, explicitly labelled "Colonel" or "General", starkly reflecting the power dynamics behind land ownership in Kinshasa.

Figure 5.2 Female farmer Ma Mbanzola

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph of Ma Mbanzola at her compound. She wished to be photographed with her new basin, expressing her happiness at acquitting this working tool through her seasonal vegetable sales.

C.3 The Paradox of Gifted Land Ownership – Ma Mbanzola's Story

Ma Mbanzola's story continues to illustrate a key tension in land ownership in Kinshasa – particularly in cases involving gifted land. Her farmland was not acquired through formal

purchase or inheritance but was gifted by a family friend who owned several plots in the area. No official documentation confirmed the transfer, nor was there any attempt to obtain one – perhaps due to prevailing local norms, limited access to legal procedures, or the burdens of navigating a complex and bureaucratic land system. These trust-based, undocumented transactions are widely practised and socially accepted in the area, contributing to the broader paradox of land ownership in Kinshasa. For individuals like Ma Mbanzola, land ownership is relational rather than legal – based on informal agreements, long-term cultivation, and social trust, rather than formally documented rights. This reveals a central paradox: while land ownership may be secured through socially legitimate means, such ownership remains fundamentally insecure without political power, advantageous gender norms, institutional recognition, or spiritual protection.

Ma Mbanzola's claim became vulnerable once the person who gifted her the land also came under pressure. The land chief began reclaiming all plots in the area – regardless of use, prior agreement, or original ownership – undermining both her tenure and that of the original landholder. Today, Ma Mbanzola acknowledges that the only reason she feels relatively secure in her current residence – land held by her family since 1959 – is not because of any legal documentation but because her sister is married into the land chief's family. In her case, it is the relationship, not the deed, that offers a degree of protection. Yet even this form of relational security is deeply fragile. This illustrates how landholding in Kinshasa is not characterised by stable legal status but by a fluid, negotiated condition – constantly shaped by shifting socio-political hierarchies. In such a landscape, ownership is never guaranteed, no matter how long land has been cultivated or how widely accepted the agreement may be.

The paradox is further intensified by elite involvement and gendered social norms. High-ranking military officers have acquired land through informal networks – only to lose it through similar channels – demonstrating that even powerful actors are not immune to tenure insecurity. Land struggles in Kinshasa are not simply defined by a binary between the poor and the powerful but unfold within layered hierarchies, where only those with the most resilient social, political, or spiritual connections are able to endure. For small-scale farmers like Ma Mbanzola – and even for those who initially gifted her land – defending land rights without strong networks remains an uphill, often impossible, struggle.

For Ma Mbanzola, the use of violence – particularly the destruction and theft of crops – acted as a powerful deterrent that forced her out of the struggle to retain her land. Unlike some men in the area, who could supplement their farming with side jobs such as construction or wage labour, Ma Mbanzola relied entirely on farming while also managing caregiving responsibilities. The loss of crops meant the loss of her sole livelihood. As soon as her harvest was threatened, she made the difficult decision to leave, salvaging what she could before losing everything. While a few male farmers continued to resist, Ma Mbanzola felt she had no such option. As she put it, "How could a poor woman like me compete?" Relocating to another farming site was not viable; her family – especially her ageing mother in her 90s – relied on her for daily care. The pressure to remain close to home and prioritise caregiving over economic recovery ultimately shaped her decision to withdraw. In this context, land ownership did not create space for agency – it became a burden she could no longer afford to carry. Without access to structural support, social protection, or control over her time and mobility, land became a source of vulnerability rather than empowerment. This reality was also experienced by other women in the area who, like Ma Mbanzola, found themselves navigating land struggles under conditions defined as much by gendered expectations as by economic precarity.

What makes this paradox even more complex is the embedded role of spirituality. In Kinshasa, land struggles are not purely legal or political – they are also spiritual. African spiritual practices, particularly ancestor veneration and witchcraft, are deeply woven into land governance. As the land chief of Kilambu Village, Manzeku, explained, "The ancestors are the ones who decide on who takes power next." When land is contested, chiefs may invoke ancestral spirits to assert their authority – instilling fear and making resistance far more complicated. For many farmers, this spiritual threat is as real and paralysing as physical violence. As Ma Mbanzola put it, "They could kill you through witchcraft if they can't use [corrupt] the justice system." In this context, spirituality becomes both a weapon and a warning – blurring the lines between formal authority and metaphysical power. Resistance is not just a political risk but a spiritual one, and for many, the price of defiance can be fatal. For Ma Mbanzola and others who experienced dispossession, land ownership became not only insecure but dangerous. Several respondents described losing friends or community members who died while attempting to reclaim land, reinforcing the reality that in this setting, land ownership is as much about navigating spiritual danger as it is about asserting legal rights. In Ma Mbanzola's experience, land ownership was shaped less by formal entitlement than by the ability to

navigate overlapping systems of spiritual, social, and political influence. For women without wealth, connections, or institutional backing, the cost of resistance often becomes too high. In such cases, leaving the land may be the only viable form of self-protection – rendering land ownership, in practice, unstable, negotiated, and deeply paradoxical.

C.4 Toyokani, Structuration Theory, and the gifted Land Precarity

Ma Mbanzola's farmland ownership was secured through Toyokani – a locally recognised, trust-based agreement grounded in mutual understanding and social negotiation. Structuration theory, as articulated by Anthony Giddens, offers a valuable framework for analysing how such arrangements function simultaneously as enabling and constraining structures. In Ma Mbanzola's case, Toyokani allowed her to become a landholder and establish a productive livelihood, despite lacking formal legal ownership. This reflects the agency potential of informal systems rooted in social norms and relational trust. However, these same structures also imposed significant constraints. While Toyokani is socially legitimised, its protection depends on factors such as wealth, kinship ties, and spiritual or political backing. The validity of Ma Mbanzola's agreement rested entirely on the perceived authority of the person who gifted her the land and the broader, shifting power dynamics in the area. Once the land chief began reclaiming land – regardless of existing agreements or visible investments – she had no legal recourse or institutional support to defend her claim. In this way, the very structure that enabled her to own land ultimately failed to protect her. This fragility is not solely due to informality; even formal documentation proved ineffective when challenged by land chiefs exercising social, spiritual, or political power.

Ma Mbanzola's experience also shows how Toyokani extends beyond verbal agreements into family and kinship networks. Her current sense of relative security – she now practises home gardening – does not stem from legal title but from her sister's marriage into the land chief's family. In such cases, Toyokani becomes embedded in broader relational systems that govern local expectations around land ownership. Yet, this form of relational protection is deeply precarious. As seen in the earlier case of Ma Marie Noel, even being married into the land chief's lineage did not prevent dispossession and harm. Several farmers reported similar experiences, noting that land chiefs often sever ties with former kin or friends after arbitrarily

selling land – rendering prior relationships meaningless. When land becomes desirable to more powerful actors, these silent agreements dissolve, and Toyokani loses its protective value.

Spiritual structures further shaped the dynamics of land ownership in Ma Mbanzola's area. Farmers, including Ma Mbanzola, attempted to resist collectively through Toyokani. They refused to pay again for land they had already cultivated and brought féticheurs to perform rituals intended to spiritually protect their rights and challenge the land chief's authority. These efforts, however, were met with an equally forceful response: the land chief mirrored their tactics, invoking his own ancestral legitimacy and reinforcing his position through connections with state institutions. Both the farmers and the land chief operated within culturally accepted spiritual frameworks, yet the outcomes remained unequal due to disparities in access to symbolic and institutional power. Spirituality played a dual structural role. For the farmers, it provided a culturally grounded way to assert what they understood as rightful ownership, especially in the absence of formal recognition. For the land chief, it functioned as a strategy of control – instilling fear through rituals, ancestral invocation, and threats of witchcraft. These spiritual practices were not symbolic abstractions. As Ma Mbanzola and others described, they shaped concrete decisions about whether to resist or retreat. In this context, spiritual authority became part of the broader structural landscape – simultaneously enabling collective action and reinforcing the very constraints that limited farmers' ability to assert ownership. Under structuration theory, these dynamics highlight how agency is always negotiated within overlapping, and often conflicting, systems of power.

Overall, from a structuration theory perspective, Ma Mbanzola's story illustrates how land ownership is shaped by dynamic and negotiated structures. Toyokani enabled her to own both residential land and farmland, yet also locked her into a system that, while locally legitimate, lacked the institutional protection to defend her claim. Her ability to act was not absent – but it was deeply shaped and constrained by spiritual, social, and political hierarchies that continuously redefined what ownership could mean. In this context, landholding was less about possessing land and more about navigating the unstable structures that governed who could claim it, when, and for how long. The paradox of land ownership in Kinshasa is not merely a question of formal versus informal tenure. It extends into the realm of spiritual authority, kinship networks, and political influence – making ownership a constantly shifting, and often illusory, construct. The land chief's ability to dispossess both vulnerable farmers and powerful

figures such as military generals reveals that legal mechanisms, such as documents and court rulings, or even physical force, such as police intervention, are insufficient safeguards in a landscape governed by informal power and ancestral legitimacy. For Ma Mbanzola, resisting could have led not only to financial ruin but also to spiritual or physical harm. In this context, land ownership did not provide protection or power. It became an illusion – offering no real security when it was most needed. Ma Mbanzola's case – like those of other female farmers discussed above – ultimately challenges the dominant assumption that land ownership inherently produces agency. Particularly for women of a certain class, with limited social networks and little protection from spiritual structures, ownership remains precarious, continuously negotiated, and shaped by layered systems of power that extend far beyond individual control.

5.2 What Does It All Mean? Lessons From these Illustrative Case Studies

To address the second research sub-question – What are the structural and historical constraints, including land access, that shape women's participation in urban agriculture? – this chapter, through the case studies of Ma Mbuyi, Ma Marie Noel, and Ma Mbanzola, has revealed the paradox of land ownership in Kinshasa. Whether acquired through inheritance (Ma Mbuyi), purchase (Ma Marie Noel), or gifting (Ma Mbanzola), land ownership does not equate to long-term security or sustained agricultural agency for women. For many, land is not a stable foundation for farming, but rather a temporary arrangement – Toyokani – that can be withdrawn or redefined at any time. Their experiences show that ownership is not a fixed status but a fragile, negotiated position shaped by shifting alliances and informal power relations. By applying structuration theory, this chapter moves beyond binary distinctions between formal and informal, or legal and customary land tenure. Instead, it situates land ownership within a continuum of negotiated power, where women's ability to maintain land depends not on ownership alone but also on their capacity to navigate interlocking systems of constraint. This dynamic is captured in the diagram below, which illustrates how agency and structural forces unfold across women's land experiences and leave them vulnerable to sudden dispossession.

A. The structural dynamics

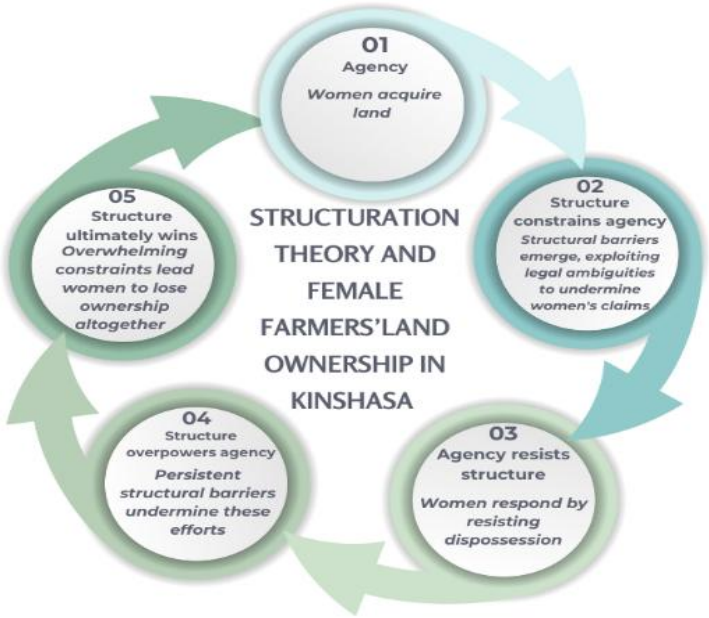

Figure 5.3 Structuration and agency in female farmers' land ownership

(Source: P. Tshomba, field data 2023)

Using structuration theory, the case studies – visualised through the diagram – demonstrate how women's agency and structural constraints are continuously co-constituted through established social norms. In Step 1, women acquire land through inheritance, purchase, or negotiation. In Step 2, structural barriers emerge as local power holders manipulate informal norms and legal loopholes to challenge their claims. In Step 3, women resist this through legal action, negotiation, or collective mobilisation. Yet in Step 4, systemic forces – such as corruption, gender bias, and institutional weakness – undermine these efforts, often culminating in Step 5, where women lose their land despite their earlier agency. Ultimately, this cycle reflects the structuration of land relations in Kinshasa, where women's agency is continuously shaped – and often constrained – by the very systems they must engage to own land.

To understand how this unstable system is sustained, it is necessary to examine the roles of the various actors involved – those who, through their everyday practices, contribute to the persistence of land insecurity. Toyokani, while enabling access to land, also reproduce insecurity. Drawing from the women's lived experiences, the analysis further reveals that each actor – whether a female farmer, land chief, or political elite – plays a role in sustaining land

ownership constraints by acting within and reinforcing established norms. While these actors navigate the informal system for survival, advantage, or authority, they also – whether intentionally or not – maintain the very instability they must contend with. These dynamics extend beyond land scarcity or patriarchal norms, revealing deeper systemic cycles in which permanent ownership remains elusive. This dynamic reflects the duality of structure: the very norms that constrain women's agency are also reproduced through the everyday actions of all actors involved. This broader pattern of structural instability is illustrated in the following diagrams.

Figure 5.4 Why land constraints persist: Land ownership chain of vulnerabilities

(Source: P. Tshomba, field data 2023)

To shift from the structural overview of land ownership in Ndjili Kilambu to its everyday functioning, this section examines how these different actors enact and reinforce the norms that sustain land insecurity in Kinshasa. It begins with the land chiefs, whose authority to allocate and reallocate land plays a pivotal role in perpetuating tenure instability – as seen in the cases of Ma Mbuyi, Ma Marie Noel, and Ma Mbanzola.

A.1 Land Chiefs: Power, Spiritual Authority, and Legal Ambiguity

Across all three case studies, the land chief consistently emerges as a central figure perpetuating land insecurity. This is unsurprising given that urban Kinshasa comprises only 4% of the city's total land area, with the remaining 90% under customary governance (Mufungizi and Akilimali, 2024). As primary gatekeepers, land chiefs wield significant power over land allocation and sales, blending customary legitimacy, ancestral spiritual authority, and political influence. A major driver of insecurity is the practice of land chiefs selling the same plot multiple times, particularly in contested or high-value areas, creating overlapping claims and legal disputes. They exploit legal ambiguities around land registration. According to Article 59 of the 1973 Land Law, definitive ownership requires a registry certificate (certificat d'enregistrement), as highlighted by Ma Marie Noel's experience. Yet obtaining this certificate involves navigating a bureaucratic system rife with corruption, high fees, and informal gatekeepers, rendering it largely inaccessible for many women who statistically earn significantly less income and possess limited social capital (77.3% less in wages and 66.5% less in business profits than men) (Donald et al., 2022). Acquiring preliminary documentation from various local authority offices alone can cost up to USUS$500, varying by location and personal networks. Additionally, according to the Guide Pratique d'Acquisition d'une Concession Foncière (2019) (Ministère des affaires foncières, 2019), obtaining the final certificat d'enregistrement officially costs 17% of the land's purchase price – though in practice, corruption, unofficial fees, and inadequate oversight frequently inflate this figure. Figure 5.5 summarises these official steps and informal practices.

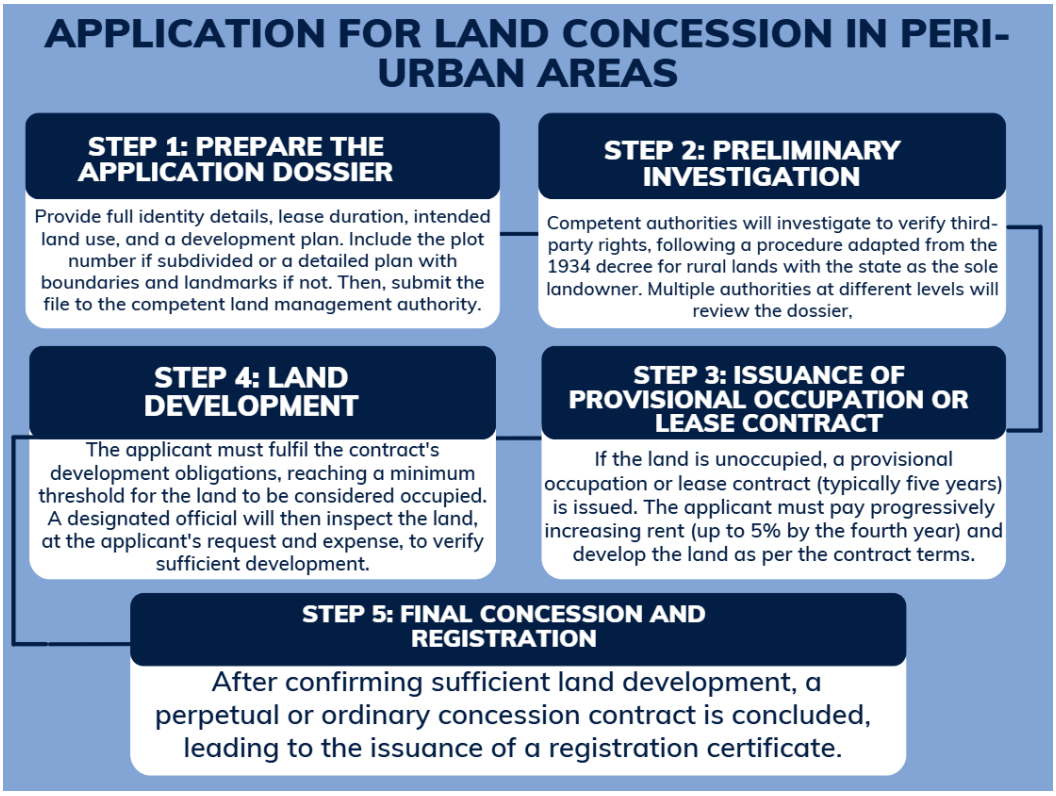

Figure 5.5 Application process for land acquisition in urban and peri-urban settings

(Source: Adapted by P. Tshomba from Ferrari and Tshimbalanga, 2015)

Even when obtained, formal documentation rarely guarantees secure tenure, as forgery and corruption remain rampant. According to the president of N'Galiema Peace Court, "Everything that is false is related to land"; this emphasises the widespread fraud and legal uncertainty (Ferrari and Tshimbalanga, 2015). Consequently, most residents rely on informal documents – such as receipts, acts of sale, or parcel sheets – recognised within local communities but lacking formal legal protection. This informality enables land chiefs to repeatedly resell plots, often targeting dispossessed women or others lacking resources to contest their land rights. Land chiefs strategically resell disputed plots to influential elites, often assuming that female farmers lack the power or resources to challenge such actors. These alliances – frequently secured through bribery and connections with military and government officials – serve to reinforce the authority of the chiefs. As an official from the Urbanism Office candidly explained, "Land chiefs often forge alliances with government officials, including within the police, to further their interests."

Yet the power of land chiefs is not absolute. They themselves remain vulnerable to elite retaliation, especially when their actions threaten the interests of more powerful actors. As Ma Mbanzola explained, “The land chief and his family deal with the authorities – not people like us. For example, two members of the land chief’s family are in prison right now because they sold land belonging to a general. The general had them arrested.” Due to the informal and negotiable nature of the land system – sustained through Toyokani – enforcement remains inconsistent. Chiefs must constantly navigate a precarious and unstable balance of power, where their authority is simultaneously reinforced and undermined by the same networks they depend on.

A.2 Farmers and the Complexity of Land Ownership in Kinshasa

While land chiefs initiate the cycle of vulnerability, farmers themselves also significantly contribute to it, further deepening the complexity and insecurity surrounding land ownership in Kinshasa. Whereas land chiefs drive insecurity through multiple land sales and informal arrangements, farmers complicate the landscape by participating in transactions that destabilise land claims for others. Central to this issue is the informal and temporary nature of farmers' land ownership, typically arranged through agreements with government bodies, private landowners, or land chiefs. Historically, land in Kinshasa’s peri-urban areas, particularly urban farming "green zones", has primarily been allocated for temporary use rather than permanent ownership. According to Article 13(a) of Law No. 11/022 (December 24, 2011), detailed in the Ministère Foncier’s 2019 guide, agricultural concessions – such as the site des maraîchères (farmers’ sites)– are allocated by the Ministry of Agriculture and its partners. These allocations are frequently formalised through informal tokens, small papers serving as proof of temporary use rights, usually obtained in exchange for modest fees paid to local authorities. Similarly, private landowners frequently utilise informal agreements known locally as Toyokani, allowing temporary cultivation without granting permanent ownership. Article 154 of the 1973 Land Law specifies that landowners with plots exceeding 10 hectares must demonstrate active land use under a provisional title for at least five years before permanent rights can be granted (Ferrari and Tshimbalanga, 2015). To satisfy this requirement, landowners commonly enter into Toyokani agreements with farmers, granting temporary cultivation rights, sometimes rent-free.

However, some farmers have also been accused of taking advantage of informal arrangements by selling plots they may not have had the authority to sell, further amplifying insecurity for subsequent buyers and complicating the already fragile dynamics of land ownership. Chief Davin of Lemba Imbu claimed that some of these transactions funded the overseas education of farmers' children – individuals who now advocate from abroad for rights to land he says was never truly theirs: "The farmers who are protesting me today – I feel like they are not thinking straight… People calling from Europe claiming to have grown up with the produce from the farm – their parents sold my land to send them to Europe," he remarked.

Ma Mbanzola offers a similar perspective, noting that some female farmers intentionally sold land they held through informal arrangements, anticipating that they would eventually be dispossessed: "Many of the women [mothers] managed to send their children to Europe with the money they earned from farming. That's why you often hear about the bana Ndjili [children from Ndjili] in Europe. Most of them come from these female farmers. Some original land occupants knowingly sold their land, knowing they would soon lose it anyway. Those who fell into this trap – some died from the shock. But the first occupants? They had already sent their children to Europe, and they are doing well now."

These accounts highlight the ambiguous and uneven nature of land ownership within Kinshasa's informal land system. While early occupants were sometimes able to transform their landholding into opportunities for economic or social mobility, later buyers – often unaware of the contested status of these plots – faced devastating consequences, including financial loss, dispossession, and in some cases, even death from shock. Ultimately, these narratives suggest that land insecurity in Kinshasa is not only imposed from above but also reproduced through everyday practices from below. Within this fluid market, ownership itself is unstable – negotiated, redefined, and at times exploited. In this way, farmers, like land chiefs and elites, contribute to the ongoing cycle of vulnerability, navigating and reinforcing a system in which land rights remain deeply contested and persistently insecure.

A.3 Elites and the Perpetuation of Land Insecurity

Building on the roles played by land chiefs and farmers, elites – including high-ranking military officers, legal professionals, and wealthy business figures – further deepen the cycle of

vulnerability surrounding land ownership in Kinshasa. As illustrated in the cycle of vulnerability, elites secure land not only through direct purchases but also via bribery and strategic alliances with land chiefs. Their influence often extends into institutions meant to safeguard land rights – such as legal offices, land bureaus, and urban planning departments – where complicity and corruption are common. These actors frequently own land themselves and benefit from the same informal transactions they are meant to regulate. Highlighting this institutional complicity, an urban planning officer explained during fieldwork, "For example, I oversee the urban planning office. If a corrupt land chief approaches me – as an ordinary citizen, it's difficult to contest their power. In the DRC, self-interest often takes precedence over altruism."

Leveraging political connections and social capital, elites often appear untouchable, navigating ambiguous legal frameworks and informal systems with ease. However, despite their advantages, their positions remain inherently unstable. Elite land claims often depend on alignment with the ruling government or their own direct involvement in political structures – leaving them vulnerable to shifts in political leadership or regime change. Reflecting on this paradox, one elite landholder with several hectares of land in the study area remarked, "Yes, marginalised people in the area are vulnerable. But don't you think we are vulnerable too, at our level? Who do you think this country really protects?" This candid admission underscores the fragility of elite protection: once political alliances shift, even the most powerful can face legal challenges, loss of property, or forced displacement. As Ma Mbuyi, a farmer who lost her land, observed, "With good advocacy, we could still reclaim the land. We've seen it happen in other areas. Even where there were residential buildings, they destroyed them and turned the land back into farmland. If one day you can fight for us, that would be great."

Ma Mbuyi's statement reveals that even seemingly permanent developments are not beyond contestation. Aware of these risks, some elites quickly resell acquired properties – often before formal procedures are complete – in an effort to secure fast profit and avoid accountability. Yet this strategy only reproduces insecurity. New buyers, often unaware of prior conflicts or irregularities, are left especially vulnerable if they lack the political or social capital to defend their claims. This dynamic reveals the depth of systemic corruption: institutions intended to protect land tenure instead perpetuate uncertainty. Elites, far from being immune, are embedded within – and vulnerable to – the same volatile system they help sustain.

As this precarious system continues, it is often the newest occupants – those furthest removed from the original transactions – who bear the greatest risks of insecurity and dispossession.

A.4 The New Occupants

At the bottom of this cycle of vulnerability are the new occupants: individuals who acquire land through informal arrangements or what appear to be legitimate transactions. Often unaware of the prior conflicts, power struggles, or illegitimacies surrounding the land, they enter a system already shaped by contested claims and shifting alliances. Their growing demand for affordable land – particularly on the urban periphery – fuels speculative and sometimes unlawful sales, inadvertently reinforcing the very dynamics that render ownership precarious. In doing so, new occupants become both victims of systemic instability and, through their participation, unintentional contributors to its ongoing reproduction. As land prices in Kinshasa's urban core continue to surge, peri-urban areas like Ndjili Kilambu have become increasingly attractive alternatives. One architect noted this shift: "In the city centre, land prices have surged significantly, making it difficult to build on small, costly plots. Recently, a 4m x 8m plot sold for USUS$50,000."

In contrast, land in peri-urban areas remains comparatively affordable. According to Manzeku, the local land chief in Kilambu, a 20 m x 20 m plot sold for approximately USUS$2,500 in 2023, with per-hectare prices ranging from USUS$7,000 to USUS$12,000, depending on proximity to infrastructure. These relatively low prices have transformed peri-urban zones into hotspots for speculative land acquisition, attracting buyers priced out of central Kinshasa. However, despite their role in fuelling demand, new occupants remain profoundly vulnerable. The plots they purchase often carry hidden historical claims or unresolved legal disputes that can resurface with shifts in political power or changes in land alliances. Formal documentation offers little protection in this fluid environment, leaving buyers exposed to forced evictions or contested claims. Highlighting the human cost of this insecurity, Ma Mbanzola explained, "Those who fell into this trap – some died from the shock [of losing their farmland]. They had no idea the land would bring them so many problems. But the first occupants? They had already sent their children to Europe, and they are doing well now." Ultimately, land often reverts to original claimants, powerful elites, or land chiefs, closing the loop of dispossession. This

reinforces Kinshasa's enduring paradox: that ownership, no matter how formalised, rarely translates into lasting security.

A.5 The Cycle Reverts to the Land Chief

At the end of the cycle of vulnerability, land frequently returns to the land chief, completing – and restarting – the process. Chiefs routinely reclaim land that becomes contested, unused, or politically vulnerable, even when these plots have already been sold or allocated to others. When asked during fieldwork whether land was still available, a land chief in Kilambu Village responded candidly, "Yes, we still have available land. We reclaimed lands that were previously sold to Rwandese… The Rwandese are considered adversaries, so we've taken back lands they had purchased. Those lands rightfully belong to us."

This admission reveals that so-called "availability" of land often results not from space being unused but from strategic repossession – justified through political narratives or by exploiting existing social and legal vulnerabilities. Through repeated acts of reclaiming and reselling contested land, chiefs reinforce the very instability they are seen to arbitrate. While the cycle often ends with land returning to the chief, this is not always the case. In some instances, land reverts to powerful elites or original owners with legal claims or political backing. These exceptions further underscore the role of power in shaping land outcomes, regardless of legal or customary legitimacy. Ultimately, what appears as ownership for most – including women and other marginalised actors – remains unstable and provisional. This recursive instability reflects the core of structuration theory: land insecurity in Kinshasa is not only imposed from above but also continually reproduced through Toyokani – the practices, negotiations, and strategies of all actors operating within a structurally fragile system.

B. Spirituality and Land Control

Beyond structural dynamics, spirituality introduces a critical yet often overlooked dimension to the paradox of land ownership in Kinshasa. While legal, economic, and social constraints are visible and well-documented, spiritual beliefs exert a more subtle – but no less powerful – influence on land disputes. These beliefs reinforce traditional authority and shape how actors interpret, justify, and navigate contested claims, often in ways that transcend formal legal

frameworks. In this context, spirituality functions not merely as personal belief but as an institutionalised system of power – one that mediates conflict, legitimises authority, and sustains control over land. As both traditional and state legal systems repeatedly fail to protect landowners – as seen throughout the experiences of farmers in this study – spirituality emerges as both a final line of defence and a locally grounded strategy to reclaim land. These acts of spiritual protest are often emotionally charged, symbolically potent, and rooted in deeply held collective beliefs. Highlighting this form of resistance, Ma Bibi, a participant, described a dramatic protest by farmers facing eviction: "All these farmers were parading with this coffin. There were so many farmers parading in the street with their coffin written, 'Rest in peace, Davin.'" Though born of desperation, this act served as a powerful invocation of spiritual authority – an embodied protest against dispossession and a public appeal to ancestral justice. Yet such resistance often provokes fierce counteraction from land chiefs, who draw on the same spiritual resources to assert their power. As Ma Bibi further recalled, "Then the land chief got angry. He said, 'Ah, the Banyanga bury me! No problem. The farmers bury me alone. However, I will bury them with all their stuff.'"

Land chiefs often invoke ancestral legitimacy and spiritual threats – such as curses or symbolic burial rites – to reinforce their authority and discourage local actors from contesting land claims through informal negotiation or customary channels. These practices serve as powerful psychological tools, reinforcing obedience and deterring resistance within the very norms and structures that govern land relations. Even when challenged in formal settings, spiritual legitimacy frequently overrides legal reasoning, allowing chiefs to retain control without relying on institutional enforcement. In this way, spirituality functions as a macro-level constraint, shaping land relations through invisible yet deeply internalised systems of belief and authority. It displaces land ownership from the realm of physical or legal possession into one governed by spiritual logic – unwritten, unpredictable, and resistant to formal regulation. As such, spiritual authority not only deepens the vulnerability of individual actors but also reinforces the structural instability and paradoxes that define land ownership in Kinshasa.

C. Intersecting Gender Norms and Land Vulnerability

Having examined spirituality as an overarching structural constraint affecting landowners across social categories, the analysis now turns to gender norms – introducing further micro-

level dynamics that specifically shape women's experiences of land ownership in Kinshasa. For divorced or widowed women in particular, land security often hinges on family relationships and interpretations of customary law – an adaptable, "living" system that is selectively applied, and frequently used to exclude women from stable tenure. Women's narratives clearly reveal how gender adds another layer of instability to already precarious land ownership structures – exposing how social norms intersect with structural vulnerability to further destabilise women's claims.

Ma Mbanzola, for example, must balance caregiving responsibilities, limited economic resources, and restricted mobility, all of which severely constrain her ability to resist dispossession. Ma Marie Noel's decision to abandon her land underscores how land can simultaneously serve as a vital source of livelihood and a burdensome obligation, shaped by systemic and physical constraints. Likewise, Ma Mbuyi's experience – where one plot was reclaimed by her family and another by the land chief – illustrates the inherently fragile and shifting nature of women's land rights, often leaving them without any practical recourse.

However, attributing women's limited land ownership solely to patriarchal norms risks oversimplifying the complex realities of land rights in Kinshasa. The city's landscape does not conform neatly to a binary legal-versus-customary framework. As seen in the preceding analysis of spirituality, multiple and overlapping systems of meaning and power influence land relations. Women's access to land is also shaped by factors such as education, age, socio-economic status, and household dynamics. These intersecting dimensions reveal that women's land rights in Kinshasa are not fixed but continually negotiated – subject to individual circumstances, evolving customary interpretations, and broader structural constraints. Thus, while gender norms significantly deepen the paradox of land ownership, they represent just one layer within a wider and more complex system of constraints.

5.3 Impact on Urban Agriculture

The interwoven effects of structural constraints, spiritual authority, and gender norms – outlined in the diagrams and case studies – demonstrate how women's land access is continually reshaped by the very systems they must navigate. These layered dynamics not only destabilise women's claims to land, but also carry far-reaching consequences for their

participation in urban agriculture. Structural barriers to secure tenure directly impact the productivity, sustainability, and economic potential of women's farming activities. As seen in the case studies, when women do hold land, they often invest heavily in improvements – installing irrigation systems, planting trees, constructing shelters for cultivation, and building support networks with other farmers. Yet once ownership is contested, these investments – and the livelihoods built on them – are frequently lost, directly disrupting women's ability to plan, sustain, and expand their farming activities.

One significant impact of interrupted land ownership is the shift to renting, which introduces new financial burdens that women did not face when farming on land they owned. As Ma Nseka, a female farmer who was evicted alongside Ma Mbuyi, explained, "Renting is tough compared to owning. For instance, you might be growing vegetables that aren't ready to sell yet, but the owner still demands rent at the end of the month. We rent from a Muluba, and he's very demanding. It's about 60,000 francs, around US$20 in rent. I don't have many plots. Many people have already left. I only have 20 plots of vegetables. It's difficult because we have to think about children's school fees, health, and everything. Farming is all we know, and it's very hard."

Her words underscore how rental arrangements not only reduce women's autonomy over land use but also introduce time-bound financial pressures that clash with the rhythms of agricultural production. When crops are not yet ready for harvest, the obligation to pay rent becomes especially burdensome – contributing to heightened stress, reduced productivity, and, for some, complete withdrawal from farming. This was the case for Ma Mbuyi, who explained, "I haven't gone anywhere else to farm. Now, I just sell this small basket of bread in front of my house. I've completely stopped farming. Most people went to areas far away to continue, but I'm an old woman. I don't have the physical strength to farm in those places. You need to take a motorbike taxi to get there, so I couldn't do it. I stopped farming." Ma Mbuyi's experience highlights how land loss can lead not just to economic disruption but also to the end of agricultural life altogether. For older women in particular, the impact is especially acute: physical limitations, isolation from support networks, and the cost of commuting to distant plots make continued farming unfeasible. In such cases, land loss is not simply about income – it marks the forced abandonment of an entire way of life. Owning farmland in a location of choice, where social ties have been established, enables women to rely on nearby family and

community support. When that land is lost, they are often forced to relocate to unfamiliar areas out of necessity rather than preference, leaving behind informal networks that once supported their farming activities. In these new settings, many must manage farms alone, without the shared labour that previously eased the physical burden.

Female farmers are left to shoulder the full range of agricultural tasks – land preparation, transporting produce, and marketing; these are responsibilities that were once divided among relatives or neighbours. As Ma Nseka reflected, “I sell at Zigida. I grow vegetables and sell everything myself there. Before, I didn’t have to do the hard work on the farm because my two younger brothers helped. I focused on selling the produce.”

For those unable to manage the work alone, hiring labour becomes necessary. As Ma Marie Noel explained, “I used to pay him – the helper – a monthly salary of US$40. But I also had to cover his food expenses, giving him 2,000 francs a day. So just multiply 2,000 by 26 days.”

Their accounts illustrate how land loss not only increases labour burdens and financial costs for women but also weakens the overall productivity and sustainability of their urban farming activities. Without stable land and social support, women are less able to maintain consistent cultivation – further undermining the viability of urban agriculture as a livelihood. Moreover, rented plots often lack the basic infrastructure and long-term reliability that women had previously invested in. These unfamiliar sites frequently present environmental challenges that make farming even more difficult. Ma Nseka expressed her frustration: “If I had money, I wouldn’t farm there any more because I’m not used to the water. I’d rather rent a space and open a mini-shop to sell food like beans.” Ma Marie Noel further explained, “Here I have 20 plots, but I only cultivate around 10 to 15 because the water stagnates on the other side. I couldn’t sell any vegetables from that area – it was a huge waste. I didn’t even make 50 francs. I lost money because the land is sloped and water accumulates. It’s only usable during the dry season. And I still have to pay rent for it.”

As the land women once cultivated becomes unavailable due to dispossession, many are left farming in unfamiliar and often less productive plots. These conditions make urban agriculture increasingly precarious – reducing yields, increasing costs, and pushing women into more vulnerable and unsustainable livelihoods. As Ma Mbanzola reflected, farming under secure

land ownership once allowed her to grow a wide range of crops and generate meaningful income – far beyond subsistence: “I had so much going on – I used to grow peanuts, cassava, maize, matembele [sweet potato leaves]. I made a lot of money. And because I am the eldest, I also had to give a lot away to my siblings’ children to eat. But it’s not the same now that I’m farming from home.” . Her experience underscores how land ownership enabled productive and profitable farming. In contrast, the loss of land or reliance on insecure arrangements significantly limits what women can grow, how consistently they can cultivate, and the income they can earn. For many, land insecurity not only reduces productivity but threatens their continued participation in urban farming altogether.

Taken together, these experiences reveal that the loss of land ownership does not merely displace women geographically, it disrupts the entire structure of their agricultural livelihoods. Without secure, familiar plots, these women face declining productivity, increasing financial burdens, and limited capacity to apply their farming skills effectively. As the case studies show, urban agriculture under insecure tenure becomes increasingly unsustainable. This instability is not just the result of poor soil or distant locations, but of a deeper systemic issue: land insecurity reshapes how, where, and whether these women are able to continue farming at all

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how women’s agency in Kinshasa’s urban agriculture sector is shaped not by stable tenure or formal rights but by their capacity to navigate an unstable and contested land system. Land ownership in the city’s peri-urban zones is marked by ambiguity, spiritual claims, elite appropriation, and informal transactions that render possession precarious and often temporary. Far from being a fixed asset, land emerges as a fluid and negotiated resource, bought, borrowed, gifted, reclaimed, or lost, embedded in overlapping customary, statutory, and power-laden relations. Within this volatile terrain, female farmers are not passive victims of dispossession. While repeatedly displaced or excluded from formal ownership, they continue to assert their presence through everyday practices of endurance, negotiation, and relocation. Their ability to remain in urban farming hinges not solely on access to land but also on emotional resilience, relational strategies, and embedded forms of knowledge that defy formal legal structures. The paradox of land ownership in Kinshasa thus reveals a deeper truth: women’s agency is not defined by possession, but by their capacity to act within, around, and

against structures that were not designed for them. The next chapter turns to life histories of women who, despite these constraints, remain active agents in shaping the city's agricultural life through strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and mutual recognition.

6 Agency Within Constraints

This chapter addresses the third research sub-question of this study: How do women navigate these [historical and structural] constraints to maintain and assert agency in urban agriculture? While the previous chapter explored how structural constraints – such as insecure tenure, informal land governance, spiritual and political authority, and gendered norms – undermine women's land ownership and make secure farming increasingly difficult, this chapter shifts focus to the everyday strategies women use to remain active in urban agriculture despite these persistent challenges. Rather than treating land ownership as the sole or ultimate marker of agency, the chapter foregrounds how women navigate uncertainty and exclusion by negotiating alternative forms of access, drawing on relational, cultural, and practical strategies that sustain their agricultural roles over time.

This chapter draws on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation during nine months of fieldwork in Kinshasa. It focuses on four women – Ma Gode, Ma Rosa, Ma Muka, and Ma Flo – whose stories reflect different positions within the city's urban agricultural system. Ma Gode and Ma Rosa are long-standing female farmers who continue cultivating through negotiated, often informal, access to land. In contrast, Ma Muka and Ma Flo have transitioned into roles as middlewomen (maman ndunda), securing their presence in the agricultural economy through produce circulation rather than direct cultivation. These four cases were not selected to be representative of all women in Kinshasa's urban agriculture but because they illustrate distinct and complementary strategies of women using their agency to navigate structural barriers. Their experiences shed light on how differentiated access to land, capital, bodily capacity, social networks, and embedded cultural norms shape the forms that women's agency can take within a constrained and evolving urban farming sector. The aim is not only to examine how these women maintain their presence in agriculture, but also to situate their strategies within the broader structural context of Kinshasa's farming economy – characterised by land scarcity, elite land consolidation, informal markets, and precarious labour that is often gendered.

Analytically, this chapter is guided by structuration theory and nego-feminism, articulated through Toyokani, as a locally grounded concept. These frameworks help reveal how women's

agency in Kinshasa is not always exercised through direct resistance or formal authority, but through relational, context-sensitive acts of negotiation, adaptation, compromise, and strategic withdrawal. In this study, Toyokani functions both as a lived practice and an interpretive lens. It reflects a culturally embedded ethic of survival – one that privileges dialogue, reciprocity, and informal social agreements over confrontation. In doing so, Toyokani highlights how women navigate, rather than overturn, structures of power, particularly in contexts of dispossession and everyday uncertainty.

The rest of the chapter proceeds as follows: each case study begins with a brief contextual background that situates the woman's experience within Kinshasa's urban agriculture system. This is followed by an analysis of how she applies Toyokani to navigate specific structural constraints. The same structure is applied to each case. After presenting the individual stories, the chapter reflects on how these diverse strategies challenge dominant assumptions about agency and power, engaging the theoretical frameworks introduced earlier. Together, these life histories resist any singular narrative about women's roles in urban agriculture. Instead, they reveal how agency emerges within the cracks of structural constraint – not through idealised notions of autonomy, but through relational, adaptive, and context-specific practices of negotiation rooted in localised realities. The chapter concludes by synthesising the key insights and setting the stage for the next chapter.

This section now turns to the first of four life histories: Ma Gode, a long-time cultivator whose access to farmland is shaped by kinship ties. Her story illustrates how family-based negotiation and informal recognition serve as foundational strategies for sustaining access within an insecure land tenure system.

6.1 Illustrating Situated Agency: Female Farmers' Narratives in Urban Farming

A. Ma Gode's Story: Navigating Land Access Through Family Networks

A.1 Background and Context/ Entering Farming and Navigating Land Access

Ma Gode, as she prefers to be called, was born in Kinshasa in 1960. Although her birthplace is Matete, she identifies with the Humbu tribe, making her an Indigenous resident of Ndjili Kilambu, where she was raised. At age 18, during her second year of secondary school, Ma Gode became pregnant, prompting her to discontinue formal education. To support herself financially, she began selling peanuts and other small goods near the Kilambu railway station. Some years later, she married. However, on discovering her husband's infertility, Ma Gode discussed openly with him her intention to have children with another man, an arrangement to which her husband agreed. In 2005, she gave birth to her second son, whom both her husband and the child's biological father supported. In 2013, her husband passed away, and later her second partner also died. In 2019, she entered another relationship, hoping it might provide mutual economic and emotional support. However, after two years, she ended this relationship because her partner could not meet her needs. Reflecting on these experiences, she remarked, "I've had my fill of relationships, and for now, I choose to remain single." Currently, Ma Gode resides with her younger son, who is approaching 18 years of age. Her older son is married with children and maintains his own household. Today, Ma Gode's primary source of livelihood comes from her agricultural activities.

Ma Gode has been involved in farming since childhood. As she explained, "Farming is something we learned from our father," adding that all her siblings also continue farming in the area. She proudly pointed out her sister's farm, remarking, "My sister's plot is even grander and more pristine." Indeed, during previous visits, her sister's plot stood out clearly due to its neatness and productivity. Ma Gode also took me to see her brothers' farms, emphasising that farming was deeply embedded in their family's tradition. As we walked further, Ma Gode showed me flourishing vegetable plots nearby, proudly mentioning, "Those sorrel plots belong to my youngest son." Although just 17, her son is already actively involved in farming,

encouraged by Ma Gode to “earn his keep”. For Ma Gode and her family, farming is not just a livelihood but a valued cultural practice passed through generations.

Ma Gode’s first independent experience with land was through ownership. As an Indigenous resident of Kilambu Village, she initially inherited ancestral land. However, due to financial pressures, she eventually sold this land in 2003. After losing ownership, she shifted to negotiating access to land instead of seeking ownership again. She secured access to land through an arrangement with the local land chief, Manzeku, and farmed this land successfully for several years. However, this arrangement unexpectedly ended when the chief forced her and other farmers off the land. Reflecting on this event, Ma Gode expressed deep frustration: “Losing the land made me very angry. I couldn't afford to invest in farming again, and being a single mother made it even more challenging.” Despite these difficulties, Ma Gode remained committed to farming. She eventually secured land access through familial negotiation. Her cousin Lambert, a wealthy and influential family member who inherited significant ancestral land and also acquired additional hectares, provided her with access to farmland near the river. Lambert, who acts as the head of their extended family, manages resources and supports family members based on their needs. Describing her current land arrangement with Lambert, Ma Gode explained, “To assist me with my farming work, my brother Lambert is the one who gave me this land. Having access to this land is like having money! Farming is great because even if I miss a meal in the morning, I'll still have something to eat at night. I always have something to sell and buy food with.”

The land provided by Lambert is substantial and located very close to the water, making it ideal for farming. As we walked through the area, other farmers repeatedly praised the quality and location of Ma Gode’s land, referring to it as one of the best plots around. However, the agreement with Lambert includes strict conditions: she must not rent out any part of the land or partner with outsiders. Ma Gode admitted that she accepted Lambert’s terms mainly to secure immediate access to land and avoid conflict with her cousin. However, she also acknowledged that she could not fully agree with the limitations imposed, especially given the land’s potential. As she put it, “This land holds so much promise. If only I had the means to fully harness it.”

Unable to exploit the land's full capacity on her own, Ma Gode shared her intention to quietly seek support through informal partnerships. She explained, "I've even considered finding a formal partner who is willing to work with me. I'll keep it a secret from my brother and make it seem like it's all my own money." She stressed that additional help was necessary, as farming such a large plot without support was difficult. The few visible crops reflected these challenges. With more income or assistance, she believes she could greatly improve productivity: "I could hire daily workers to clear the trees and prepare the land. With the space I have, there's so much potential." Her intention to partner with a man was deliberate, as she believes men in the area tend to have more financial means. Yet, she is aware of the social judgements that such partnerships might attract: "The moment I involve a man in my farming work, whispers start, hinting he might be my lover, especially given my single status."

Despite this, Ma Gode remains committed to finding support, especially as her productivity has recently declined. Pointing to an area where crops had failed, she said, "I focus on my farm. For instance, this time, I invested in sorrel, but unfortunately, they were all ruined, and I made no money. It's like having a child – you keep working even after experiencing setbacks. The rainfall really damaged the farm." Still, her determination remains firm. She concluded, "People will talk, but I've learned not to be shackled by their opinions." For Ma Gode, access to land continues to provide essential support – not only for food and income, but also for maintaining her dignity and role within the community: "Indeed, farming not only provides me with food but also helps me support my extended family and gain respect within the community." Through this family-based land access, Ma Gode is able to sustain her livelihood without bearing the financial burdens that come with renting or purchasing land.

Figure 6.1 Female farmer Ma Gode introducing me to her elite cousin

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph showing Ma Gode (centre back) introducing me to her cousin Lambert (left), a respected member of the local elite in the area. I am pictured on the right.

A.2 What Ma Gode's Story Reveals

- From Ownership to Kin-Based Access

Ma Gode's story illustrates how negotiated land access can offer women a meaningful way to sustain their livelihoods, support their families, and preserve social dignity in the absence of land ownership, whether formal or informal. Her experience reflects Toyokani, which enables women to adapt to shifting economic and social landscapes while maintaining their place in urban farming. Ma Gode's initial landholding was under customary tenure, a system common in Kinshasa where land chiefs allocate plots to members of their lineage. These allocations often come with the right to use, sell, or gift the land. While this ownership initially gave Ma Gode a sense of security, as she used the land for farming, she was eventually forced to sell it due to financial hardship and immediate personal need. What allowed her to remain in farming after this loss was not ownership but her ability to negotiate continued access through her family network.

This shift from ownership to access highlights a critical point made by Ribot and Peluso (2003): that agency lies not in formal rights alone but in the ability to derive benefit from resources.

However, access also came with limitations. Ma Gode's unexpected eviction by the land chief illustrates the precarity of informal arrangements, even within customary systems that are supposed to protect lineage members. Her frustration stemmed from the fact that, as a member of the lineage, she believed she had the right to use the land – yet she lost access without warning. Similarly, the conditions imposed by her cousin – such as the prohibition against sub-letting or forming partnerships – further restricted her flexibility. These constraints reduced her entrepreneurial capacity, limiting her ability to generate extra income or scale up her farming activities. Had she owned land, she would likely have had more freedom to expand her livelihood.

- Negotiating Gender Norms and Resource Exclusion

To navigate the constraints she faces, Ma Gode draws on Toyokani. This approach emphasises harmony, adaptability, compromise, and faith in responding to structural and gendered limitations. Rather than confronting the land chief directly, Ma Gode adapted to the situation and negotiated new access through her cousin. Similarly, she accepted her cousin's conditions in order to preserve her access to land. By choosing verbal compliance, she ensured continued access, even when those terms were restrictive. Aware that these conditions limited her entrepreneurial potential, Ma Gode began discreetly seeking a male business partner to help increase her capital and productivity. In Ndjili Kilambu, economic opportunities are highly gendered. According to local statistics from 2022, 100% of men in the area are involved in income-generating activities, while 60% of women are classified as housewives and not engaged in paid or recognised occupations. Among the working population, men dominate technical and manual labour – such as bricklaying, electrical work, carpentry, and transport – which are in high demand as the area develops into a residential zone. In Kilambu Village specifically, where Ma Gode farms, construction is the main non-farming activity and is almost entirely occupied by men. As a result, access to income and capital is overwhelmingly concentrated among men.

During fieldwork, it was common to hear of or observe male farmers working part-time in construction trades and pooling their earnings to support or expand their farms. These arrangements are seen as natural and rarely questioned. In contrast, similar collaborations are heavily scrutinised when pursued by women. As Ma Gode explained, the assumption that any

working relationship between a woman and a man must be romantic or sexual reinforces the exclusion of women from business partnerships and financial networks. These gendered norms not only discourage collaboration but also restrict women's access to the resources and growth opportunities that men benefit from freely. In the case of Ma Gode, although she claims not to care what people might say, her repeated references to local perceptions reveal how deeply gendered judgements shape the strategies she must employ. As a single woman, she is particularly vulnerable to gossip and moral suspicion, which can undermine her credibility and limit her access to support. Still, she does not retreat. Her discreet efforts to pursue male partnerships – even considering approaching male elites for financial assistance – reflect a calculated form of resistance aimed at expanding her urban farming.

"Sometimes," she shared, "when I see Ila [a local elite] in his car, I wonder how I can approach him to ask for help… Any amount of money would be helpful. I could use it to clear this bush and invest more in the farm. Then I can repay him gradually."

She is not afraid to collaborate, but she remains cautious. To avoid backlash – from both her cousin and the wider community – she keeps potential partnerships hidden. This dual awareness – of opportunity and social risk – is central to how she navigates a patriarchal system that punishes female visibility while normalising male economic dominance. She navigates her lack of access to resources by repositioning herself within unequal systems to leverage what she can. This strategy reflects the essence of nego-feminism: knowing when to comply, when to negotiate, and when to bend the rules to one's advantage. Rather than resisting directly, Ma Gode uses silence, compromise, and careful timing to protect her position while pushing for growth. In this way, her approach is not passive but deeply tactical – a form of everyday negotiation rooted in local realities.

- Faith, Resilience, and Small-Scale Growth

Alongside her negotiation strategies, faith plays a quiet but powerful role in sustaining Ma Gode's efforts. She often frames farming challenges in spiritual terms, expressing confidence that God will intervene in times of difficulty. Her belief is not only personal but also practical – it fuels persistence, hope, and emotional resilience where structural support is lacking. As she put it, "I have faith that I'll be able to grow my crops at the right time. With farming, even if

you face setbacks, you never give up." In a context where access is fragile and uncertainty constant, faith becomes an inner resource that strengthens her resolve and complements her tactical decision-making. Despite enduring long-standing constraints, in 2015 Ma Gode was able to purchase her own residential house through farming: "I bought my house there in 2015 for US$500. Now, it's worth US$1800." By the end of the fieldwork in 2023, she had also expanded her cultivation to five plots of maize and sorrel. While it remains unclear whether she has in fact secured a formal partnership, this steady growth – though modest – demonstrates her capacity to sustain and expand her farming within a landscape of limited resources and structural barriers. Rooted in Toyokani and the principles of nego-feminism, her case shows how women in Kinshasa navigate both land and resource constraints to continue shaping urban agriculture. Her story reminds us that for many women, agency is not found simply in titles but also in tactics, in faith, and in the everyday negotiations that allow them to plant, harvest, and persist.

A.3 Summary

In conclusion, while Ma Gode lacks the financial resources that typically support long-term farming, she continues her livelihood through Toyokani – a negotiation strategy rooted in kinship, faith, and resilience. Her access to land is made possible by ties to an influential family member and her willingness to defy restrictive gender norms, despite being a single woman in her sixties. However, not all women have access to such kin-based networks. For many, land is secured through other means, shaped by economic precarity and unequal power relations. One common alternative is labour-based exchange, where women offer physical work in return for the right to cultivate. The next case explores how this form of access functions – not merely as a reflection of dependency but as a negotiated strategy through which women assert agency and remain active in Kinshasa's urban farming landscape.

B. Ma Rosa's Story: Navigating Land Access Through Exchange Labour

B.1 Background and Context/ Entering Farming and Navigating Land Access

Ma Rosa was born on December 25, 1958, in Bandundu, now part of Kwilu Province in the DRC. She recalled moving to Kinshasa in the 1970s after marrying: “We came to Kinshasa because of your fathers [referring to both her husband and her friends’ husbands]. They were on their way to Kinshasa – Léopoldville. They proposed marriage to us before coming, and we followed them after marriage.” In 2020, her husband, who had worked as a chef, passed away after a long illness. Together, they had eight children, many of whom now have children of their own. However, few have stable employment, and most are unable to support their families independently. As a result, Ma Rosa has remained the primary caregiver for her extended household – including some of her children and her grandchildren. When we met in early 2023, she had just returned to farming and was still grieving the sudden and unexpected loss of her eldest daughter, who passed away in October 2022, leaving behind five children. Their father had long since separated from her daughter and relocated to Angola. In addition to her broader caregiving responsibilities, Ma Rosa had now taken on full responsibility for raising her late daughter’s children. “I am the mother now. The grandmother has become the mother,” she said, reflecting on her new role.

To support her family – even when her husband was alive – Ma Rosa tried various income-generating activities over the years, including running a small shop from home. “Whenever I try to open a small corner shop, the children just take what they want or eat the goods. That’s why the business failed,” she explained. She also attempted to sell cassava leaves from the nearby forest with a friend, but the lack of resources made it unsustainable. “We realised we didn’t have the means to continue,” she said. “That’s how we ended up farming.” This marked the beginning of Ma Rosa’s long and ongoing journey as an urban farmer in Kinshasa. According to her, farming became not only her main livelihood but also the most practical option, as it offered a level of flexibility and reliability that other income-generating activities had not. “If we have cassava leaves on the farm, I can harvest and sell them as needed,” she explained. To make this possible, Ma Rosa and her friend Ma Colette arrange to stay near the fields during the week. Initially, they stayed with a family friend. However, after the passing of his wife, they could no longer remain there. They then moved in with another friend and now spend the full week near the land before returning home at the weekends. As daily travel has become increasingly difficult with age, they try to limit movement as much as possible. “It’s hard going back and forth – our legs are tired and hurting now,” she said. During the week, they work in the fields during the day and sleep at their friend’s house at night.

Ma Rosa began farming in Kinshasa in 1991, but her roots in agriculture run much deeper. Reflecting on her early years, she shared, “We learned to farm because we were born in a village. We grew up watching our mothers farm. In the village, by the time you’re 12 or 13, you must have your own plot to learn how to grow food. That’s how we learned – by doing.” Farming was not just a skill – it was a way of life she brought with her when she moved to the city. In Kinshasa, she began farming alongside five close friends. Over the years, however, that group gradually diminished. “One passed away, another lost her sight, and one is now very old. It’s just the two of us left,” she said, referring to her long-time friend, Ma Colette, with whom she still works today. Ma Rosa and her friends initially gained access to farmland through a family friend who owned a large portion of land in Kilambu Village. This land had been passed down to him from his brother. As Ma Rosa recalled, “This man's brother used to own the entire property down to the bottom – it runs from here all the way to the river below.” At the time, Ma Rosa and her friends were staying at the family friend’s residence. In exchange for housing and access to land, they contributed by helping around his property – clearing weeds, keeping the surroundings clean, and doing other domestic tasks. There was no formal payment involved. Instead, their access to land was built on mutual trust, labour, and long-standing social ties. However, after four years, the family friend sold the plot they had been cultivating to a local elite named Papa Ila. Recalling the circumstances of their eviction, Ma Rosa explained, “He didn't seem to give us much time. We were told as soon as he purchased the land, ‘Ba mamans [female farmers], you should begin using your produce and leave when you have cleared everything.’” Despite this notice, the transition was abrupt. As they began harvesting their cassava roots and peanuts, one of Papa Ila’s staff arrived and informed them that their time on the land had ended: “It's over for you here, your contract has expired.” With little room to negotiate, they were forced to leave.

Shortly afterwards, another opportunity arose when the wife of the new landowner approached them with an offer of work. They agreed and requested a payment of 200,000 francs for the group. However, Ma Rosa believes that the staff member in charge of the area misrepresented their request. “He only gave us 25,000 francs, even though there were four of us. He told the landowner that our request was too much,” she recalled. Feeling that the agreement had not been honoured, they chose to end the arrangement. With that arrangement ending, Ma Rosa and her friend once again had to find a new place to farm. They returned to the same family friend, who offered access to another portion of land further up the mountain. “We worked

there, cultivating cassava leaves and peanuts, and the growth was impressive," she recalled. The second site gave them hope for a while, but it too was eventually sold – again to Papa Ila. "This is the place where the stadium is currently being constructed," Ma Rosa added. The landowner's staff came and asked them to vacate the site immediately. Fortunately, Ma Rosa and her friend were already in the middle of the harvest. They quickly collected what they could and prepared it for sale. "Then we began selling cassava stems until we were finished," she said. Despite these repeated displacements, Ma Rosa noted that they continued to maintain a respectful relationship with the landowner. Ma Rosa and her friend felt that the staff treated them unfairly, but believed the landowner himself was respectful and humble in his interactions with them. "The owner recognises us and always greets us when we see him. We helped him with some farm work," she added.

They eventually found another piece of land, once again through their long-standing connection with the family friend. However, this land too was later sold – this time to a man known as "Professor". When "Professor" visited the site, he noticed how well Ma Rosa and her friend were cultivating cassava roots, peanuts, and maize. In a gesture of hospitality, they offered him some of their harvested peanuts. Ma Rosa recalled, "He saw how we were farming and said, 'Finish your harvest, but don't leave forever. Come back to work – for yourself and for me.'" Following this exchange, they reached a working arrangement. As Ma Rosa explained, "We farm both for him and for ourselves. We plant the cassava, and when it's ready, we tell him and wait for his instruction to harvest. We do everything – soaking, cleaning, drying – and then he picks up the finished fufu." In return for their labour on his portion of the land, "Professor" allowed them to cultivate a section for their own crops. "Yes, we're now at the boundary of my field," she added. "Ma Colette's limit is the same – where you see this tree." Each of them has about 100 m of land, which they use for their own farming. To this day, they continue to cultivate cassava, sorrel, and peanuts on these plots.

Alongside their farming, Ma Rosa and Ma Colette continue to assist the family friend who first helped them access land. Now in poor health, he still receives their support when needed. On the day we met, they had just returned from clearing weeds in his backyard. As they prepared to take a short break before heading to the fields, Ma Rosa said: "We have boiled water [tea]. That man – our family friend – bought us one French baguette, which we will split and have with the tea." Their relationship continues through these small acts of mutual care – exchanging

labour for shared resources and companionship. It is through this ongoing pattern of support and everyday exchange that Ma Rosa and Ma Colette have sustained their farming life to this day.

Figure 6.2 Female farmer Ma Rosa

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph showing Ma Rosa pointing to the land boundary of "Professor," her landowner.

B.2 What Ma Rosa's Story Reveals

Ma Rosa's journey demonstrates the strategic use of access – not ownership – as a means of navigating systemic constraints, including unstable land tenure, elite land control, limited income, and the physical challenges of ageing. For over three decades, she has sustained her presence in urban farming not through formal ownership or financial capital but by negotiating access through Toyokani. Her informal yet deliberately maintained arrangements with landowners exemplify Nego-feminist logic (Nnaemeka, 2004). In Ma Rosa's case, this negotiation consistently takes the form of labour-for-land exchange, driven by a clear objective

– to continue cultivating and remain productive. Her strategies reflect a commitment to relational presence, mutual benefit, and deeply rooted cultural norms. Rather than being static, Toyokani evolves with shifting relationships, power dynamics, and bodily conditions, enabling her to remain active despite ongoing uncertainty. From an external view, these practices may appear modest or seem shaped by precarity; but in their local context, they are tactical, intentional, and resilient: quiet forms of resistance that reflect an alternative logic of land access. What follows examines how Ma Rosa strategically navigates resource constraints by applying Toyokani in practice – negotiating access to land and sustaining her presence in urban farming through the skilled exchange of her labour.

- Securing Access in a Landscape of Scarcity

While many urban farmers in Kinshasa are displaced due to limited and contested land access, Ma Rosa has sustained her farming not through rental agreements or land purchases, but through a strategy of labour-for-land exchange. Her tasks – clearing weeds, planting, harvesting, and maintaining plots – serve as informal currency, securing cultivation rights that would otherwise be out of reach. Today, she farms under such an arrangement with a landowner called “Professor”. She tends his cassava fields, processes the harvest into fufu, and in return is granted a small plot – about 100 m – to grow her own crops. Reflecting on the increasing difficulty of accessing farmland, she noted, “Really, there is no more farmland left!” Her friend Ma Colette echoed this reality, recalling how close they had been to farming near their home in Kisenso: “We could have gone to that other side, but they have already sold everything – and even those who work there are crying because they’re also being kicked out.” These reflections highlight the broader precarity many urban farmers face – marked by land loss and displacement – while also underscoring how Ma Rosa’s strategy has given her a relative advantage: continued access in a landscape increasingly shaped by informal deals, elite consolidation, and exclusion. In this way, Ma Rosa’s labour-for-land exchange illustrates Toyokani in practice – not simply as a response to scarcity, but as a relational system grounded in reciprocity and trust. These negotiations do more than secure land for Ma Rosa; they sustain ongoing relationships that reinforce her access while offering landowners consistent labour and informal protection.

- Mutual Benefit and Informal Land Protection

Typically, accessing a similar plot of land in Ma Rosa's area costs around 30,000 francs (approximately USUS$15) per year – an amount that holds significant weight for farmers like herself. Ma Rosa earned only that amount after six months of cultivating peanuts. As she explained, "I planted peanuts, but they didn't grow well – we only made 30,000 francs. My second grandchild is in sixth grade and needed to take exams, so I went to the school, but they said I had to pay 200,000 francs." While this sum represents half a year's labour, the structural reality Ma Rosa faces means that every franc must stretch to cover both daily survival and caregiving responsibilities – making rent-free access especially critical. In contrast, such an amount is relatively insignificant to many landowners, often members of the elite, such as "Professor", who teaches at the University of Kinshasa. For landowners like him, the presence of reliable cultivators is more valuable than rent. Much of the land in this area – especially where Ma Rosa farms – is held for speculation rather than immediate use. According to the 2022 district census, it has one of the highest rates of unused plots. As Chapter Five illustrated, formal ownership alone does not guarantee tenure security. Land can still be contested, challenged, or reappropriated. In this context, having someone like Ma Rosa regularly present offers not only labour but also informal protection – reinforcing the landowner's presence and legitimacy. In her current arrangement, the landowner known as "Professor" rarely visits his property, entrusting its care entirely to Ma Rosa and Ma Colette. Ma Rosa knows the boundaries intimately and acts, informally, as the land's gatekeeper. As she explained, "The limit begins here and extends up to where we entered, and it continues. Take the path indicated by the palm trees, even beyond the palm tree. Yes, that palm tree there is also his. You see, it is the river there that separates him from the other landowner." By monitoring and respecting these boundaries, Ma Rosa reinforces the mutual trust at the core of Toyokani – a system where land access is sustained not by legal tenure, but through presence, familiarity, and ongoing relational care. Her detailed knowledge of the property secures her continued access while simultaneously offering informal protection for the landowner, illustrating how reciprocity is central to these negotiated arrangements.

- Knowing the Limits of Informal Agreements

However, Ma Rosa remains fully aware of the risks involved. She understands that these arrangements are inherently fragile and can change at any moment. As she put it, "That's why we are not sure where we're going next. If the landowner comes to us and asks us to leave, we

will." Her friend Ma Colette echoed this sentiment: "I know from past experience that if the landowner comes here to build, like at Papa Ila's, there won't be much work here for us." These reflections illustrate the constant uncertainty they face – particularly when negotiation is no longer possible, such as when landowners decide to sell or repurpose their land, as has happened in their experience. This precarity is not tied to a single event but is a persistent feature of their engagement with land. In a state where land ownership and access are rarely enforced or protected – despite the existence of legal frameworks – these informal arrangements offer opportunity but remain embedded in the broader precarity that defines much of the land used for urban farming. To Ma Rosa and Ma Colette, the imbalance of power in these relationships is not abstract: they are acutely aware of their vulnerability to eviction. Even Toyokani, with its long-standing relationships and reciprocal labour, does not guarantee continuity.

- Withdrawal as a Strategic Response

Although Ma Rosa recognises that Toyokani does not guarantee continuity, her engagement with it is far from passive. While her urban farming journey has been marked by episodes of land loss and instability, she has also developed clear boundaries within her negotiation strategies. For example, when a landowner's staff underpaid her group – despite a prior wage agreement – they chose to withdraw from the arrangement. This moment reveals that Ma Rosa's decisions are not driven solely by precarity. If that were the case, she might have accepted any available income – especially in a context where land access is never guaranteed. Instead, her refusal demonstrates that farming – and the negotiations that sustain it – are not merely reactive responses to scarcity, but deliberate, self-directed strategies. These strategies are also flexible. As Ma Rosa noted, she occasionally still performs work for the same landowner, showing that her withdrawal was not a permanent rupture, but a situational choice. The ability to step back and then re-engage when conditions improve illustrates how women like Ma Rosa navigate the complexities of urban farming in Kinshasa with both adaptability and discernment. Thus, Toyokani is not an open-ended obligation, but a flexible and revocable agreement. When reciprocity breaks down, so too does the deal. Even labour-for-land

exchanges are governed by give-and-take – defined by mutual benefit rather than rigidity or desperation.

- Embodying Adaptation Through Proximity

In addition to the unpredictability of land tenure, Ma Rosa must also contend with the physical limits of her ageing body. Just as land access can be revoked without warning, her ability to farm is increasingly threatened by fatigue, pain, and the mounting difficulty of meeting daily demands. As she put it, "My main concern is my legs. If I didn't have leg pain, I could easily keep going for a long time. I also have back pain, but if the pain in my legs becomes unbearable, I will be unable to farm." To manage these physical demands, Ma Rosa has long negotiated sleeping arrangements near her farmland. Since she began farming in 1991, she has consistently lived close to the plots she cultivates. Initially, she and Ma Colette stayed with a family friend whose house was next to their field. However, after his wife passed away, it became socially inappropriate for them to remain there. They then arranged to stay at another house nearby – slightly further, but still within walking distance. Though modest, this shift has been critical to their continued ability to farm. Unlike the many women who walk several hours each day – often from Kisenso, about 20 km away – Ma Rosa and Ma Colette preserve their energy by staying near the fields. This proximity allows them to arrive early, complete more work, and fulfil both their own farming needs and their labour commitments to the landowner. When we met, they were already working by 7 am and joked, "When we pass by, you are still asleep! We are usually at the farm by 6 am." This arrangement is not merely about convenience; it is a deliberate strategy to conserve strength and sustain productivity. As Ma Rosa ages, such practices have become increasingly vital. For both her and Ma Colette, the continuity of farming depends not only on access to land but also on the careful negotiation of proximity. In this way, Toyokani becomes an embodied practice – one that enables women like Ma Rosa and Ma Colette to remain present and productive by adapting to the physical demands of their environment.

- Faith as Quiet Endurance

Still, Ma Rosa's ability to remain present within urban farming is not sustained by negotiation and adaptation alone. As physical exhaustion deepens and structural precarity persists, her commitment increasingly draws on faith. In the face of uncertainty – whether from ageing, land

insecurity, or poor harvests – she often has no clear answers. When asked how she copes with such unpredictability, her response consistently turns to God. At one point, she quoted scripture: “That is our real struggle, but as God has said, ‘The birds do not sow, but they eat.’” This reference reflects a deep belief in provision and continuity, even when circumstances offer no material guarantee. It expresses a quiet confidence that – through relationships, timing, and belief – land access will somehow persist. Ma Rosa’s ability to navigate the daily complexities of ageing, economic hardship, and land insecurity is anchored not only in practical skills and social networks but also in spiritual resilience. In this way, faith acts as a companion to negotiation, showing that the sustainability of urban farming rests not solely on material logic but also on hope, humility, and trust in continuity amid precarity. This outlook reflects the essence of nego-feminism as practised through Toyokani: a form of negotiation that is relational rather than confrontational, shaped by local norms, grounded in mutual understanding, and guided by faith rather than ego. It is not a theory imposed from above, but a lived ethic rooted in context, care, and quiet strategy.

B.3 Summary

Bringing Ma Rosa’s case into focus, her experience reveals that sustaining urban farming amid structural constraint is made possible not through ownership, rental, or resistance alone but through labour-for-land exchange, relational reciprocity, and embodied negotiation. Her continued presence in farming depends on navigating uncertainty and precarity with flexibility, faith, and quiet determination. Yet not all women sustain their presence in urban agriculture in the same way. As the case of Ma Muka shows, some adapt by taking on entirely different roles within the sector. Rather than cultivating land herself, Ma Muka positions herself as a middlewoman, using negotiation not to access land for farming but to remain economically active through produce distribution. Her story illustrates another facet of Toyokani in action within Kinshasa’s urban farming sector – one that redefines presence and agency beyond cultivation, while contributing critically to the continuity and resilience of urban agriculture.

6.2 Illustrating Situated Agency: Middlewomen’s Narratives in Urban Farming

A. Ma Muka’s Story: Navigating Urban Farming Through Trust-Based Produce Access

A.1 Background and Context/ Entering the World of Farming and Middlewoman Networks.

Ma Muka was born around 1986 in Bandundu City, located in the southwestern region of the DRC. She began her education there, and she explained that in the village, children often start school early by accompanying their older siblings. This allowed her to begin schooling at a young age, and she studied up to the second year of secondary school. Her husband, who lived in Kinshasa, would occasionally visit the village to see his family. During one of these visits, he proposed marriage to Ma Muka. He assured her parents that he would support her education through to completion once she moved to Kinshasa. Reflecting on that time, Ma Muka said, "Ha, you know how village people are – they all agreed. My husband was from Kinshasa, from Binza Ozone, and people are often impressed by those who come from the city." Following this agreement, a traditional wedding was organised, and she moved to Kinshasa with him. On her arrival in Kinshasa, Ma Muka was not encouraged to return to school. As she recalled, "I was expected to learn household duties and couldn't return to school." Around the age of 12, in 2003, Ma Muka gave birth to her first child – a daughter. She described the birth as difficult, requiring both a blood transfusion and a fluid transfusion. Reflecting on how the situation was perceived at the time, she recalled, "The hospital, run by nuns, was quite upset. They were displeased with my in-laws for allowing such a young marriage." She added, "At the time, I didn't even have breasts yet, because I was so young." Today, Ma Muka is the mother of nine children, including four-year-old twins. All of her children, except for the twins, are currently attending school.

When Ma Muka first arrived in Kinshasa, she lived with her in-laws in Binza Ozone. Later, her uncle encouraged her and her husband to move closer to her own relatives, who were based in Plateau 1 Tchad, located in the southern part of Kinshasa, about 18 km from Binza. As she explained, "I lived with my husband in Binza. My parents live in the village, but my family, particularly my uncles, wanted us closer to them in Tchad. I'm not sure why." At the time of their marriage, her husband was working as a seller in a depot at Nzando market, a central market in Kinshasa. He managed to buy land in Tchad, where the family has lived ever since. After losing his job at the market, her husband began working as a bricklayer's helper. However, this work has also become irregular. "He hasn't been called for brick-making work in the past two years," Ma Muka noted. Currently, he engages in small-scale farming at their home, with support from Ma Muka and the children, using the space available around their

residence. With his income remaining unstable, it is Ma Muka's vegetable-selling business that now serves as the main source of financial support for the household. Through this work, she helps fund her children's education and covers many of the daily household expenses, including food.

Ma Muka was already familiar with farming from a young age, having grown up in Bandundu. As she explained, "Farming is a skill we learn from a young age in the village. Our mothers teach us, and we follow along until we master it." However, when she moved to Kinshasa, she did not focus directly on farming. Instead, she chose to sell vegetables, which she viewed as a more profitable activity. Her entry into vegetable selling began while she was living with her in-laws in Binza Ozone, in the western part of Kinshasa. She would travel to Lutendele in the south – about 12 km away – to buy vegetables, which she then resold in Kitambo, located approximately 5 km north of her home. This routine required her to move across much of the city and marked her early involvement in Kinshasa's urban farming value chain as a vendor. After she and her husband moved to Plateau 1 Tchad in 2009, she initially sourced produce from nearby farmers. However, when those farmers – based in an area known locally as Piknic – were evicted, some relocated to Kilambu Village. Rather than looking for new suppliers, Ma Muka followed the same farmers to Kilambu, maintaining the relationships she had built over time. She continues sourcing her produce from Kilambu to this day. To transport the produce from Kilambu, Ma Muka carries the bundles herself. "I'll carry them on my head. I don't have money for transportation," she explained. Once home in Tchad – about 13 km away – she washes and organises the produce into large bundles to be sold the next day. She sells the vegetables at Mbanza Lemba Market, located in a different district approximately 20 km from her home. Sometimes her children accompany her, especially when they are not in school. "In the morning, I split the vegetables with my children before they go to school. They help me take them to the market," she said. At the market, Ma Muka works closely with her customers – mainly other women vegetable sellers, often referred to as mamans manoeuvre. She typically supplies these market women with produce in advance and collects payment later. "The market women sell the vegetables in the morning, and between 12 and 1 pm, I go around collecting money from them," she explained. She does not sell directly to consumers unless her usual buyers leave some produce behind – if any produce remains after her main buyers have made their selections, she sometimes resorts to street selling: "We do street selling only if there's leftover produce in the basins after the market women have made their purchases." After

finishing sales and collecting payments, she buys groceries for the day and returns home. While Ma Muka enjoys her work and has built a reliable base of clients, she is also candid about the toll it takes. “I had all my children through this activity,” she said, expressing pride in her ability to support her family. But she also acknowledged the physical demands and health challenges. “Vegetable selling is hard work. It's physically demanding and can lead to health problems, due to the heavy lifting and long-distance walking. It has made me look older than my age.”

Figure 6.3 Middlewoman Ma Muka

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph showing Ma Muka explaining how she bundles sweet potato leaves for sale to other middlewomen (mamans manoeuvre).

A.2 What Ma Muka’s Story Reveals

Navigating Constraints Through Relational Agency

Ma Muka's life illustrates the entanglement of structure and agency. Confronted with early marriage, the prevention of returning to school, her husband's unstable income, lack of land ownership, and the absence of institutional support, she nonetheless carved out a role within urban farming – not by escaping these constraints, but by strategically navigating within them to sustain herself and her family. Her position in Kinshasa's urban agriculture is sustained not by formal access to resources, but through relationships gradually built and maintained over time. It is these bonds of trust – earned, sustained, and continually negotiated – that make her continued participation possible, even amid precarity and risk. Her story reflects a relational mode of agency, shaped by Toyokani. Rather than being defined by formal power or institutional access, Ma Muka's agency lies in her ability to persist, adapt, and remain visible within the shifting terrain of Kinshasa's urban farming economy.

Urban farming in Kinshasa is not practised in isolation; it depends on collaboration between farmers and various types of middlewomen, locally referred to as mamans ya ndunda, like Ma Muka, and secondary sellers known as mamans manoeuvre. For Ma Muka, these interactions operate through a layered relational system: horizontally, she is connected through a triadic network linking farmers (producers), herself as an intermediary (mamans ya ndunda), and mamans manoeuvre (secondary sellers); vertically, her participation is reinforced by broader social ties, including essential support from her household. These layered relational dynamics are illustrated in Figure 6.4 below; this figure represents the relationally structured movement of produce from farmers to consumers within the specific value chain that sustains Ma Muka's urban farming activities.

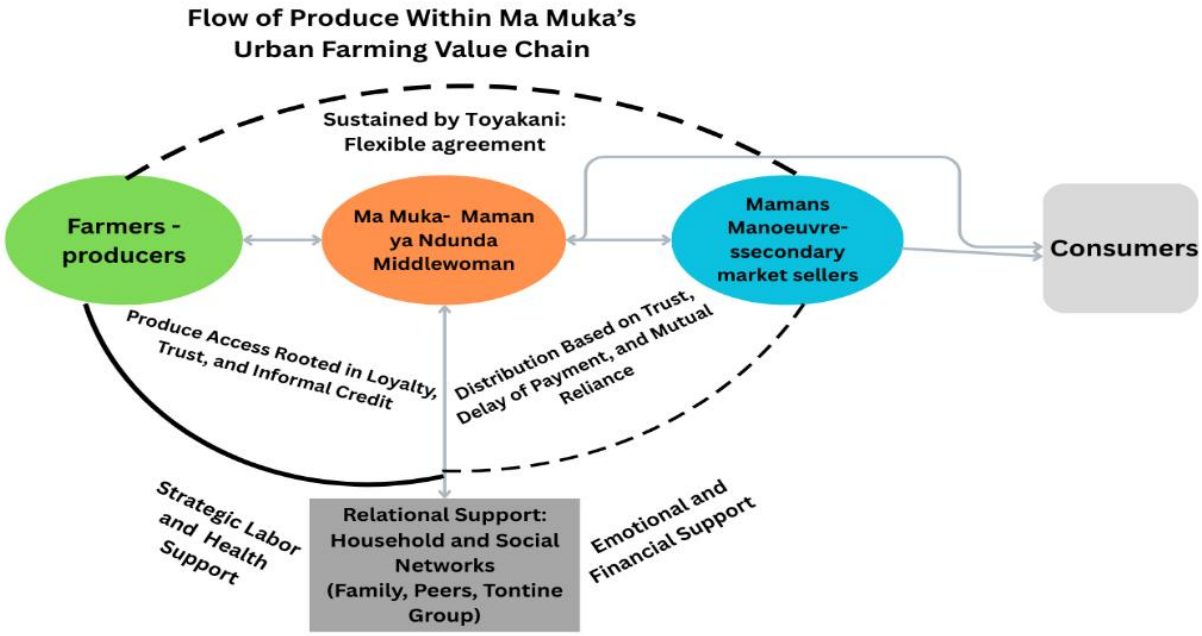

Figure 6.4 Relational flow of produce and trust between farmers and middlewomen based on trust

(Source: P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

- Navigating Farmer–Middlewoman Relationships Across the Value Chain

As Figure 6.4 shows, although produce moves physically from farms to markets, Ma Muka's position within the system does not rely on formal ownership or institutional support, but rather on trust-based negotiation, continuous adjustment, and mutual reliance, anchored through the ethic of Toyokani. Her sustained participation depends on maintaining ties in two directions: upstream with farmers, who supply her with produce – sometimes granting informal credit based on trust – and downstream with mamans manoeuvre, who sell her goods and repay her afterwards. These reciprocal connections form the social infrastructure that enables her to remain active within Kinshasa's urban farming economy, even in the absence of formal protection or legal market entitlement. The next sections explore how Ma Muka navigates each end of this value chain, beginning with her access to produce. This access is shaped not only by transport challenges, market fluctuations, and seasonal scarcity, but also by informal arrangements negotiated over time with local farmers, including, when necessary, the ability to obtain produce on credit.

- Accessing Produce: Dynamics of Loyalty and Negotiation with Farmers

In Ndjili Kilambu, where Ma Muka operates, physical and logistical barriers to market access play a critical role in shaping relationships between farmers and middlewomen. Transportation is both limited and costly. While private 4 x 4 vehicles are occasionally used by wealthier individuals, most residents – including farmers and traders – must either walk long distances or rely on moto taxis. Yet even moto taxis are not always accessible due to high fares, safety concerns, and gang-controlled territorial divisions. As Ma Muka explained, “They charge around 5,000 francs, but it can go up to 15,000 francs depending on the load.” In her case, transporting a 25,000-franc load of vegetables could absorb nearly half of her expected 10,000-franc profit, underscoring how transport costs alone can make selling produce economically unfeasible. Navigating gang-controlled territories also adds risk and complexity to daily farming life. As Antoine Bangala, an elderly farmer, noted, “I walk to my farm every morning and take a moto taxi partway home if I can afford it. They usually drop passengers near the Lemba Imbu police station due to gang territory divisions”; this is a challenge that requires local knowledge and careful navigation. The absence of a centralised market in Ndjili Kilambu further compounds these difficulties. The nearest major market, Mbanza Lemba, is located up to 15 km away – a distance difficult to balance alongside daily farming responsibilities. As Ma Gode, a female farmer, explained, “Farming is like a baby – it needs constant attention.” In addition, harvesting is time-consuming, especially for crops like cassava leaves and sorrel that require careful handling to allow regrowth. Given the perishability of crops, high transport costs, and the labour-intensive demands of farming, farmers are often left without the time, energy, or security needed to sell their produce independently. Managing both production and marketing thus becomes virtually unattainable for most.

Middlewomen such as Ma Muka have thus become essential actors within the urban farming value chain. They help reduce spoilage, ease farmers’ logistical burdens, and enable them to focus on cultivation. Leveraging her farming knowledge, Ma Muka not only purchases produce directly from the fields but also assists with harvesting and crop preparation. Her ability to handle vegetables carefully, ensuring proper regrowth, has positioned her as a trusted and indispensable intermediary – someone whose presence reinforces the very functioning of the farming economy in Ndjili Kilambu. However, this intermediary role also reveals visible financial disparities. As one farmer, Mr. Levi, observed, “A plot of vegetables sold for 25,000 francs to a middleman could fetch up to 65,000 francs in the market.” At first glance, this profit margin may suggest that middlewomen disproportionately benefit from the farming value

chain. Yet the economic relationship is far more complex, shaped not only by logistical burdens like transportation and security risks but also by seasonal dynamics. Middlewomen tend to profit more during farmers' low seasons, when produce is abundant and farmers must sell quickly before goods perish. In these moments, middlewomen can negotiate lower prices and resell at a higher margin. However, during high seasons[2] when produce is scarce – the bargaining power shifts. Farmers, aware of the value of their limited supply, choose whom to sell to and command higher prices, significantly reducing middlewomen's profit margins. Thus, while moments of financial imbalance exist, they are part of a broader cycle of mutual dependence and adjustment. As the relational diagram illustrates, Ma Muka's ability to remain active in Kinshasa's urban farming economy is not driven by isolated profit-taking, but by sustaining long-term, trust-based relationships with farmers.

I first met Ma Muka during the rainy season – a period when vegetables are scarce and competition among middlewomen intensifies. In this tense moment of scarcity, Ma Muka's privileged access stood out. While many buyers struggled to secure produce, one farmer – Dieu – reserved his entire harvest for her. "I was even threatened with being beaten," he said, "but I refused to sell because the produce was already for Ma Muka." He added, "Some even called me Rwandese. I prioritised you, Muka, since you're a loyal customer. Others weren't pleased and started insulting me." In Kinshasa, being called "Rwandese" is not a neutral reference to nationality but a politically charged insult, often used to signal betrayal and provoke serious social exclusion. This tension reveals how fiercely loyalty is tested during scarcity periods, as farmers' selling choices can provoke intense hostility from excluded buyers.

Ma Muka's access to produce during the rainy season was not secured through financial advantage, but through long-standing, trust-based arrangements cultivated over years of cooperation. As she explained, "For example, today I had to buy vegetables on credit and will pay the farmer back after selling them tomorrow." Without these informal agreements, she noted, continuing her business would have been impossible. Her participation is embedded within a moral economy where trust, rather than purchasing power, defines access to resources

[2] Here, 'high season' for farmers refers to periods of scarcity, when produce is rare and they can sell at higher prices. Conversely, when produce is abundant, farmers call it the 'low season', as they must sell quickly and often at lower prices, while middlewomen gain bargaining power.

in Kinshasa's urban farming networks. This ethic of relational negotiation is reflected in her description of price adjustments during times of scarcity: "We continue to buy from them because of our loyalty. The farmers adjust the prices fairly during low seasons so we can still profit." In this system, flexible, reciprocal negotiation – not fixed market pricing – sustains both farmers and middlewomen across cycles of scarcity and abundance. Rather than relying on formal contracts or property rights, Ma Muka's agency is built and maintained through trust, loyalty, and adaptive cooperation – conceptualised locally as Toyokani – within precarious conditions.

- Sustaining Market Access Through Trusted Secondary Sellers

However, sustaining her role in urban farming also requires Ma Muka to maintain strong, negotiated relationships with mamans manoeuvre – the secondary sellers who distribute her vegetables at the market. As one fellow middlewoman, Ma Chantal Veda, explained, "I choose to sell on the street because selling in the market can be complicated. Some people already have their designated spots and can be unwelcoming." Lacking a designated stall due to spatial exclusion and market competition, Ma Muka adopts a relational strategy: rather than selling everything herself or competing for limited space, she entrusts most of her produce to trusted sellers, while occasionally street-vending any unsold vegetables. As she described, "After purchasing the vegetables, we make large bundles, each worth 1,000 francs. We then take these to Mbanza Lemba Market for selling. The market women buy from us, often splitting the bundles into halves or thirds for resale." These women sell on her behalf and repay her later in the afternoon. "I wait around the market until I'm paid. The market women sell the vegetables, and between 12 and 1 pm, I go around collecting money from them," she explained. This informal credit system, based not on legal contracts but on reciprocal trust and consistent exchange, enables Ma Muka to sustain her role in the urban farming value chain despite lacking direct market access. By circulating her produce through trusted networks, Ma Muka navigates structural exclusion, maintaining economic visibility without reliance on formal infrastructure or financial capital. In sum, it is through her triadic, trust-based network – linking producers, intermediaries, and vendors – rather than through formal structures, that Ma Muka sustains her position in urban farming. Without the reciprocal trust, reliability, and adaptive cooperation – grounded in the localised ethic of Toyokani – at both ends of the value chain, Ma Muka's intermediary role would be far more precarious or even unsustainable.

- Extending Relational Support: Household and Broader Social Networks

Yet Ma Muka's ability to remain active in urban farming is shaped not only by her horizontal triadic relationships across the farming value chain but also by vertical interdependencies within her household and broader social networks, as illustrated in Figure 6.4, above. Her work is deeply physical and labour-intensive: she often walks over 10 km from the farm to her home, prepares the vegetables, and then walks again to the market, carrying produce on her head – largely because transportation costs are prohibitive. These daily physical demands highlight the fact that sustaining participation in urban farming depends as much on relational support as on individual endurance. Within this context, Ma Muka's family plays an active role in sustaining her work. Speaking about her children, she explained, "They're very efficient. If they have afternoon school, they help me with the harvest in the morning, or sometimes they help by dropping the vegetables at the market. After the mamans manoeuvre have taken the vegetables, they quickly return home to get ready for school." Their assistance eases the burden both in the farming fields and at the market, enabling Ma Muka to maintain her business despite the considerable physical demands.

Similarly, beyond the household, Ma Muka's participation in a tontine – an informal savings group shared with fellow farmers and middlewomen – provides another critical layer of social and financial support. The tontine is not merely a financial mechanism; it is a relational institution built on mutual trust, rotating responsibility, and shared obligation. Through this system, Ma Muka is able to stretch limited resources, ensuring a degree of income security that sustains both her household and her farming activities. As she explained, these cooperative ties extend beyond financial support into daily survival: "We walk together from home to the fields and the market," she noted. In a context where insecurity is a constant threat, collective walking offers protection – reducing the risks women face when travelling alone through gang-controlled areas, as several other middlewomen also emphasised during fieldwork. This everyday solidarity illustrates how both household and broader social support networks are critical to sustaining Ma Muka's participation in urban farming. In sum, Ma Muka's experience reaffirms that women's agency within Kinshasa's urban agriculture is not anchored in formal systems but built through dense relational infrastructures – both horizontally across farming and market chains and vertically through household and social ties. These networks, shaped by

the localised ethic of Toyokani – centred on flexible negotiation, enduring trust, and relational harmony – enable continued participation under persistent precarity.

- Economic and Social Impacts: Modest Upward Mobility

The tangible impacts of this relational agency are evident: through layered strategies of cooperation and solidarity, Ma Muka has secured a degree of financial stability, allowing her to offer her children opportunities she herself was once denied – particularly access to education – and to modestly elevate her household's position within Kinshasa's precarious urban economy. "Our farming earnings are primarily used for our children's school fees. For example, our daughter, despite failing her final year of high school twice, will be re-enrolling, which we'll finance," she explained. Except for her two youngest, all of Ma Muka's children are currently enrolled in school. For her five eldest, she pays an average of US$150 per child annually – a considerable amount in a country where the (World Bank, 2024)reports an average annual income of just US$634. Given her ability to sustain regular schooling expenses while also managing daily living costs through farming activities and her husband's irregular income, Ma Muka's household can be understood as modestly positioned above the urban poverty line – a fragile improvement made possible not by individual accumulation but through the cumulative strength of interdependent relational strategies across household, farming, and market networks.

- The Embodied Cost of Agency: Pride and Dignity Amid Precarity

Yet this form of agency and stability comes at a cost. The security Ma Muka has built remains hard-won. The physical toll of her work – despite household and social support – is not symbolic: it is real, cumulative, and often painful. "It has made me look older than my age," she reflected. "Vegetable selling is hard work. It's physically demanding and can lead to health problems." Her daily labour – walking long distances, carrying heavy loads without reliable transportation, and operating without consistent healthcare – reveals the embodied cost of sustaining her participation in urban farming. At times, Ma Muka's health deteriorates to the point that her profits are absorbed by medical expenses, forcing the sale of household goods to afford care. She aspires, one day, to transition to selling from home – "If I had enough money, I'd prefer to sell from home. I'd sell items like maize, cassava flour, and peanuts right outside

my house," she explained. However, while she remains active in urban farming, Ma Muka continues to take pride in her identity as a maman ya ndunda, singing with laughter alongside her peers: "Biso ba maman ya ndunda eee. Mobongo ya dollars" – "We are the middlewomen, in a dollars business." Ma Muka's joyful refrain reflects a more complex reality – one where pride, resilience, and agency endure, even as daily hardships are openly acknowledged. While urban farming is often viewed externally as a survival strategy within precarity, for Ma Muka and her peers, it is also a source of dignity and collective strength.

A.3 Summary

Ma Muka's experience shows that agency is not something women simply possess, but something continuously performed, negotiated, and endured – within the limits imposed by social structures and the body, and mediated through the localised ethic of Toyokani. Viewed through the lens of nego-feminism, Ma Muka's story illustrates how women like her navigate systemic exclusions by mobilising relational networks across farming, markets, and households to remain active in urban farming. However, not all women navigating Kinshasa's urban agricultural economy have the advantage of long-standing relational ties. Ma Flo and Ma Nao, newcomers to vegetable selling, have yet to build the trust and embedded networks that underpin stable participation. Their experience highlights the challenges of entering urban farming without relational capital, and the strategies they use to attempt to carve out space for themselves amid these constraints will be the focus of the next section.

B. Ma Flo's and Ma Nao's Stories: Navigating Kinshasa's Urban Farming Economy as Newcomer Middlewomen

B.1 Background and Context/ Entering the World of Farming and Middlewoman Networks

Ma Flo was born in the 1960s, belonging to the Yaka ethnic group from Kasongo-Lunda in Kwango Province, located in the southwest of the DRC. After her marriage, she relocated with her husband to Plateau de Batéké, a rural area in the Maluku commune of Kinshasa Province, to engage in farming. While they did not own land there, the local Téké land chief offered them a plot according to local custom: "In Plateau de Batéké, newcomers were traditionally given forest land to farm without any charge," Ma Flo explained. There, they cultivated cassava roots,

maize, and peanuts, and raised their five children. Over time, two of her children migrated to the urban centre of Kinshasa. One son, now married, settled in the city, while her third daughter, Naomi – locally known as Ma Nao – also moved to Kinshasa. Ma Nao aspired to become a tailor, but her education was interrupted by an early pregnancy. Now married and raising three young children, including a breastfeeding infant, Ma Nao lives with her husband, who works as a bricklayer in Ndjili Kilambu. Although Ma Nao attempted to open a small home-based shop, the business ultimately failed, as she described: "You see, we live in a less developed area, so when you sell from home, you are more likely to start using that money while waiting for all the merchandise to be sold to get your profit. You can buy merchandise for 100,000 francs to sell, but you might not be able to quickly get back 20,000 francs." While Ma Nao and her husband navigated these urban challenges, Ma Flo and her husband remained in Plateau de Batéké, continuing their farming activities. However, in August 2022, escalating conflict between the Yaka and Téké communities disrupted their lives. As Ma Flo recalled, "The farm we had at the house was burned during the conflict. But the other farm was just left abandoned." Facing targeted violence against Yaka families, Ma Flo, her husband, and their youngest child were forced to flee. Seeking safety, they moved to Ndjili Kilambu to live with their daughter Ma Nao and her family.

While Ma Flo had decades of farming experience – “for a very long time now. It has been more than 30 years. My aunt showed me” – her transition to Kinshasa exposed her to unfamiliar barriers: limited knowledge of how to navigate urban land access, financial insecurity, and the heightened physical demands associated with farming in an urban context. When asked about restarting farming, she responded, “Well, where would I do that?” and on hearing about land rentals, she remarked, “Rent land? Oh, so it's similar to renting a house where you pay monthly?” Her surprise reflected how commodified access to land contrasted with her rural experiences of farming as a communal right. Ma Flo hoped to eventually return to Plateau de Batéké to recover her abandoned crops, as her daughter, Ma Nao, explained: “She left her farm there, with her peanuts, cassava roots, and more. She can start farming here, but she still wants to return. She needs to clear the weeds and finish the harvest first.” Yet the immediate need for income led Ma Flo and Ma Nao to attempt vegetable selling. “With vegetable sales, you quickly make your profits on the same day,” Ma Nao explained. However, without pre-existing ties to farmers, they struggled to secure access to produce. The following exchange occurred during a negotiation attempt, involving the farmer, the middlewomen and the researcher, in which the

middlewomen backed by the researcher, sought to establish a tie loyalty with a farmer they were meeting for the first time.

Interviewer: *"Well, why don't you give them a chance? I know them; they are new to this area."*

Farmer (J.C.): *"Well, I do not see them because they go elsewhere. The reason we see them here for the first time is that where they usually go, they could not get anything. We have our middlewomen who are loyal to us even when the market is not good."*

M.W. (Ma Flo or Ma Nao): *"Exactly, because you used not to see us, now we are here and have met. We can now become your loyal customers."*

Interviewer: *"She wants to become your loyal customer!"*

Farmer (J.C.): *"Hm, do not mind them. I know how they function."*

Despite visiting several farmers and attempting different negotiations, Ma Flo, Ma Nao, and their peers ended the day without securing produce to sell. As Ma Nao explained, it is not uncommon – especially when vegetables become scarce – to return home empty-handed. She recalled one occasion when, unable to purchase any goods, she simply gathered some free plants and brought them home to sell.

Figure 6.5 Middlewomen, including Ma Flo

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph showing Ma Flo (front left) with fellow middlewomen after a failed negotiation with a farmer, discussing their next step.

B.2 What Do Ma Flo's and Ma Nao's Stories Reveal?

Whereas Ma Muka's role in Kinshasa's urban farming economy is sustained through long-standing networks of trust, Ma Flo's and Ma Nao's experiences reveal the challenges faced by newcomers navigating the system without such embedded ties. In this context, access to produce is not just a matter of financial readiness, but of relational capital – something they have yet to build. As shown in Figure 6.6, Ma Flo and Ma Nao navigate the value chain through a series of improvisational and relational strategies.

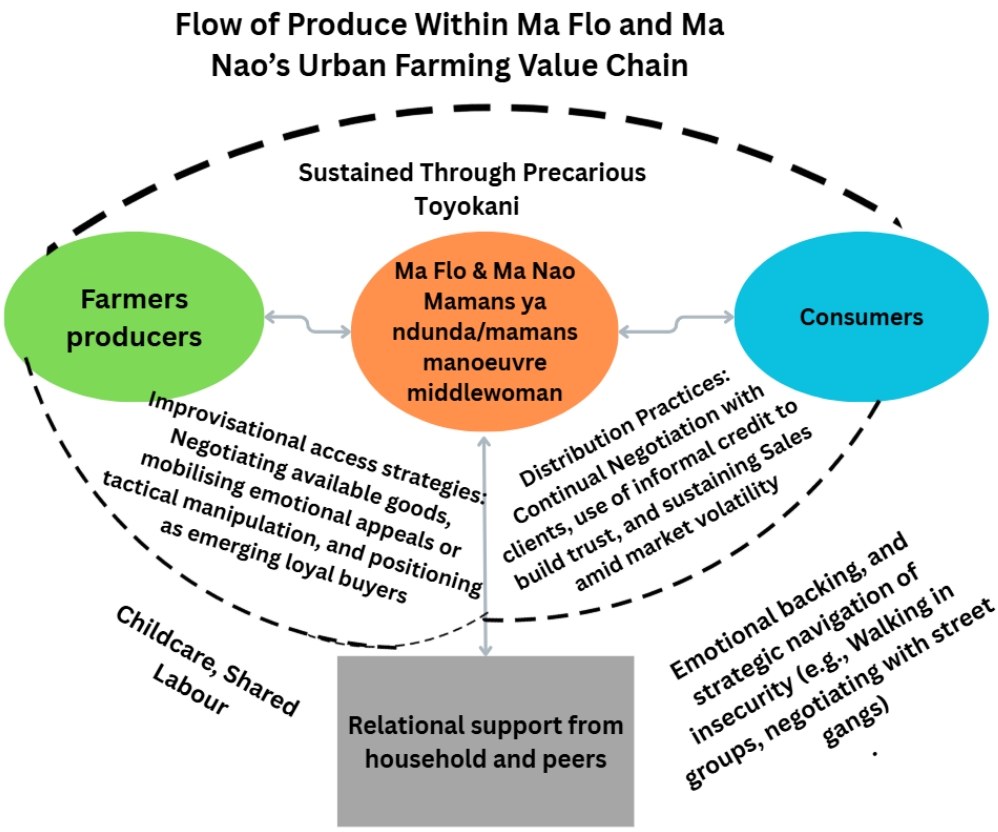

Figure 6.6 Middlewomen access to produce under precarious conditions

(Source: P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

This diagram illustrates how Ma Flo and Ma Nao navigate Kinshasa's urban farming value chain through fragile negotiations, represented by dotted and curved arrows. Lacking embedded trust, they rely on improvisational tactics – negotiating for available produce, using emotional appeals, and extending informal credit. Their participation is supported by peer and household networks that provide childcare, logistical support, and collective responses to insecurity. The analysis that follows unpacks how they engage with these structural constraints. While centred on their individual experiences, their strategies are deeply collective – enacted through peer-based coordination, mutual protection, and shared labour. As the following sections demonstrate, this relational mode of agency is essential to sustaining their place within an otherwise exclusionary and precarious value chain.

- Improvisational Strategies for Accessing Produce

Ma Flo and her daughter Ma Nao entered Kinshasa's urban farming economy without any established trust. Their efforts to engage in vegetable selling – especially during a time of scarcity – were consistently met with relational scepticism. One farmer bluntly rejected their appeal: "No, they are just devils. Even if we introduced each other today, they would still run from us until the market is in real need, and then they will come back. If there is an abundance of vegetables, they will only go to the farms they are used to and stop there." This hostility reflects broader dynamics in Kinshasa's farming economy, where unfamiliar middlewomen are often viewed as opportunistic or unreliable – perceptions shaped by previous experiences of loss or disappointment. In this context, access to produce is not merely a matter of purchasing power but also of embedded trust within existing farming networks. Toyokani –grounded in loyalty and negotiation – typically governs how produce circulates.

But when such relationships are absent, Toyokani either becomes a rigid, short-term financial exchange or fails to materialise altogether. As Ma Nao reflected after one failed attempt, "We did not agree on the price. He still wants 20,000 francs for each bundle. But with such a price, there will not be any profit left for us. It is like selling his vegetables for him, without making anything ourselves." For newcomers like Ma Flo and Ma Nao, the pathway to Toyokani is uncertain. Though they actively engage in negotiation, the absence of trust often results in constrained exchanges – marked by inflexible terms and minimal bargaining power. When negotiation fails entirely, they must turn to improvisational strategies to remain active in the sector. As Figure 6.6 illustrates, their access to produce depends on a series of adaptive tactics: negotiating for whatever is available, mobilising emotional appeals – or, at times, tactical manipulation – and attempting to present themselves as emerging loyal buyers. These efforts reveal an ongoing struggle to gain footing in a value chain where trust is not given but must be painstakingly earned.

- Negotiating Whatever Is Available

In the absence of established relationships or consistent supply, Ma Flo and her peers often rely on opportunistic encounters – accessing whatever produce happens to be available, from whichever seller is willing to negotiate. On one occasion, unable to find vegetables, Ma Flo, accompanied by her young son, approached a middlewoman cleaning her recently purchased peanuts, hoping to buy directly from her. Redirected instead to the farmer in the field, she

negotiated access to the peanuts, even though this had not been part of her original plan. As she later explained, “We came to buy vegetables, but since we couldn't find any, we ended up buying peanuts to sell.” While it is common for experienced middlewomen to diversify their sales according to seasonal availability, these choices are typically strategic. The middlewoman cleaning her peanuts – who had been selling various types of farm produce for years – explained, “Yes, I have been selling for a very long time. I sell everything. Right now, it's peanut season, so I'm selling peanuts. Sometimes, I also sell other vegetables.” She added confidently, “I am just thinking. I hope to make a profit of 50,000 francs. That will be great!” Her response reflects a calculated approach informed by experience, market knowledge, and planning.

By contrast, Ma Flo’s decision was shaped by immediate necessity rather than strategic foresight. As a newcomer with no established ties, she relied on negotiating whatever was available from whichever farmer was willing to sell – without the benefit of insider knowledge or market orientation. This improvisation extended beyond product choice and into the labour process itself. Unfamiliar with local harvesting tools, she hesitated: “I don't think I can work with a razor like they do. We usually use a knife.” In this setting, proper preparation – such as cleaning peanuts with a razor – is essential for marketability. Ma Flo’s lack of tools and unfamiliarity with the techniques for handling peanuts made it clear that she had not intended to buy or harvest them that day. This unpreparedness was not a sign of failure but, rather, underscored the deeply reactive nature of her strategy – driven by constraint rather than deliberate choice. Similarly, Ma Nao recalled another moment of improvisation when no produce was available: “Well, if we don't get anything, I will just go back home. Last time, it was just like that; we wandered about everywhere but didn’t get anything. So, when I came here, I harvested some sinda for tea and some not really good-quality sweet potato leaves. I just went home with that.” These wild crops (sinda) – often gathered freely when not claimed by a farmer – represent not a fallback strategy but a necessary improvisation in a system where formal access to cultivated produce remains out of reach. What might appear to be minor, opportunistic deviations reveal deeper patterns of adaptation. For Ma Flo and her peers, these are not acts of strategic diversification but pragmatic responses to relational exclusion, limited choice, and the systemic uncertainty faced by those without embedded networks. As nego-feminism reminds us, pragmatism in such contexts becomes an embodied practice – a

continuous negotiation to remain present, even when the structural conditions are persistently unfavourable.

- Emotional Appeals, Manipulation, and the Performance of Emerging Loyalty

As nego-feminism suggests, women's agency often takes the form of tactical, non-confrontational negotiation – what can be described as chameleon-like pragmatism. For Ma Flo and her peers, such strategies – while occasionally bordering on manipulation – reflect an attempt to soften rigid, transactional relationships in contexts where trust is lacking. Their engagement with Toyokani is limited to short-term financial exchanges, without the depth of loyalty or long-term trust enjoyed by more established middlewomen. In response, they seek to stretch the boundaries of Toyokani by presenting themselves as emerging loyal buyers, hoping to gain a foothold in a value chain that favours familiarity, continuity, and embedded trust.

One notable instance highlights this use of emotional performance. Faced with a farmer unwilling to reduce her price, Ma Flo and her group staged a dialogue to elicit sympathy. They portrayed Nicha, one of their peers, as a struggling widow and sole caregiver: "'You see, this girl [Nicha] has no parents or husband, and she's the sole provider for her children…' Nicha also played along and said, 'Yeah, I've wasted money buying here.' Then I told her, 'You've been foolish.'" The farmer, visibly moved, responded with emotional generosity: "Please take the vegetables and go. God be with you. We have good luck here; I know you will sell well and make a good profit." As they recounted the event, Ma Nao laughed: "We did indeed make a good profit. Unlike this one here [referring to another situation], I do not see it going anywhere." This instance illustrates how emotional manipulation can become a negotiation tactic used to stretch the boundaries of Toyokani – making space for temporary flexibility where none previously existed. Even when faced with outright hostility, Ma Flo and her peers continued to appeal to social norms. In one such encounter, Ma Nao responded calmly to a farmer's accusations with, "No problem, my dear uncle." The use of kinship terms like "uncle" served as a relational softener – an embodied negotiation tactic grounded in the ethics of non-confrontation and mutual recognition central to both Toyokani and nego-feminism. At times, they explicitly positioned themselves as loyal buyers-in-the-making. "But if I become your

customer, I will not leave you," Ma Nao insisted while trying to negotiate access with a sceptical farmer.

While it remains unclear whether their claims of being new to the area were entirely accurate, the intent was evident: to perform humility and build the appearance of a future relationship. However, this performance was not without ambivalence. As Ma Nao later remarked, "They are just being too proud. We will see when they have an abundance of vegetables – we will also become very cocky!" Her comment reflects not only frustration but also an awareness of the shifting power dynamics that middlewomen may eventually come to hold. Similarly, another peer added, "If he had his vegetables available and sold them to us, we would go sell the vegetables and immediately become his customers!" The display of humility, then, may be strategic rather than sincere – a performance designed to gain immediate access rather than signal genuine newcomer status, highlighting the fragility of their position within the value chain. These moments show that Ma Flo and her peers are not merely negotiating prices: they are negotiating belonging. Their relational agency is not yet anchored in trust but is instead constructed through emotional labour, social fluency, and tactical performances – chameleon-like adaptability in line with nego-feminism. These strategies remain fragile and situational, but they reflect deliberate efforts to gain legitimacy in an urban farming economy that often withholds access from those lacking embedded ties.

- Selling Without a Downstream Network: Negotiating with Consumers

As Figure 6.6 illustrates, on the horizontal axis of the value chain, Ma Flo and her peers not only act as mamans ndunda (intermediaries) but also as mamans manoeuvre, selling directly to consumers rather than relying on trusted resale networks. Without relationships with established mamans manoeuvre, they cannot offload lower-quality produce or navigate difficult pricing through intermediaries. This means they must not only work harder to secure high-quality produce – often a challenge in itself – but also absorb market frictions directly, managing customer dissatisfaction, price resistance, and unsold stock on their own. As Ma Nao explained, "Let me tell you, selling these bundles for 1,000 francs is tough. Customers are so picky. They bargain and sometimes even offer 500 francs for a bundle. Some of them just refuse to buy, and it's frustrating." She added, "The clients at the market can be quite demanding and proud. They'll say, 'Not these sweet potato leaves, please,' or complain, 'These vegetables

don’t look great. They’re ugly,’ and so on.” Lacking the buffer of downstream networks, Ma Flo and Ma Nao must cultivate consumer trust directly – a process that is emotionally taxing and shaped by everyday negotiation.

In many cases, this includes forms of Toyokani that involve extending produce on credit – everyday agreements not anchored in formal contracts but grounded in mutual understanding and relational trust, where prices are negotiated and payment deferred. As one woman recounted, “I had cassava leaves, and I made bundles to sell for 2,000 francs each. I hadn’t sold a single bundle yet. Then a woman approached me and offered 1,500 francs for a bundle. I didn’t even respond – I just kept walking. But she convinced me to stay, and in the end I felt sorry for her, and I sold her three bundles for 5,500 francs.” This partial-payment arrangement – agreed to after negotiation – was not merely a financial compromise: it was a calculated act of trust. Yet as the seller later acknowledged with resignation, “She still owes me money, even now.” Such moments of informal credit are not isolated decisions, but part of a broader survival logic that underpins women's engagement in the market. In Kinshasa’s informal market economy, such credit practices are more than sales tactics. They reflect a relational ethic of mutual support, where helping someone who cannot immediately pay may earn loyalty in return. In the absence of formal guarantees, these gestures become essential to survival. Through small acts of care, compromise, and resilience – often enacted through fragile forms of Toyokani, such as extending credit without certainty of repayment – women like Ma Flo and Ma Nao sustain their foothold in the urban farming economy. These exchanges, whether with farmers or consumers, are not merely economic: they are relational negotiations shaped by the everyday ethos of nego-feminism, where agency is not asserted through confrontation but gradually forged through humility, persistence, and adaptive navigation.

- Navigating Street Insecurity: Informal Safety Strategies as Relational Agency

In addition to negotiating with farmers and consumers, Ma Flo and her peers must also navigate another axis of vulnerability: urban insecurity. Their reliance on street vending exposes Ma Flo and Ma Nao to threats from Kuluna gang networks, which are primarily concentrated in Kinshasa’s poorer neighbourhoods and informal settlements – areas that also encompass many of the farms, homes, and informal markets they traverse daily. As (Lagrange and Vircoulon, 2021, p.4) observe, “These gangs are territorial in terms of their operations; they ‘own’ a

neighbourhood, assaulting strangers passing by their territory but not targeting those who live there." Because middlewomen must frequently cross neighbourhood boundaries to access produce or reach consumers, their mobility makes them easily marked as outsiders and vulnerable to territorial violence. One of Ma Flo's peers recounted how an elderly widow, working as a middlewoman, was raped and beaten in broad daylight after failing to make a payment. She was hospitalised and her fate remained uncertain. Once fragmented, Kuluna gangs have now consolidated into two dominant blocs – "American" and "Chinese" – and reportedly collaborate with elements of the local police, some of whom are former gang members. This entanglement with state actors further erodes the possibility of formal protection, forcing women to rely on informal and often precarious strategies for safety.

In response to such pervasive threats, women like Ma Flo and Ma Nao develop their own informal safety systems. A key tactic is collective movement. They rarely operate alone, choosing instead to move in trusted peer groups. In one incident, the group described meeting near a bridge, preparing to sell produce. As they paused to decide which route to take, gang members began to approach. "One of them blocked our path, and another started circling around us," Ma Nao recalled. "We decided not to continue – we turned and walked away while they stood there, embarrassed." This moment reflects not passive avoidance but calculated restraint and situational awareness – an everyday performance of collective coordination to minimise risk. In other cases, they rely on informal negotiation, offering small payments to avoid confrontation. "When you see them, you must give them money," one explained. "'Mère, mère, even just 200 francs for us to buy weed,' they say. You can respond, 'I haven't sold much today, but here's 500 francs,' and they might leave you alone." These payments are not random acts of desperation but carefully prepared exchanges. Women often tuck small bills into their clothing to avoid having to open their bags publicly. "Françoise had 500 francs tucked into her Ankara wrap and handed it over easily," one woman recounted. "But her friend opened her bag – big mistake. They snatched it." These snatchings can be violent, as one noted – "they can even cut your hand" – highlighting the embodied danger of small missteps. Over time, even these interactions may evolve into fragile forms of recognition: if a seller becomes known for cooperating, she might earn protection within that territory – thus allowing her to return and sell more safely. These exchanges, while precarious, resemble a form of partial Toyokani – grounded not in mutual trust but in negotiated survival. In this context, Ma Flo and her peers avoid entering new selling zones not only due to economic unfamiliarity, but because, without

localised trust networks, they lack both protection and secure access. As Ma Nao explained, “I avoid taking the Congo Fort Road. Even my child Prince knows we should not go there. If you must use that road, keep some money like 500 francs with you aside.” This everyday strategy illustrates how navigating insecurity requires not just spatial awareness but also social embeddedness – knowing where one is recognised and where informal protection can be expected.

What emerges here is a broader view of relational agency that extends beyond the farm and market. Safety, like access to produce, is negotiated through trust, timing, and collective strategy. In line with nego-feminism, women like Ma Flo and Ma Nao adapt tactically – using group solidarity, informal payments, and cautious mobility to manage insecurity. In this context, Toyokani becomes not just a farmer–buyer ethic, but a flexible logic of negotiation – one that extends to peers and, at times, even to local gangs. This underscores the fact that sustaining a presence in urban farming involves navigating risks far beyond cultivation, shaped as much by informal relationships as by the physical act of selling.

- Managing Household Constraints

As Figure 6.6 illustrates, both peer and household support are essential to sustaining women’s participation in urban farming. Beyond navigating public insecurity, Ma Flo and Ma Nao must also rely on their families to remain active in the farming value chain. When Ma Flo struggled with harvesting peanuts in the field, she brought the produce home to finish cleaning – assisted by her son, who had accompanied her and helped with tasks like aligning the peanuts, as instructed by the farmer. Ma Nao, meanwhile, balances the demands of market activity with childcare responsibilities. Still breastfeeding a young child, she relies on her family during the day: “She is home with her grandparents. My in-laws and her older siblings take care of her.” During fieldwork, she remarked, “Oh, my breasts hurt now,” noting the physical discomfort caused by delayed feeding. This embodied toll underscores the hidden costs of participation – where the strain of economic labour intersects with ongoing care responsibilities. These often-invisible forms of support – from children, spouses, and extended family – are essential to sustaining women’s participation in urban farming. Relational agency, in this context, is not confined to markets or streets but extends into the home, where everyday acts of care and cooperation make continued engagement possible. Here, Toyokani also operates quietly –

through shared responsibilities and informal agreements that enable women like Ma Flo and Ma Nao to remain present in a precarious value chain. Though rarely recognised, this behind-the-scenes labour is vital to the fragile foothold that newcomers work to secure in Kinshasa's urban farming economy.

B.3 Summary

For newcomers like Ma Flo and Ma Nao, remaining in urban farming requires more than access to produce – it demands negotiation of exclusion, insecurity, and limited trust. While Toyokani – a trust-based ethic of flexible agreement – remains central in Kinshasa's farming economy, Ma Flo and Ma Nao's version is fragile and transactional, built on short-term deals rather than long-term loyalty. Yet their agency is not isolated; it is sustained through everyday relational negotiations – across peer groups, households, and even gang-controlled streets. Childcare, companionship, informal safety networks, and careful social navigation become part of their farming practice. Guided by nego-feminist principles of humility and tactical negotiation, they manoeuvre not with confrontation but with quiet resilience. As Ma Nao remarked, "There will be a time when farmers will even ask us to take the produce on credit." This hope reflects not naivety but relationally anticipatory agency – a belief that persistence and presence will eventually yield trust and inclusion in Kinshasa's urban farming economy.

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how women in Kinshasa's urban agriculture, particularly in Ndjili Kilambu, assert agency in the face of structural constraints such as commodified land, gendered hierarchies, economic precarity, and urban insecurity. Through diverse, situated strategies, women remain active in both farming and produce distribution, not as passive victims but as relational actors whose agency emerges through negotiation, improvisation, and ethical navigation of local dynamics. For female farmers, agency is asserted through strategies such as rotational cultivation, manure negotiation, labour-sharing, and informal agreements with landholders, practices grounded in trust, reciprocity, and presence. For middlewomen (vegetable sellers), this agency takes different forms. Established actors like Ma Muka sustain their role through long-standing relationships with producers, while newcomers like Ma Flo and Ma Nao rely on tactical flexibility, emotional and moral appeals, and collective manoeuvring to access produce, secure credit, and navigate street-level risk. Across both

groups, women demonstrate that remaining in the urban agriculture economy requires more than access: it demands the moral and strategic labour of sustaining relationships under insecure and shifting conditions. These case studies demonstrate that agency is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic and situated practice shaped by social position and material constraint, and which can be mobilised or substituted for trust. Even in the absence of formal guarantees, women enact agency through Toyokani, a moral logic of negotiated obligation, relational belonging, and adaptive reciprocity that underpins everyday continuity in farming and trade. In examining this, the chapter addresses the question of how women assert agency in urban agriculture despite structural constraint, showing that agency is enacted not just through land ownership or cultivation but also through relational manoeuvring, improvisational negotiation, and embodied resilience. These findings lay the groundwork for Chapter Seven's exploration of how knowledge, skill, and moral reasoning further sustain women's presence in urban farming, beyond legal frameworks, beyond formal recognition, and beyond reductive narratives of informality or survival.

7 Reframing Urban Agriculture: Agency Beyond Survival

This chapter responds to the fourth guiding sub-question of the thesis: How do women's localised experiences in urban agriculture reveal situated forms of knowledge and agency, and contribute to reframing perceptions of urban farming? In development and academic discourse, urban farming in the Global South is frequently framed through a survivalist lens – as a stopgap for those excluded from formal employment or economic mobility. It is often portrayed as low-status, low-skill labour driven purely by necessity , in contrast to the lifestyle and sustainability narratives more common in Global North contexts. Such framings focus narrowly on *why* women farm – often attributing their participation to poverty – while overlooking *how* they farm: the financial decisions, relational negotiations, and, in some cases, spiritual reasoning that shape and sustain cultivation. By treating poverty as the analytical endpoint, this perspective flattens the complexity of women's practices into narratives of coping or survival, making it difficult to recognise agency in ways that are meaningful within local systems of value. Even the adaptive strategies examined in Chapter Six risk being misread as reactive adjustments within an activity still seen as marginal.

To counter these framings, this chapter advances an epistemological shift. It argues that recognising women's agency requires rethinking how urban farming itself is understood – not as a fallback but as a dynamic, knowledge-intensive livelihood system. Drawing on fieldwork in Kinshasa, the chapter shows how women's practices are shaped by financial investment, relational coordination, and – at times – spiritual reasoning. The chapter illustrates these dynamics through the life history of Ma Bibi, a farmer whose trajectory exemplifies how urban agriculture can be pursued as a strategic and dignified livelihood. While Ma Bibi's story anchors the discussion, the chapter also integrates insights from other field encounters to surface shared patterns, tensions, and divergent strategies. Without romanticising these practices, the chapter emphasises that women's engagement in farming constitutes a form of place-based knowledge production – one that unsettles survivalist assumptions and invites a more grounded reading of urban agriculture.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. It begins with a review of dominant representations of urban farming in academic discourse, particularly those linking it to low-income survival. The second section introduces Ma Bibi's trajectory, highlighting her economic decisions and relational

strategies. The third section expands the analysis, drawing on additional field narratives to explore the economic, social, and spiritual dimensions of urban farming in Kinshasa. Finally, the chapter returns to Toyokani to draw together the layered insights and highlight how women's agency in urban farming unsettles survivalist framings.

7.1 Misframing Urban Agriculture: Gender, Survival, and Knowledge Hierarchies

Mainstream narratives often attribute women's dominance in urban agriculture across African cities to their socio-economic disadvantages. Chant, (2013) argues that women in urban areas face greater economic challenges than men, including lower educational attainment, limited work experience, and restrictive gender norms that burden them with unpaid care responsibilities. As a result, many women turn to informal, low-income activities such as urban agriculture as a survival strategy (Hovorka et al., 2009). This form of farming is often framed as an extension of women's caregiving duties – what Dennery (1996) describes as "part of [their] responsibility to feed the family". In Kinshasa, these generalised narratives take on a localised form through the discourse of débrouillardise – a logic of tactical survival, improvisation, and self-reliance. Popularised in expressions like "Article 15" ("débrouillez-vous", or "figure it out"), this framing reinforces the idea that urban agriculture is a reactive, low-skill activity practised out of necessity. Such representations – echoed in the work of Mianda (1996), Musibono et al. (2011), and Suka and Alenda-Demoutiez (2022) – portray urban farming in Kinshasa as a fallback livelihood requiring minimal expertise, especially during periods of economic hardship. While this narrative reflects the influx of men into agriculture during the economic collapse of the 1980s and 1990s (Lauro, 2020), it relies on a crisis-centred logic that generalises male participation and obscures the long-standing involvement of women in the sector.

In reality, women's engagement in urban agriculture predates these disruptions and is shaped by everyday decision-making, intergenerational learning, and long-term adaptation. Chapter Four examined the gender dynamics within urban farming, highlighting how it is often perceived as a fallback activity for men in Kinshasa (Mankondo Idrissa & Musalu Sikisa, 2021). Yet, these dominant narratives tend to marginalise the systems of knowledge through which women sustain and reproduce urban farming practices. This aligns with (Kinyanjui, 2019) observation that "knowledge originating from African women is frequently dismissed as

peripheral or insignificant", reflecting colonial and patriarchal assumptions about what counts as legitimate expertise. In Kinshasa, this marginalisation is epistemological. It privileges formal, Westernised knowledge systems and devalues the embodied, everyday learning women acquire through seasonal practice, peer exchange, and community networks. As (Ilmi, 2014) notes, "indigenous knowledges have not been conceptualised and built for the Eurocentric classroom", and are therefore often rendered invisible or inferior. In urban agriculture, these localised and experiential forms of expertise remain excluded from formal discourse, which continues to equate legitimacy with scientific credentials and institutional recognition. As a result, women's agricultural contributions are frequently collapsed into narratives of survival – explanations that reflect hardship but obscure the skill, planning, and situated knowledge embedded in their daily practices. Reframing urban farming as a deliberate and knowledge-intensive livelihood allows for a more grounded understanding of women's agency – one that is neither rooted in desperation nor idealised as emancipatory. It is best understood as a complex and adaptive practice, shaped by labour, planning, and negotiation within unstable social, economic, and spatial constraints.

The life history of Ma Bibi illustrates this shift. While not representative of the experience of all women in Kinshasa's urban farming sector, her trajectory offers insight into how farming can evolve from necessity into a strategic livelihood – not through linear agency, but through pragmatic continuity shaped by constraint. Moving through roles such as maman manoeuvre, cultivator, seed producer, and maman ndunda, she shows how women sustain urban farming through accumulated knowledge, relational coordination, and financial planning. Her story provides a grounded entry point into the broader analysis that follows, which draws on other women's experiences to explore the economic, social, and spiritual dimensions that make urban agriculture viable in Kinshasa.

7.2 Ma Bibi's Case Study

A. Background and Context

Ma Bibi was born in 1967 in Matadi, in what is now Kongo Central Province, and is the eldest of nine children. In 1976, her family relocated to the Ndjili Q13 neighbourhood of Kinshasa to access better medical care for one of her siblings, who required specialised treatment. At the time, her father worked as a department head at the Office National des Transports (ONATRA), the national transport agency. Soon after settling in Kinshasa, Ma Bibi's mother was introduced to urban farming by her sister and began cultivating sorrel (roselle). Ma Bibi recalled that her mother's earnings "surprised my dad", noting that "The income from just two plots was almost equal to his salary." Because sorrel regrows quickly, she added, "the plots were not entirely depleted – they could regrow in a matter of days." Encouraged by this unexpected success, and influenced by his brother – who had previously urged him to leave formal employment – her father resigned from ONATRA to pursue farming full-time.

In 1979, the family moved to CECOMAF, a semi-rural area on the outskirts of Kinshasa, where they stayed in her paternal uncle's compound. There, her father expanded his activities to include charcoal production. "My dad was doing so well," she recalled. With the income he generated, he purchased a plot of land in Lemba Imbu. However, tensions soon emerged within the extended family. Although it was his brother who had initially encouraged her father to farm, this brother later forced him off the land. The family relocated to the newly acquired land in Lemba Imbu. "We were new to the area," she said, "and my dad didn't have enough money to buy chicken manure and other necessary things, so the farm was not doing well. That's when our struggles started."

At 14, Ma Bibi began her first year of secondary school, but her family's worsening financial situation made it increasingly difficult to continue. To contribute to the household, she began cutting and selling firewood during school breaks and after class. Facing stigma in the neighbourhood, she recalled, "They would say, 'Why are you letting them borrow? How would they even pay?'" By age 15, she had left school. "It started to feel like a waste of time… I needed to support my family." She later became a maman manoeuvre, assisting middlewomen (maman ndunda) in harvesting and reselling cassava. "I'd gather the leftovers they didn't want," she explained. "When I sold the cassava leaves, I made good profit – around 90 to 100 zaires." Reflecting on this period, she said, "God never gives up on His people… At 15 years of age, I became the breadwinner of my family!" While some extended family members disapproved, she emphasised her sense of responsibility: "It was entirely my decision to help

out." She also spoke about the lack of guidance at home. "My mother wasn't brave enough to work," she said. "I learned farming from the people around me. She didn't even advise me about going to church or school."

In 1986, at the age of 19, Ma Bibi met her first husband while returning from the bush with a load of cassava leaves. After a brief courtship and a visit to his family, he proposed marriage – but with a firm condition: "I don't ever want to see you going to that bush again or selling in the market." Although he supported her and her family financially, Ma Bibi resumed selling vegetables in secret. When he found out, she said, "Things changed. He became physically abusive… as one pain from beating me had not even subsided, he would add more." Soon afterwards, their landlord asked them to vacate the house for renovations. Ma Bibi used the opportunity to leave. "I knew people would laugh at me," she said, recalling the return to her parents' home with her child. That same evening, she went to a nearby farm to look for vegetables to buy and resell. Her husband later came to ask her to return, but Ma Bibi refused unless he allowed her to keep working. "He was stubborn and refused, and I also refused to return." Despite family pressure, she stood firm. Eventually, he conceded, "Since you do not want to come back, I cannot take care of the child from afar. So, I am giving you custody of the kid." She accepted. "He lives in Matete, I live in Lemba Imbu – not too far apart, but we never met again."

After her separation, Ma Bibi continued working as a middlewoman, buying vegetables from farmers and reselling them. It was during one of these visits that she met her current husband. Together, they have had 10 children, one of whom later passed away. Encouraged by her mother-in-law – a seasoned farmer – Ma Bibi transitioned from resale into cultivation. At the time, her husband was farming on his family's land in Lemba Imbu, and she joined him in the work. The couple later purchased a plot in the centre of Lemba Imbu, but despite holding ownership papers they were eventually evicted by the local land chief. "When the land was sold," she recalled, "we lost so much stuff." Anticipating such instability, Ma Bibi – an active member of her church – followed a tip from her pastor, who also served as the president of the local farmers' cooperative, to relocate. Negotiations with the land chief were stalling and eviction seemed imminent. She began renting farmland in Kilambu Village; other farmers followed after being forcibly removed.

Since then, Ma Bibi and her husband have expanded their operations across three main sites: the rented plot in Kilambu Village, her husband's family land in Velleman, and another family plot in Lemba Imbu. The key to sustaining and growing these operations, she explained, has been consistent reinvestment in seeds, manure, and other farming inputs. "You don't eat everything with farming. You have to reinvest in farming." However, not all experiences have been smooth. She recalled one incident involving a hired helper: "I buy a pot of salad seeds for 10,000 francs. When I grow it, it covers the plots. But when Matondo did the work, no salad grew. I bet he sold my seeds for as little as 3,000 francs – enough to buy his weed." Since then, she and her husband remain present during key stages of farming and only work with trusted helpers. "These two helpers are good because they don't steal – though they eat a lot," she added, referring to the boys assisting them in the field.

The couple divide labour efficiently: her husband handles soil preparation with assistance and joins her for harvesting and other tasks. As their activities grew, so did Ma Bibi's expertise. She now produces some of her own seeds and continues to purchase others, and she regularly advises other farmers. During one exchange, she told a fellow grower whose spinach was damaged by heavy rain, "Just add vitamins – but don't add salt." To maximise profit, Ma Bibi prefers selling her own produce. She has mastered bulk packaging and weighing techniques: "If my hands get full, that becomes my balance." In the market, she often collaborates with mamans manœuvres who take produce on credit and repay after resale, given that many lack upfront capital. When necessary, she also sells directly in other markets. As the main seller, Ma Bibi also manages the household finances. Although decisions are made jointly, she explained, "I am the one managing all the money. When we farm, I am the one who sells the produce, so all the money is with me." She uses this income to contribute regularly to tontines and local card-based saving systems, which help meet the family's financial obligations.

Despite the strain, Ma Bibi remained focused: "I didn't really care about my [second] husband's adulterous life. I just focused on working hard, making money, farming, and selling vegetables. With God's help, I slowly built our house and ensured my children received an education. God never left us." She and her husband enrolled their first two daughters in a boarding school in Ndjili Brasserie, despite local scepticism. Some neighbours mocked the decision – "Who does she think she is? Sending her children to a posh school" – but the school's head nun was supportive: "Being a farmer doesn't mean you are poor… I was also raised with farming

money. I won't expel your child for late fees – but remember, you need to pay." While one daughter left school to marry, the other became pregnant during university. With her parents' encouragement, she kept the child and returned to her studies, later graduating as a medical doctor at 26. "At her graduation," Ma Bibi recalled, "People selling flowers shouted, 'Mama doctor, are you not going to buy flowers?' I just sat down, thinking of the pain I endured in farming to get her there."

To this day, Ma Bibi insists that her children – regardless of profession or marital status – remain involved in farming. "Even my married daughter and the one who just graduated are involved. I sold their vegetables yesterday. I never want them to stop farming." Alongside investing in education, she and her husband have strategically acquired land. In 1992, while still living with his family, they bought their first residential plot in Lemba Imbu for US$300. In 2014, they added two more plots in Bel Air for US$1,000 each. Now, they plan to sell the land in Velleman and reinvest the proceeds in rental property. "That way," she explained, "we can take a break from farming, grow cassava leaves, and have someone else harvest and sell them for us. We'll earn from both farming and property." Reflecting on how urban farming is often socially misrecognised, she remarked, "People think bar owners are the most successful in Lemba Imbu. But we sent our children to the same schools as government ministers – just from farming. People who laugh at farmers make me laugh."

Figure 7.1 Ma Bibi (right) bundling vegetables, Pa Boni (far left), Ma Bibi's husband, harvesting

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

7.3 Situated Reframing and Agency in Urban Farming – Insights from Ma Bibi's Story and Beyond

Ma Bibi's life history complicates dominant portrayals of urban farming as low-skill or purely reactive. Her experience reflects how women can move through shifting roles – maman manoeuvre, cultivator, seed producer, and middlewoman – over time, adapting to changing needs and constraints. Her trajectory reveals how farming, though rooted in necessity, can evolve into a sustained livelihood supported by local knowledge, resourcefulness, and relational negotiation. Yet her case is not singular. The analysis that follows draws on Ma Bibi's story alongside the voices of other women to examine the broader narratives that shape how urban farming is understood in Kinshasa. The next section begins by engaging the dominant

framing of urban agriculture as a poverty-driven practice – and asks what is at stake when poverty becomes the primary lens through which women's participation is interpreted.

A. Disrupting the Poverty Narrative

A.1 Local Stigma and Social Misrecognition

Is Ma Bibi poor enough – or marginal enough – to be included in a study on survival-driven urban agriculture? Her story complicates that question. Through farming, she and her husband acquired multiple plots of land, built a large house, and financed their children's education at prestigious schools – among other forms of stability they have achieved. While Ma Bibi began farming out of necessity, she remained committed to it even after attaining relative stability. Her trajectory suggests that women's participation in urban farming may be shaped by poverty at certain stages, but that it can also evolve into a strategic and sustained livelihood. Yet despite such realities, farming remains strongly associated with poverty – not only in development discourse but also in everyday perceptions in Kinshasa. Participants described how farming is still viewed locally as something for those who have no better options. Despite her accomplishments, Ma Bibi noted that people still saw her as "just a farmer". Ma Viviane recalled, "People laughed at us and said farmers have cracked feet." Ma Marie Noel shared how her children were mocked: "They would say, 'The money you eat comes from the farm.'"

These perceptions obscure the diversity of women who engage in farming and the varied motivations that sustain their participation. Across this study, women from a range of socio-economic backgrounds – including nurses, pastors, and teachers – participated in farming not only out of necessity but also by choice or because of the influence of routine, or pride. Marlene, a trained nurse, explained, "I accompanied my sisters-in-law as a newly married woman to help them and saw the money that could be made – so I started farming myself. My husband and I are both nurses, but we also farm and treat patients at home." Similarly, Ma Marie Noel shared, "My body ached, but I still went to the farm. Once I reach the river, all the pain is gone… Why should I stay home just to watch someone else's child? I'd rather go to the farm." These accounts complicate the assumption that urban farming is an activity only for the urban poor. Rather than being driven purely by desperation, women's continued engagement in urban farming reflects routine, resilience, and an intentional commitment to a livelihood they

find both meaningful and sustaining. Their motivations often shift over time, moving between necessity, habit, and strategic continuity. Confronted with social judgements that reduce their labour to markers of poverty, many women explicitly reject being defined through such narrow frames. As Ma Viviane put it, “If someone wants to laugh at me, they can. At the funeral, I’ll be dressed just like them. If someone wears an expensive scarf, mine will be expensive too. So how is the other person better than me?” Ma Bibi similarly remarked, “They laughed at us, but we’ve sent our children to the same schools as ministers.” These responses do not deny the struggles of farming – but they reject poverty as a defining identity. Women are aware of how farming is interpreted socially, yet they articulate a more complex understanding of their work and worth.

A.2 Strategic Silence and the Ethic of Discretion

At the same time, many women emphasised the importance of discretion. As Ma Viviane remarked, “The person who hides is cleverer than you.” This caution reflects more than humility – it is a strategy grounded in local social realities. As one farmer said, simply, “People keep their earnings private here.” For many, discretion protects against envy, spiritual attacks, and social obligation. Ma Viviane herself recounted what she believed to be a spiritual attack caused by jealousy, which left her unable to walk for months: “In this line of work, there are many jealous people… Not everyone has a good heart.” Her story, like those of others in this study, reflects a broader reality: discretion is not incidental but a locally grounded strategy. In some cases, presenting themselves as financially modest allows women in urban farming to negotiate better terms for land access or leverage with producers. This strategic self-positioning enables women to navigate uneven power dynamics while protecting themselves. As Nnaemeka (2004) writes, “The chameleon adapts without imposing itself”. Without demanding visibility or recognition, women manage social exposure and systemic precarity through silent, embodied negotiation.

A.3 Shared Precarity and the Limits of Material Measures

Finally, the assumption that poverty is visible – symbolised by cassava bundles at dawn or a woman farming a small patch – reduces complex lives to deficit-based narratives. Across the field site, women farming one Mukala or more than 50, like Ma Bibi, face the same risks of

eviction or land loss. While material outcomes may vary, precarity is shared. Wealth, too, is not simply individual. It is relational – constructed through networks, spiritual protection, and collective labour, and often embedded in Toyokani practices of trust and reciprocity. As (Brockington et al., 2018) argue, poverty and prosperity must be understood through the social units and local norms in which they are embedded. Thus, defining urban farming solely through poverty is both analytically flawed and personally harmful. It erases the relational, financial, and embodied strategies through which women sustain their livelihoods. This study does not ask whether women like Ma Bibi are "poor enough" to be included – it questions why poverty remains the dominant framework for understanding urban agriculture at all. Reframing urban farming requires moving beyond assumptions of lack and recognising the dynamic, situated agency that sustains it. One key aspect of this reframing is challenging the persistent narrative that urban farming is a low-cost fallback activity, an assumption that reinforces its association with poverty. While Chapter Four outlined the broader economic dynamics of Kinshasa's urban farming sector, the analysis here focuses on how women's economic strategies, particularly around profit, labour, and negotiation, reflect situated agency. To illustrate this, Table 7.1, below, presents the estimated input costs for cultivating spinach across 15 Mikala, a common plot size among peri-urban farmers, discussed in in depth in Chapter Four. These figures, grounded in field data and women's testimonies, challenge the notion that urban farming requires minimal investment. They reveal a logic of financial planning that includes seed selection, compost procurement, and labour coordination, underscoring the fact that farming is not only materially demanding but also strategically managed

Table 7.4 Estimated profitability per Mukala (with projection for 15 Mikala), including land and labour

	Term	Amount (FC)	USD (≈ @2300)
1	Revenue	80000	34.78
2	Cost of Production	30336	13.19
3	Gross Profit	49664	21.59
4	Land (estimated)	1000	0.43
5	Labor (estimated)	10750	4.67
6	Net Profit	37914	16.48
7	Projected Net Profit for 15 Mikala	568710	247.2

(Source: P. Tshomba, field data, 2023)

Note: FC refers to franc Congolais, the local currency of the DRCongo.

A.4 Analysis: Profit, Labour, and Relational Strategy in Urban Farming

The consolidated profit table (Table 7.1) shows that cultivating spinach on 15 Mikala can yield an average net profit of approximately US$247 in less than two months. Additional earnings are possible through repeated harvests, as spinach can typically be cut two to three times from the same planting – enabling women to generate returns every two weeks, depending on soil quality and rainfall. A similar economic logic applies to amaranth (biteku teku), another fast-growing crop commonly used in urban crop rotations. As one woman explained, “Right now, an amaranth plot will sell for 20,000 francs. So with 10 plots, I make about 200,000 francs – around US$100. After buying fientes, seeds, and treatments, I’m left with about US$50. But with all the small sales that follow, I can get to US$150. It sounds good, right?”

This kind of reasoning reflects a broader pattern. Beyond spinach and amaranth, women cultivate a variety of crops – including aubergine, okra (gombo), Scotch bonnet (pili pili), and cabbage (chou pommé) – each with distinct growth cycles, input needs, and market returns. Across these crops, decisions about planting, fertilising, and selling are not incidental. They are informed by accumulated knowledge and economic coordination – shaped by seasonal constraints, input availability, and price volatility. Yet, as with any enterprise, these profits are shaped by risk – land insecurity, erratic weather, pest damage, and soil depletion. As Ma Rosa worried aloud while preparing to leave her fields for the weekend, "The birds are bothering us – they're eating our peanuts. I don't know how the farm will look when we get back!" Environmental disruptions like these routinely affect expected outcomes. One farmer explained, "In farming, you can plan and estimate your earnings based on your investment. But unforeseen events like heavy rain can disrupt everything. A plot you planned to sell for 15,000 francs might only sell for 8,000."

These reflections highlight a critical point: profitability in urban agriculture is not only a matter of labour or input but also hinges on constant vigilance, real-time problem-solving, and flexibility in the face of unpredictability. These are not incidental skills, but forms of embodied knowledge accumulated through years of experience. As Ma Marie Noel-Jeanne observed, "Sometimes crops don't grow as expected. The soil may no longer be fertile. This time, some areas didn't grow well, but I haven't lost money." This ethos of recalibration – adjusting plans mid-season, reallocating labour, or switching crops –defines the everyday work of urban farming in Kinshasa.

Profitability, then, is neither automatic nor accidental. It emerges from layered and continuous decision-making, in which women weigh input costs, environmental variability, and volatile markets. In a city where many households live on less than US$3 per day, even modest profits from urban farming carry weight. But these returns require upfront investment: cultivating a single Mukala can cost around US$17, an amount far from negligible in Kinshasa's economic landscape. Field data and testimonies show that urban farming requires far more than access to land. As one farmer with a large plot explained, "For now, I've only cultivated 40 plots. There's still more land, but I haven't started preparing it because I don't have the money to hire help. I also can't afford seeds or pig or chicken manure." Every phase, from soil preparation to harvest, demands cash, calculated spending, and financial risk-taking.

Ma Bibi's experience illustrates this reality in everyday practice. When her helpers jokingly asked for more pay, she responded with a smile: "Let's finish the work from the 5,000 francs I already gave you. Then we'll talk." Laughter followed, with the group teasing her for being "stingy". Yet beneath the humour was a deeper logic: Ma Bibi's sustained participation in farming depends not only on effort or land but also on disciplined financial management, underscoring the fact that urban agriculture is far from a low-cost fallback for many women. Even middlewomen face similar financial demands – they must secure cash upfront to purchase produce. Yet this financial logic is often interwoven with Toyokani, a system of trust, reciprocity, and mutual obligation. Through these negotiated relationships, women like Ma Bibi navigate uncertainty and sustain their presence in farming despite limited resources.

The next section turns to the role of social capital in sustaining urban farming, highlighting how practices of trust, reciprocity, and negotiation are deeply interwoven with financial decision-making. Taken together, these dimensions reveal urban farming not as a reactive or fallback activity but as a layered and adaptive livelihood strategy that challenges survivalist portrayals.

B. The Social Capital Dimension of Urban Farming: Challenging the Survivalist Lens

While input and profit tables reveal the material investments required in urban farming – demonstrating that financial expenditure is central – they do not tell the whole story. Profitability is never achieved in isolation. In many cases, it is not merely the presence of financial capital but also the ability to mobilise it through relationships of trust that makes cultivation possible. Women's capacity to access labour, negotiate inputs, and manage risk often depends on dense social networks and embedded practices of cooperation. These intertwined financial and relational strategies reveal urban farming as a complex, knowledge-intensive livelihood – not simply the low-cost, low-skill fallback activity often portrayed in mainstream urban agriculture discourse.

B.1 Pooling Inputs and Shared Responsibility

This interplay between capital and social coordination is especially visible in several specific farming practices. For instance, while chicken manure is essential for soil productivity in Kinshasa's urban agriculture, it is sold only in bulk – requiring significant upfront cash. As one

farmer explained, “The soil here demands chicken manure after each harvest for optimal productivity. But obtaining it requires cash, which is a problem.” To meet these costs, women often pool their resources – sometimes planning weeks in advance – to make such purchases feasible. These arrangements depend on trust and collective planning and are not incidental; they are central to sustaining production. They reflect how financial access is mediated through shared responsibility, embedded cooperation, and mutual reliance. Similar logics extend beyond input pooling. When cash is insufficient, some women coordinate with middlewomen (maman ndunda) – not only to stabilise prices and buffer losses (as discussed in Chapter Six) but also to secure financial support. In these cases, middlewomen provide upfront cash in exchange for a share of the harvest, often negotiated through Toyokani – flexible, trust-based agreements rooted in reciprocity.

The farmer cultivates the middlewoman’s crop while intercropping her own, allowing both to benefit. These arrangements enable women to combine financial need with relational strategy, making farming viable even when liquidity is low. In other instances, middlewomen pay for crops early – while the vegetables are still in the seedbed. This allows farmers with limited cash to expand cultivation rather than waiting for existing crops to mature and sell. As one middlewoman explained, “We actually bought the plot a while ago, and today we're here to harvest the crops.” In this arrangement, the farmer receives immediate capital, which helps sustain production; the middlewoman, in turn, secures future harvests at a stable price. These flexible, trust-based arrangements not only bridge financial gaps but also sustain farming continuity in a context where formal credit systems, input subsidies, and institutional trust are largely absent.

B.2 Savings Systems as Relational Safety Nets

In such an environment, women turn to informal financial infrastructures that they manage and rely on. A central example is the tontine – known locally as likelemba: a kind of rotating savings scheme rooted in women’s mutual aid associations that has existed since the 1930s (Lauro, 2020). In parallel, many women also participate in ko buaka carte (literally, “to throw a card” in Lingala), a form of card-based savings in which members contribute small amounts at regular intervals. Over time, these systems enable women to accumulate savings or access small, informal loans – often through the very networks where they save. When profits fall short or new investments are needed, these collective arrangements provide a vital financial

buffer – enabling timely purchases of seeds, compost, or labour to sustain cultivation. Yet their value extends beyond economics. These savings systems operate as more than financial mechanisms; they function as relational safety nets, allowing women to manage uncertainty, absorb shocks, and maintain continuity in cultivation despite unstable conditions. What this illustrates is that financial strategy in urban farming is not separate from social capital – it is embedded within it. Women do not bypass constraint through confrontation but navigate it through the give-and-take of reciprocity and flexible negotiation, as articulated in nego-feminism. These practices also reflect the duality of structure: women work within, adapt to, and subtly reshape the systems that constrain them. Together, these interwoven strategies – anchored in Toyokani – constitute a grounded economic logic, one rooted in mutual obligation and shared risk that enables farming to persist far beyond what cash or land access alone can achieve. What sustains urban farming is not simply access to land or capital, but the ability to mobilise support through trust-based systems of timing, cooperation, and mutual aid. This became especially clear through my own attempt to engage in urban farming – an experience that revealed just how embedded and indispensable these relational systems are.

Figure 7.2 Female farmers and sellers in a savings-group meeting

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph showing local businesswomen (including female farmers and sellers) during one of their monthly savings-group meetings.

B.3 The Boundaries of External Logics

Although I did not farm in the conventional sense, I collaborated with a university-trained agronomist (already active in the field – his background even influenced my choice), accessed land through family connections, and invested approximately US$290, a considerable sum in Kinshasa's economy. We set up a profit-sharing agreement and coordinated input purchases and logistics. Despite these advantages, the aubergine plots underperformed. Hoping to improve margins, I bypassed middlewomen and used my own car to deliver produce directly to the market, an approach some farmers recommend. Yet the project struggled to break even. At one point, during a sales trip, my assistant's phone was stolen, and our limited earnings had to cover the replacement. In the end, with no profit generated, there was nothing left to share. In reflecting on the limited success of my own attempt, one thing became clear: what was missing was not capital or technical knowledge, but embeddedness. This is not to suggest that women in this study do not experience failure; many do, and they speak openly about it. But, unlike the women I interviewed, we lacked the advantage of strong ties to local farmers and middlewomen, relationships that enable more strategic navigation of urban farming's everyday constraints.

During a field walk with Ma Bibi, for instance, a nearby farmer lamented that rain had damaged her spinach. "I'm going to try adding some vitamins and see how it works out," she said. Ma Bibi responded gently, "Yes, just add vitamins – but don't add salt." This brief exchange, one of many I witnessed, was not just practical advice. It also reflected an embedded culture of informal, experience-based knowledge-sharing. These interactions do not eliminate failure, but they can reduce its likelihood. It was the kind of situated support I lacked, relying instead on a formally trained agronomist whose approach remained largely detached from local farming networks.

The same dynamics were evident at the market. Although I followed expected norms – arriving at 4 am in Zigida Market and negotiating persistently – I was repeatedly sidelined. One maman manoeuvre, growing impatient, told me, "Our loyal suppliers are arriving." Soon after, they turned to their regular partners, and I was forced to sell at a loss to avoid spoilage. These were

not merely commercial transactions; they were shaped by long-standing trust, familiarity, and mutual obligation – forms of relational capital I did not possess (see Chapter Six for further discussion). My effort to bypass these networks – relying on formal planning and logistics – left me disconnected from the web of reciprocity that sustains urban farming. Without Toyokani, I had a plan, capital, and training, but no relational continuity. These everyday forms of cooperation – often invisible in development discourse – are what make urban farming viable in contexts of systemic constraint. These strategies also reach into domains not easily captured by material analysis. For many women, sustaining farming involves not only financial and social coordination but also spiritual practices aimed at protection and balance – an often-overlooked layer of everyday agricultural life.

C. Spiritual Dimensions of Urban Farming: Beyond the Material

Building on the financial and social dimensions discussed earlier, this section explores the spiritual logics that underpin farming for some women in Kinshasa – intentional strategies rooted in a relational ethic that includes unseen forces, ritual practice, and belief. While this is not universal, for many women farming is embedded in cosmological understandings that shape how they engage with risk, reciprocity, and well-being. Not all women foreground spiritual reasoning in their narratives, but for those who do, it forms a pragmatic and meaningful part of their decision-making process.

D. Beyond the Material: Sharing, Blessing, and Balance

In many farms, it is not unusual for women to give away part of their harvest. While this might appear externally as a gesture of generosity, social expectation, or even a loss of potential income, women often frame it differently. These acts, as they describe them, are part of a broader ethic of balance – where giving and receiving are not opposites, but intertwined. Ma Marie Noel captured this understanding when she explained how sharing is not incidental, but integral to how she thinks about profit and protection: “With crops, I can't eat everything by myself. By giving away, God will also bless me, and He does. I can also plant and harvest my own food to eat, but what about other people? Before I start working on the soil, I always pray

to God to give me the strength to work and bless the land because I won't be eating everything by myself… What I have left after giving away is what I use to calculate my profit. Sometimes, I may not make a profit, but it's okay. I just worry about what I have. I don't dwell on what I've given away."

Her words suggest an alternative logic of calculation – one that blends material and spiritual sensibilities. What is given away is not excluded from the economy of farming; it is folded into it as a generative act. Rather than a loss, sharing becomes a strategy of continuity and care. This echoes Ilmi's (2014, p. 146) observation that, in many African contexts, "before resources are consumed… there is the offering of blessings and prayers, and the giving of sacrifice to ensure greater harmony". In this light, the ethic of Toyokani extends beyond the social and material: it includes an understanding of reciprocity that reaches into the spiritual. Agreements are not only between people but also with forces believed to shape fertility, well-being, and outcome.

E. Protective Strategies and Cosmological Agency

Women pray, give, and share, not from passive belief but as a form of situated agency – an attempt to negotiate with both the social and spiritual realms. These practices serve not only as protective strategies but also as active negotiations with the unseen forces that women believe shape farming outcomes. In one instance, a landowner who had recently purchased a plot sent cows to graze through the fields, disregarding the crops still under cultivation by female farmers who had been renting the land. One farmer recounted what happened next: "I just sat there and fixed the cows. The cows stopped eating and started running away from my farm… I cried for my farm, and God heard my prayers, causing the cows to retreat." She was able to recover some of her crops before the final eviction. Her account illustrates that spiritual engagement is not peripheral: it is central to how some women understand and respond to disruption. Rather than opposing the landowner or reacting forcefully to the cows, the farmer turned to prayer, trusting that spiritual forces would intervene. The cows' retreat was not seen as coincidence but as a sign of spiritual responsiveness.

Here, agency is not enacted through resistance but through embedded strategies that blend caution, reciprocity, and spiritual reasoning. In this light, Toyokani, are agreements forged not

only with people but also with forces believed to influence land, labour, and harvests. To frame urban farming merely as a fallback is to view it through a reductive lens – one that overlooks the layered realities women navigate. These practices reveal that farming is not simply about income or food production; it involves ongoing negotiation across financial, social, and spiritual domains. Such complexity is often missed in mainstream narratives that fail to see how much intention, knowledge, and relational labour are embedded in the everyday work of cultivation. As with the financial and social strategies outlined earlier, these spiritual practices reflect a grounded logic of resilience, rooted in local norms of care, timing, and relational accountability. Recognising this spiritual layer within Toyokani challenges dominant framings that view farming outcomes solely through material inputs – offering instead a more holistic view of agency grounded in context-specific ethics of care, reciprocity, and belief.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed how women's localised experiences in urban agriculture reveal situated agency and knowledge. Rather than presenting farming as a reactive strategy rooted in poverty, the analysis shows that women in Kinshasa sustain their presence in agriculture through layered practices of financial planning, relational negotiation, and adaptive expertise. These are not incidental tactics but expressions of embedded value systems that shape decisions across economic, social, and spiritual dimensions. The life history of Ma Bibi exemplifies how urban farming evolves over time, shaped by constraint yet sustained through continuity and strategic practice. Her trajectory, alongside other women's narratives, demonstrates how knowledge is produced through doing: seed-saving, labour-sharing, reinvestment, seasonal timing, and discretion function as relational forms of insight. At the heart of these strategies is Toyokani, an ethic of negotiation and reciprocity that connects financial logic to social trust and spiritual reasoning. In examining all these aspects, the chapter contributes to the thesis's central inquiry by showing that access to land and produce is not simply material but in fact deeply relational. Women remain in farming not only by acquiring plots but also by cultivating the social, moral, and practical networks that make continuity possible. These insights refine our understanding of how women in Ndjili Kilambu navigate urban agriculture through situated agency: not through resistance alone, but through continuity, strategy, and embedded knowledge. These findings lay the foundation for the final chapter's broader reflection on the

thesis's contribution to localised African feminist debates on women's agency in urban agriculture.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

In Ndjili Kilambu, a peri-urban district of Kinshasa's Mont-Ngafula commune, women continue to farm despite multiple, overlapping barriers. Mainstream development discourse, and even some strands of feminist scholarship, have often positioned land ownership as the cornerstone of women's agricultural autonomy, suggesting that African women's lack of ownership is the principal obstacle to their agency. Simultaneously, local authorities, drawing on colonial legacies embedded in governance and social norms, have long framed urban farming as inappropriate for the city. It is against this backdrop that this study asked the following: How do women in Ndjili Kilambu assert and manifest agency in sustaining urban farming within their socio-structural context?

To address this question, the research examined four interwoven dimensions of women's engagement: the broader dynamics of urban agriculture in the district; the intersectional constraints faced by women landowners; the strategies women deploy to navigate these challenges; and the localised knowledges and adaptive practices embedded in everyday experiences. Drawing on eight months of feminist decolonial ethnographic fieldwork and engagement with a diverse range of actors, including female farmers, middlewomen, helpers, land chiefs, agronomists, and local authorities, this study offers a nuanced understanding of women's agency in Kinshasa's urban farming sector.

8.1 Synthesis of Findings

The research demonstrated that land ownership alone does not secure women's participation in urban agriculture, as tenure insecurity and structural constraints remain pervasive. While land ownership is often framed in development discourse as a marker of autonomy or power, in Kinshasa formal ownership rarely guarantees women land security or freedom from contestation of their claims to the land. Even those with legal documentation, financial resources, or elite connections navigate a fluid tenure landscape shaped by overlapping legal, customary, and spiritual authorities. The experiences of Ma Marie Noel, Ma Mbanzola, and Ma Mbuyi illustrate how land acquired through purchase, inheritance, or gifting remains precarious due to weak state enforcement, patriarchal inheritance systems, and discretionary decisions by local authorities. Within this context, Toyokani plays a dual role. It links formal and informal systems, allowing women to protect or reclaim land through trust-based arrangements, yet the

same negotiations can also expose them to dispossession. Land ownership, therefore, is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing negotiation, sustained through adaptation, relationships, and active presence within shifting structures of power. Even for female landowners, urban farming remains precarious; ownership alone does not secure tenure or agency in Kinshasa's complex socio-political landscape.

The research further showed that women sustain participation not through ownership alone but also through relational access, strategic negotiation, adaptation, and trust. Access, to land, produce, or position within the value chain is maintained primarily through social ties, reciprocity, and ongoing negotiation rather than financial transactions alone. Women draw on kinship networks, labour exchanges, trading relationships, and produce circulation, while middlewomen (local vegetable sellers) – known locally as mamans ndunda and mamans manoeuvre – play a crucial role in mediating exchanges and sustaining the sector's continuity.

Two pathways illustrate how women navigate constraints. Long-standing actors rely on loyalty, reputation, and mutual recognition, whereas newcomers cultivate trust through emotional negotiation, reliability, and visible presence. Across these strategies, Toyokani functions as both a practical ethic and an analytical lens, demonstrating how relational embedding, sustained interaction, and negotiated agreements enable women to operate effectively within an unstable urban farming sector. These findings reveal urban agriculture to be a relational, multi-positional practice, where engagement extends beyond cultivation to mediation, circulation, and social negotiation. Presence, trust, and adaptability are central to sustaining participation despite structural and social constraints.

The research, finally, revealed that women's relational strategies and negotiated participation collectively contribute to an epistemic reframing of urban agriculture. In Kinshasa, farming is not merely subsistence labour or low-skill work: it is a strategic, long-term livelihood. Women invest in land, labour, tools, and expertise to sustain continuity, intergenerational planning, and social value. Farming is often a deliberate pursuit that embodies dignity, competence, and relational responsibility. Agency is lived and expressed differently by each woman; thus, success – or the exercise of agency – is measured not by visible wealth or material accumulation but by what urban farming enables women to achieve, individually and collectively. For some, this includes investing in the education of the next generation or supporting family members;

for others, building homes, maintaining social standing through household and community networks, or contributing financially to local social events; and for others still, asserting personal autonomy through choices such as dressing as desired, ensuring food security, or participating in collective savings systems that reinforce trust, reciprocity, and long-term stability. These practices are often deliberately discreet, safeguarding bargaining power, spiritual protection, or social standing.

Women actively reject reductive poverty labels, exercising epistemic agency that contests conventional development narratives. Across financial, social, and spiritual domains, Toyokani facilitates collective resource mobilisation, trust-based exchanges, and alignment with ancestral or divine forces, ensuring continuity and productivity. Urban agriculture, therefore, emerges as a site of relational and strategic agency, where planning, financial engagement, and embedded practice cultivate dignity, resilience, and social value through sustained negotiation and locally grounded knowledge.

8.2 Implications of the Findings

From these findings emerges a reconceptualisation of agency that challenges dominant assumptions in feminist and development scholarship. Traditional agrarian and development literatures often equate empowerment with formal ownership or individual autonomy, treating land titles, legal rights, or access to resources as durable markers of agency (Akinola, 2017; Peters, 2004; Agarwal, 1994). The Kinshasa case complicates this narrative. While ownership carries symbolic weight, it is fragile and easily undermined by overlapping legal, customary, and spiritual authorities (Deininger and Castagnini, 2006; Zakaria, 2021). Women's continued participation in urban farming cannot be explained through rights alone; it emerges from relational practices that enable them to navigate instability. Agency here is enacted through negotiation, trust, and interdependence – not as a possession but as an ongoing, relational practice. This aligns with African feminist perspectives such as nego-feminism, which emphasise negotiation, compromise, and adaptive strategies in the face of structural precarity (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020), and with global feminist debates that conceptualise agency as contingent practice rather than resistance or possession (Butler, 1997; Mahmood, 2005).

This reconceptualisation of agency carries important epistemological implications. The vernacular concept of Toyokani is more than a description of practice; it functions as an analytical lens that reveals how reciprocity, coexistence, and negotiated agreements structure everyday life in Kinshasa's urban agriculture. By engaging with Toyokani as a conceptual category, scholars are encouraged to foreground locally grounded logics rather than relying on imported frameworks such as "empowerment" or "resilience", which risk obscuring context-specific strategies (Cornwall et al., 2007; Eyben, 2010). Importantly, the analytic value of Toyokani lies not in its direct transferability across contexts but in the methodological principle it embodies: attending to locally derived categories that capture how agency is actually lived, negotiated, and sustained. In demonstrating how Toyokani illuminates women's agency within conditions of precarity, this study also opens the door for other context-specific concepts – whether in Kinshasa or elsewhere – to inform and reshape broader scholarly debates on gender, livelihoods, and relational practices. Centring women's categories and practices demonstrates the potential for co-producing knowledge with participants, challenging hierarchical epistemologies that marginalise local insights (Harding, 1991; Beoku-Betts, 1994; Mbembe, 2017). In this frame, silence and selective disclosure are not gaps but deliberate strategies of agency. For the decolonial feminist ethnographer, what women choose not to reveal is as important as what they articulate, since it reflects their power to control representation and knowledge(Spivak, 1988; Trinh-, 1989).

The findings also carry practical implications for development interventions and urban policy. Many programmes assume that securing formal land rights, delivering technical inputs, or formalising markets will automatically empower women. Yet the Kinshasa case shows that such measures may be insufficient or even counterproductive: legal claims can be contested, technical aid cannot replace trust, and formalisation may exclude those who rely on relational networks for their livelihood. Policy and development efforts must therefore recognise and strengthen the relational infrastructures that underpin women's agency, cooperatives, savings associations, and networks of middlewomen who mediate access to land, labour, and markets. Supporting these relational structures ensures interventions align with lived realities rather than undermining the very mechanisms women depend on to navigate precarity.

Finally, the study offers methodological lessons for research in contexts marked by vulnerability and informality. By treating women's narratives as conceptual resources, the

research demonstrates how ethnographic and narrative-based approaches can generate theory from the field rather than imposing external definitions (Manning, 2016; Charmaz, 2014). Attending to the categories, terms, and silences participants employ reveals the relational and contextually grounded nature of agency. This methodological stance strengthens the accuracy of representation while also contributing to wider debates on ethical and co-produced knowledge production in African and peri-urban contexts where conventional metrics fail to capture local logics (Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2003; Tamale, 2022).

In conclusion, women's continued participation in urban farming is not accidental, but actively sustained through negotiation, trust, and relational networks. The implications of this study therefore extend beyond Kinshasa. Theoretically, they call for a redefinition of agency as relational, contingent, and negotiated rather than as a fixed attribute or as individual possession. Epistemologically, they demonstrate the value of locally grounded concepts such as Toyokani, showing how context-specific practices can inform and enrich global debates on gender and livelihoods. Practically, the findings challenge development frameworks that prioritise formal ownership or technical interventions, highlighting instead the importance of relational infrastructures and local strategies for sustaining livelihoods. Methodologically, the study underscores the significance of narrative-based, co-produced categories in generating theory that is both grounded and analytically robust. Taken together, these contributions unsettle dominant framings of women in urban agriculture and open new pathways for research, policy, and African feminist thought.

The next section turns to the study's broader contributions, highlighting its empirical, conceptual, and methodological significance beyond the immediate field site.

8.3 Contributions

This thesis makes four interlinked contributions: empirical, conceptual, epistemological, and methodological. Together, these interventions reposition women in Kinshasa's urban agriculture not as marginal actors surviving at the edges of legality, but as central figures whose relational strategies generate theory, sustain livelihoods, and inform feminist debates. By advancing these contributions, the thesis not only documents overlooked dynamics of urban agriculture in the DRC but also provides conceptual tools, epistemological insights, and

methodological approaches with relevance across feminist scholarship, urban studies, and decolonial research.

A. Empirical Contribution

At the empirical level, this thesis provides one of the first sustained decolonial feminist ethnographies of women's agency in Kinshasa's urban agriculture. It demonstrates that agency is not secured by land ownership alone (formally or informally), but through a complex set of strategies: negotiating with landholders, collaborating with middlewomen, investing financially and spiritually, and mobilising trust-based networks. These insights do more than document practices: they reveal the logic through which women enact agency under conditions of precarity, and they lay the foundation for the conceptual innovation of Toyokani.

The experiences of women such as Ma Marie Noel, Ma Mbanzola, and Ma Mbuyi, who not only lost their land and livelihoods but were forced either into silence or into advocating in hiding to reclaim their plots, illustrate that landholding in Kinshasa can be both precarious and perilous. Female landowners live under the constant threat of dispossession, which can have life-threatening implications, as land can be resold, contested, or arbitrarily reassigned. For many, this creates a cycle of vulnerability in which ownership provides only a provisional foundation for farming, rather than a guarantee of autonomy, highlighting the need to understand land tenure as an ongoing, relational, and negotiated process rather than a static legal status.

The thesis also foregrounds actors frequently overlooked in scholarship: middlewomen, known locally as mamans ndunda, and mamans manoeuvre (vegetable sellers). Contrary to portrayals of exploitation, these women often work collaboratively with farmers to sustain urban agriculture in Kinshasa. For example, Ma Muka's partnership with loyal farmers ensures stable prices during peak periods and fair purchases during low periods, sustaining the livelihoods of both. Similarly, Ma Flo, who became a middlewoman after losing access to land, illustrates the adaptive nature of women's agency: rather than withdrawing, women reconfigure their participation to remain present. These cases show that middlewomen coordinate exchanges, manage risk, and facilitate circulation through relational negotiation. Their role is thus not reducible to exploitation but reflects adaptive strategies that reinforce the resilience of urban

agriculture. Collectively, these practices highlight the fact that urban agriculture in Kinshasa is sustained through trust, interdependence, and strategic collaboration, challenging assumptions that informal systems are chaotic or purely exploitative.

The research demonstrates that urban agriculture is not a casual or residual activity but one requiring investment. Cultivating 15-bed plots of leafy vegetables (considered an averaged small-scale farming), for example, involves average outlays of around US$70 per month on inputs, labour, and socially and / or spiritually embedded sharing obligations. Beyond financial costs, women rely on human resources through collaborative labour and savings groups that generate capital for farming. Spiritual practices – blessings, ancestral alignments, ethical sharing – interweave with material strategies, providing protection against jealousy or conflict and embedding farming within a moral framework. These practices reveal that urban farming is sustained by an integrated system of economic planning, social collaboration, and spiritual care.

Finally, the study situates Kinshasa's urban agriculture within broader debates on urban informality and spatial negotiation. Women engage tactically with landholders, middlewomen, and even local street actors (Kuluna), negotiating access and protection through semi-formal, trust-based arrangements. The ethic of Toyokani captures these subtle dynamics: it governs who farms where, how produce circulates, and how obligations are balanced. Through this lens, informality is not chaotic but structured by relational agreements that sustain continuity. By linking these practices to theory, Toyokani extends structuration theory and nego-feminism, grounding them in empirical realities and paving the way for the thesis's conceptual contribution.

B. Conceptual Contribution

The central conceptual contribution of this thesis is the development of Toyokani, a vernacular Lingala term literally meaning "we agreed as such", as a lens for understanding women's agency under conditions of constraint. In Lingala, words often encapsulate not only an action but also its intention, temporal dimension, and relational context. Toyokani exemplifies this: it expresses an agreement made in the past, enacted in the present, and guiding future action, simultaneously capturing both activity and purpose. The concept foregrounds the everyday

ethics of negotiation, reciprocity, and relational obligation, grounded in trust, through which women sustain access, continuity, and productivity within the intersectional constraints of class, gender, age, and socio-economic conditions that render urban farming environments unstable. Its contribution lies in reframing how agency is recognised, theorised, and valued. This applies not only in Kinshasa, but in any context where negotiation, rather than autonomy or resistance, defines the conditions of action.

Toyokani makes three key conceptional contributions:

B.1 Extending Nego-feminism Through Local Grounding

Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) articulation of nego-feminism, summarised as "negotiation without confrontation" and the "no-ego" principle, emphasises relational pragmatism and interdependence in African women's strategies. Toyokani does not replicate nego-feminism; it extends it by situating negotiation not merely as tactical adaptation but as an ethical principle of belonging, trust, and reciprocity. Toyokani captures not only an agreement but its enactment over time: a decision made in the past, applied in the present, and guiding future action. In this way, negotiation becomes a mode of managing intersecting constraints, including gender, class, age, and socio-economic precarity, through which women sustain continuity, legitimacy, and presence in urban farming. While nego-feminism foregrounds complementarity and relational ethics, Toyokani offers a location-sensitive articulation. Agreements are embedded in local understandings of labour, reciprocity, and responsibility, co-produced through ongoing relationships. Women in Kinshasa do not often negotiate abstractly; they enact strategies daily, coordinating with partners, kin, market women, landowners, and labourers. Their agency often rests on balancing obligations, ethical trust, and pragmatic adaptation to contextual constraints. The case of Ma Bibi illustrates this dynamic vividly. When her husband attempted to restrict her selling activities, she adapted rather than withdrew. She shifted roles within the sector, moving from maman ndunda (first-hand seller) to maman manoeuvre (second-hand seller), and relied on reciprocal agreements with market women who provided produce on credit, a form of trust and negotiation captured by Toyokani. At home, she tactically adjusted routines to give the appearance of compliance, such as cooling food with a fan to suggest she had not been out. These strategies demonstrate how women employ negotiation and ethical adaptation to sustain productivity within intersecting household and socio-economic constraints. Further, most

women in Kinshasa do not negotiate household roles in abstraction; they co-produce farming strategies with their partners, dividing labour and income in ways that reflect gendered trust, mutual need, and pragmatic adaptation. These arrangements are not necessarily harmonious, but they are sustained through a shared ethical logic captured through Toyokani. This formulation highlights the dynamic and contingent nature of relational agency in the context of Kinshasa, where women navigate cooperation, silence, compromise, and resistance as part of negotiated belonging: not as ideal harmony, but as context-sensitive practice. Through such empirical insights, Toyokani extends nego-feminism by grounding ethics in everyday constraints and recognising agency beyond rigid binaries of resistance and submission. It also sets the stage for further conceptualisation through structuration theory's lens of agency as shaped by enabling and limiting structures.

B.2 Operationalising Structuration Theory

This thesis contributes to debates on agency and structure by operationalising Giddens' (1984) structuration theory in a localised African context. Giddens conceptualises structure and agency as a duality, mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. Toyokani grounds this duality ethnographically, showing how women's agency emerges not in isolation but through relational embeddedness, trust, and reciprocity. It functions both as a response to structural constraints and as a medium through which women subtly navigate, reproduce, or reshape those very constraints.

Women in Kinshasa do not merely endure land scarcity, patriarchal or socio-economic exclusion; they, sometimes, act strategically within these limitations. For instance, when Ma Rosa and Ma Colette were unfairly evicted, they did not sever ties with the landowner. Instead, they maintained courteous interactions, greeting him, keeping lines of communication open, to sustain relational trust as a form of strategic hope. Here, agency is enacted not through confrontation but through pragmatic, ethical negotiation that preserves the possibility of return. Access to resources such as produce during peak harvesting is likewise mediated through Toyokani networks. Deeply embedded women like Ma Muka can obtain produce on credit, while newcomers such as Ma Flo initially face constraints. As one farmer observed, "I have never seen this face before; she only came because of scarcity," signalling how recognition and familiarity regulate access. Ma Flo's repeated presence creates the potential for her to gradually

build trust and establish her own Toyokani agreements, illustrating the fact that networks are dynamic and contingent on relational acknowledgement.

These cases demonstrate that agency is neither fully determined by structures nor wholly autonomous. Instead, it emerges through repeated negotiation, ethical adaptation, and relational presence. Toyokani captures this recursive process, highlighting how the same agreement can simultaneously enable access for some while excluding others, empowering marginalised women while being co-opted by elites. In this way, Toyokani, in Kinshasa's urban agriculture, makes visible the ethical, relational, and temporal dimensions of structuration that Giddens leaves under-theorised. By grounding abstract dualities in vernacular practice, Toyokani provides a lens through which agency is exercised, falters, or is denied, while simultaneously revealing how structures are reproduced, contested, and transformed in everyday African urban life.

B.3 Decolonising the Vocabulary of Agency

Much feminist and development scholarship has described African women's agency through categories such as "resistance", "autonomy", or "empowerment" (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020). While analytically useful, these vocabularies often carry Eurocentric assumptions privileging individualism, confrontation, or formal legal entitlement. They can also feel abstract or distant to the women whose lives they aim to describe. Toyokani offers a decolonial alternative. As a Lingala vernacular concept, it carries both temporal and performative qualities: an agreement made in the past, enacted in the present, and binding future action. To invoke Toyokani is not simply to describe agreement but to perform it, enacting belonging, trust, and reciprocity.

Ethnographic practice illustrates how Toyokani structures agency in ways that differ from dominant vocabularies. Women often described their strategies not in terms of resistance or autonomy but as processes of negotiated belonging. For example, Ma Flo's gradual recognition within farming networks was not achieved through financial capital but through continual presence, reciprocal trust, and obligation. By contrast, Toyokani could also underpin collective resistance: when gang members demanded free produce, Marlene explained that she could rally fellow women to drive them away. Taken together, these cases show that Toyokani sustains

women's presence in farming both through inclusion and through situational resistance, demonstrating its flexibility as an everyday ethic of negotiation.

Broader African philosophies highlight the significance of relational ethics in constituting agency. Ubuntu in Southern Africa – expressed as "I am because we are" (Bhuda and Marumo, 2022) – and Taa Bonyeni in Ghana's Wa region – translated as "we are one people" (Akurugu, 2024) – offer ontological systems in which personhood and legitimacy are constituted through relation. Toyokani resonates with these philosophies but remains distinct. It is not an abstract moral system but an everyday speech act that structures access, continuity, and legitimacy in precarious farming contexts. In this sense, Toyokani decolonises the vocabulary of agency by grounding conceptual analysis in the language and practices through which women themselves articulate action in Kinshasa. It not only provides an analytical lens but is also a performative vernacular practice that captures how agency is navigated in precarious conditions. By reframing agency as negotiated belonging and situational resistance, Toyokani privileges African women's epistemologies and demonstrates how conceptual innovation can emerge directly from ethnographic practice.

In sum, Toyokani does not contradict nego-feminism or structuration theory; it builds on them by grounding abstract principles in ethical-relational practice. It decolonises the vocabulary of agency by revealing how women's agency in Kinshasa unfolds not through formal resistance or systemic transformation but through fragile negotiations shaped by trust, compromise, and social memory. These practices are neither heroic nor oppositional: they are pragmatic responses to precarity, anchored in humanistic world views and attuned to relational continuity. While Toyokani enables inclusion through locally embedded norms, it also surfaces quieter exclusions rooted in the absence of trust or reputational legitimacy. In this way, Toyokani offers a situated lens that bridges relational ethics and structural navigation, reframing African women's agency as an ongoing process of negotiated presence and ethical adaptation under constraint.

The following section develops this conceptual insight into an analytical model that maps how Toyokani operates across three interwoven dimensions in practice.

- *Toyokani Triadic Model: A Grounded Conceptual Contribution*

Building on the empirical insights of this study, Toyokani offers a locally grounded lens for understanding African women's agency, emerging from practice while engaging with theory. To render these lived realities analytically visible, the thesis introduces the Toyokani Triadic Model (Figure 8.1), which illustrates the three interdependent dimensions – relational ethics, relational networks, and adaptive strategies – through which women enact agency in Kinshasa's urban agriculture. By rendering these dimensions visible, the model connects empirical observation with theoretical interpretation, showing that agency is negotiated, relational, and contextually grounded, rather than reducible to formal ownership or individual autonomy.

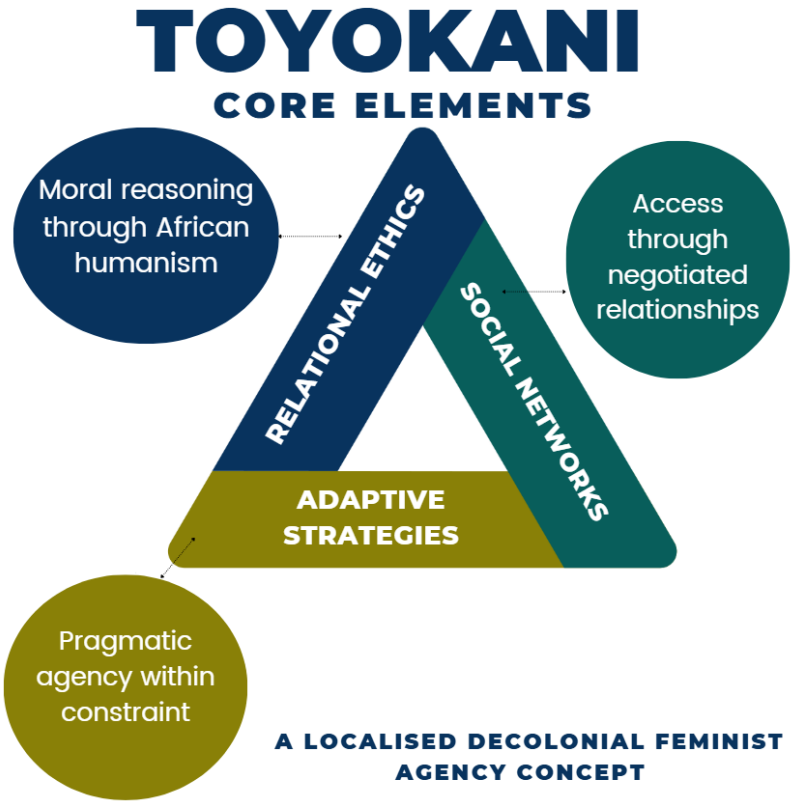

Figure 8.1 The Toyokani Triadic Model

(Source: P. Tshomba, based on fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2024)

Figure 8.1 shows a heuristic representation of the three interdependent dimensions, relational ethics, relational networks, and adaptive strategies, through which women enact agency in Kinshasa's urban agriculture.

- **Relational Ethics: The Philosophical Ground of Resilience**

In Toyokani, ethical action is guided by an African philosophical world view emphasising relationality, harmony, and mutual obligation. Women's decisions are grounded in a moral logic that values collective well-being and negotiated balance over individual confrontation. Expressions such as "Nzambe akosala" ("God will act") reflect resilience and confidence in a moral order that extends beyond formal institutions. Drawing on long-standing humanistic principles like Ubuntu (Makisosila, 2018; Modie-Moroka et al., 2020), Toyokani positions social life as a web of interdependence, where legitimacy, justice, and agency arise through relational accountability. In practice, spirituality informs how women interpret constraints, assess risk, and decide when to compromise or resist. Far from being passive, these beliefs function as ethical anchors in conditions of structural uncertainty, sustaining negotiated agreements and reinforcing social and emotional strength.

- **Relational Networks: The Infrastructure of Access**

Access to land, labour, produce, and markets is rarely governed by formal rules alone. Women navigate these systems through both horizontal and vertical negotiations, with landowners, husbands, fellow farmers, middlewomen, and even antagonistic actors such as gang members or officials. These networks are sustained through trust, reciprocity, strategic manipulation, and informal agreements, forming the social infrastructure that allows women to maintain continuity, resolve disputes, and manage risk under conditions of uncertainty and precarity. These relational arrangements are not idealised; they are purposeful, constantly reconfigured, and deeply embedded in the logic of sustaining livelihoods.

- **Adaptive Strategies: The Practice of Negotiated Agency**

Women's responses to structural constraints are neither static nor uniform. From rotating land plots to alternating between farming and trade, or redefining household roles, women employ pragmatic, adaptive strategies shaped by their positionality and available resources. These strategies often work around formal systems – not to evade them, but to render them negotiable. Toyokani captures this agility: the continuous recalibration of roles, labour, and obligations through locally meaningful agreements. These actions may appear subtle or non-confrontational, yet they are grounded in strategic intentionality, enabling women to maintain

access, build credibility, and assert influence within shifting constraints. At the same time, Toyokani does not always emerge from premeditated planning. Moments of vulnerability, uncertainty, or dispossession can also catalyse relational agreements. In this sense, Toyokani reflects both pragmatism and responsiveness, a mode of navigating complex realities rather than a fixed strategy.

Overall, the Triadic Model serves as an analytical lens for understanding how agency is enacted relationally, ethically, and adaptively through trust under conditions of precarity and negotiation. By distilling the three interdependent dimensions of Toyokani – relational ethics, relational networks, and adaptive strategies – the model clarifies how women navigate insecurity and remain present and active in Kinshasa's urban agriculture sector. While grounded in these specific practices, Toyokani, as a field-derived concept, reorients how agency is understood in urban African contexts more broadly. It offers conceptual tools for analysing how women sustain visibility and continuity within fragile systems of governance. Its significance lies not in prescribing a universal model but in foregrounding the locally meaningful, morally negotiated practices through which agency is enacted under constraint.

C. Methodological Contributions

This thesis makes methodological contributions by demonstrating how women's agency can shape not only the subject of study but also the process of research itself. Working within a decolonial feminist ethnographic framework, I approached the field with a commitment to privileging women's voices and categories, rather than imposing external analytical frameworks. The guiding principle was to learn agency from the ground up, on women's terms, through their own words, rhythms, and priorities.

This orientation transformed fieldwork into a collaborative process in which women determined when, how, and what knowledge could be shared. Rather than applying predesigned checklists, I combined participant observation, interviews, and unstructured conversations that unfolded as life stories. Sometimes participants chose to speak at length, sometimes they preferred silence while working, and sometimes unexpected tools emerged, such as a farmer-led map that became a reference point in group discussions. Remaining open to unexpected participants and dynamics – grounded in feminist ethnographic traditions that emphasise the

value of emergent knowledge (Davids and Willemse, 2014; Berg, 2023) rather than restricting engagement to pre-selected categories enabled the identification of previously overlooked actors, such as middlewomen, whose practices sustain urban agriculture in ways a more rigid design might have missed. These methods demonstrate that agency was not only the focus of study but also shaped the methodology itself, with participants determining what counted as knowledge and how it could be generated.

Linguistic embeddedness was central to this study, as research was conducted in Lingala rather than mediated through French or English. Using the vernacular broke down barriers, established trust, and positioned me as someone who could genuinely belong within participants' worlds. In the local context, French often carries associations of intellectual elitism and could have created distance; Lingala, by contrast, opened space for intimacy, recognition, and mutual understanding. Crucially, attending to language enabled the emergence of Toyokani as a field-derived concept. Participants repeatedly invoked this term to describe agreements with landlords, household arrangements, or informal permissions. For example, when I asked middlewomen across different groups how they were able to harvest vegetables in the absence of the farmer or owner, their responses were almost always some variation of "Toyokani boye…" – "we agreed as such" – followed by specific details, such as "I already paid the farmer, and we agreed I could come harvest whenever I could". These agreements were not necessarily recent; they could have been made hours or even weeks earlier and were often validated by neighbouring farmers acting as informal gatekeepers. Even when participants did not explicitly use the term Toyokani, their descriptions of negotiated arrangements reflected its underlying logic, revealing it as a relational ethic embedded in everyday practice. The recurrence of this pattern across multiple participants highlighted that Toyokani was not an isolated explanation but a shared, socially grounded practice, showing how attentiveness to vernacular speech and recurring field observations allowed the concept to emerge organically from the field. This illustrates how methodological choices, such as linguistic embeddedness and openness to participants' frames of meaning, can generate conceptual insights. In this way, observing Toyokani functioned as both a methodological and analytical practice, demonstrating that participants themselves shaped what counted as knowledge.

My positionality added further complexity. As a local but not from the study area, and as someone marked by time abroad, I occupied an in-between position, visible as both insider and outsider. Building trust required humility, attentiveness, and a refusal to perform false belonging. Reciprocity and care became practical methodological principles, sometimes enacted through culturally appropriate gestures (buying produce at fair prices, paying a taxi fare for an elder, discreetly sponsoring a day's labour) and sometimes through restraint (withholding advocacy when it might endanger continuity for participants). These choices show that reciprocity in decolonial feminist research is not a general ethic but a situated practice that must be continually negotiated. The affective dimension of fieldwork was inseparable from its methodological and ethical commitments. Walking long distances in the heat, enduring exhaustion, and witnessing officials dismiss women's labour as "backward" revealed the embodied and emotional costs of engaging across elite and local worlds. Yet moments of laughter, solidarity, and women's blessings reframed these hardships as shared experience. Attending to both women's practices and my own embodied responses underscores the fact that decolonial feminist methodology is simultaneously ethical, affective, and relational, recognising emotion, presence, and lived realities, not just technical skill, as central to knowledge production

Methodologically, this study contributes to African feminist and decolonial scholarship by showing how ethnography can move beyond extracting data to co-constructing conceptual insights with participants. It challenges dominant approaches that impose external categories – such as "informality" or "survival" – that often obscure local meanings, and instead demonstrates the value of building theory from within African epistemologies. Its novelty lies in extending decolonial feminist ethnography to urban agriculture in African cities, a field where women are too often treated as passive subjects rather than active co-producers of knowledge. By foregrounding relationality, openness, and co-construction, this study offers a methodological template for contexts where researchers seek to de-centre external categories and work with the epistemologies of local non-elites. Ultimately, it shows that ethnography grounded in feminist and decolonial commitments can both illuminate lived realities and generate new concepts that reshape scholarly and practical understandings.

As Mama, (2011)reminds us, "We need to develop modes of knowing that emerge from our own histories and social realities, rather than continue to rely on borrowed lenses". Embracing

this stance, the study makes three interconnected contributions, empirical, theoretical, and methodological, advancing understanding of African women's agency under conditions of constraint, while demonstrating how rigorous scholarship can emerge through embedded, co-produced, and contextually situated practice. Empirically, it shows how women actively navigate and shape access to land, labour, and livelihoods, revealing the relational, negotiated, and contextually grounded character of their agency. Theoretically, by centring local concepts such as Toyokani, it demonstrates how the abstract frameworks of structuration theory and nego-feminism can be meaningfully anchored in everyday realities, generating insights that are both conceptually rich and contextually grounded. Methodologically, the study shows how women's voices can guide the research process, enabling knowledge to be co-produced relationally, linguistically, and ethically. By remaining open to unexpected participants, privileging vernacular language, and attending to ethical and relational dynamics, it illustrates how concepts can emerge organically from practice, Toyokani being a clear example.

Taken together, these contributions underscore the value of approaches that move beyond extractive research towards the co-construction of knowledge. African women's agricultural practices emerge not only as sites of economic and social activity but also as arenas of conceptual innovation, where agency is enacted, theorised, and methodologically recognised. By demonstrating how everyday practices, local concepts, and relational dynamics can inform theory and research design, this thesis offers insights that are context-sensitive, analytically robust, and transferable to other settings where scholars seek to engage with the epistemologies of local actors. In doing so, it affirms that understanding African women's agency requires attention not only to what they do but also to how they define, negotiate, and communicate their world.

8.4 Practical and Societal Implications

The findings of this study extend beyond descriptive accounts of women's everyday practices in Kinshasa to raise important scholarly questions about how urban agriculture, gender, and women's agency are conceptualised and theorised. They demonstrate that women's agency in peri-urban agriculture is enacted less through formal ownership or externally defined measures of success and more through negotiated access to land, collective infrastructures, and culturally embedded practices. In this way, the study answers its research questions by showing how

women sustain presence, productivity, and legitimacy under conditions of structural constraint and state fragility.

Even when women hold formal titles, customary claims, or inherited rights, sustained land access depends on relational trust, ongoing negotiation, and adaptive strategies.(Peters, 2004; Wily, 2006; Lund, 2008; Fenske, 2011; Berry, 2023). Practices that scholarship often dismisses as informal, insecure, or marginal can, in fact, be deliberate and functional. The analytical lens of Toyokani illuminates how these relational agreements enable women to maintain continuity on the land, demonstrating that agency in urban agriculture is both negotiated and contextually grounded. These arrangements, however, can also be fragile and can leave women vulnerable to conflict, displacement, or shifts in local power, and underscore the need for ethically informed, context-sensitive engagement in both research and development practice.

Collective strategies further illustrate the relational nature of women's agency. Savings groups, labour-sharing arrangements, and reciprocal care networks constitute infrastructural forms of resilience that extend beyond individual households (Mbiba, 2000; Hovorka et al., 2009; Prain and Lee-Smith, 2010). These practices reveal that agency is distributed and co-produced, challenging scholarly assumptions that isolate women's actions from communal and relational frameworks. Yet these networks are not universally accessible: intersectional factors such as class, age, and marital status mediate inclusion, demonstrating that collective strategies can both empower and inadvertently exclude. Recognition of these dynamics is essential for researchers, educators, and practitioners who seek to support women's livelihoods without reproducing inequalities (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003, 2009; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Cultural and spiritual dimensions of farming constitute another critical component of women's agency. Rituals, blessings, and moral economies are embedded in everyday practices, guiding decision-making and conferring social legitimacy and moral authority (Rocheleau et al., 1996; De Boeck and Plissart, 2004; Simone, 2004). These dimensions are often overlooked in both academic and development literature, which tends to prioritise efficiency or productivity over meaning-making. This study situates cultural and spiritual practices at the heart of livelihood strategies, demonstrating that urban agriculture in Kinshasa is not merely instrumental but deeply social, ethical, and future-oriented. Recognising these practices encourages both

scholars and practitioners to engage with women's knowledge systems on their own terms, fostering approaches that amplify rather than replace local frameworks.

Together, these insights have implications for scholarship, development practice, and institutional engagement. By contesting dominant framings that portray urban farming as residual, crisis-driven, or a fallback livelihood – concepts captured in ideas of débrouillardise (Mianda, 1996; Suka, 2022; Trefon, 2004) – this study demonstrates that women's participation can be deliberate, knowledge-intensive, and oriented towards long-term continuity. It extends African feminist scholarship on land and livelihood agency (Agarwal, 2003; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003), provides empirical grounding for frameworks such as nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) and structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), and highlights the capacity of feminist political ecology to account for cultural and spiritual dimensions of urban farming (Rocheleau et al., 1996) . Methodologically, it illustrates how decolonial feminist ethnography (Manning, 2022) enables concepts such as Toyokani to emerge from women's own epistemologies, reshaping the categories through which agency is understood. These insights also suggest that scholarship on African women's livelihoods can benefit from being conducted with a decolonial mind. Approaching research in this way does not mean abandoning comparative or theoretical ambition, but it does require remaining open to concepts and categories that emerge from women's lived practices. As this study has shown, agency can be theorised through vernacular notions such as Toyokani, which capture relational and cultural dimensions often overlooked by externally imposed frameworks. A decolonial orientation can therefore enable more accurate, accountable, and contextually meaningful analysis of women's lives, while advancing feminist and urban studies more broadly.

Practically, these findings encourage development actors, community organisations, and educational institutions to design interventions aligned with local negotiation and collective strategies. Supporting tontines, labour-sharing networks, or culturally grounded training programmes can reinforce women's resilience without imposing externally defined measures of security, productivity, or success. Similarly, researchers are called to adopt co-constructive, relational methodologies that foreground vernacular concepts and Indigenous epistemologies, generating theory from practice rather than imposing preconceived frameworks. Embedding such approaches in curricula, research training, and programme design enhances accountability, analytical rigour, relevance, and the sustainability of interventions. Ultimately,

this study demonstrates that women's practices in peri-urban agriculture are often creative, relational, and future-oriented acts that generate resilience, social legitimacy, and possibility. Engaging with these practices on their own terms, acknowledging relationality, collective infrastructures, and cultural-spiritual dimensions, offers a pathway for more ethical, context-sensitive, and equitable partnerships between female farmers, scholars, and development actors alike, while advancing theoretical and methodological debates in African feminist and urban studies.

8.5 Limitations of the Study

This study was geographically confined to peri-urban Ndjili Kilambu, a locality shaped by migration, urban expansion, land commodification, and rapid urbanisation (Trefon, 2004; Muzingu, 2009). This focus allowed for rich, contextualised insights into women's experiences, consistent with the depth-oriented logic of case study research, which can generate robust theoretical understanding even when geographical scope is limited (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Nevertheless, the findings cannot be generalised to all of Kinshasa, as peri-urban, urban, and fully urbanised land dynamics are qualitatively distinct. Linguistic and cultural diversity further limits transferability: Lingala, the primary language of this study, is only one of many Congolese languages, and meanings or practices may not fully translate to other regional or linguistic contexts. Accordingly, the study solely offers transferable insights that illuminate patterns of women's agency in [peri] urban agriculture, rather than universal claims.

A key limitation is the deliberate focus on female farmers and middlewomen (vegetable sellers), which necessarily excludes other women actors – such as helpers, informal labourers, and suppliers of inputs like fertilisers or seeds – who also play important roles within the urban agriculture value chain. While the experiences of these actors were incorporated indirectly when they illuminated the practices of farmers and middlewomen, fully including other women participants would have expanded the scope beyond manageable bounds and required a separate, dedicated study. Similarly, although men, customary authorities, and state officials were interviewed, their accounts were interpreted primarily in relation to women's narratives and the situated contexts that shape women's agency. This analytical orientation underscores the relational nature of gendered experiences, wherein women's strategies cannot be fully disentangled from male actors or governance structures (Nnaemeka, 2004). Future research

could adopt multi-actor approaches to capture the interplay of social, institutional, and gendered forces more comprehensively.

The study employed a feminist, decolonial, and reflexive ethnographic approach (Manning, 2022), prioritising participants' voices through life histories, dialogue, and observation. Recruitment relied on spontaneous encounters and snowballing, allowing trust to develop organically rather than imposing predetermined sampling quotas. While this strategy produced rich, context-specific insights, it limited the composition of the sample, which predominantly comprised women in their fifties. Consequently, younger voices and intergenerational perspectives were underrepresented, potentially reflecting the timing of fieldwork and the challenges of engaging women balancing childcare or schooling responsibilities (Kelly, 2022). Practical constraints, including safety concerns, limited time, and restricted mobility, further shaped the data collection. For instance, while middlewomen's practices were observed in the fields, accompanying them to urban markets was not feasible due to early-travel risks and insecure routes; thus, insights into market-based negotiation strategies rely primarily on participants' accounts rather than direct observation.

Discussions around land tenure were particularly delicate, and revisiting certain narratives posed potential risks, as participants could misinterpret my motives as politically driven, creating mistrust. The study was also temporally bounded: although both planting and harvesting seasons were observed, longer-term processes, such as cassava production cycles or displacement linked to urban construction – could not be followed. While these long-term dynamics are central to women's livelihoods, the study provides a detailed, situated account of strategies within the shorter observed period, highlighting the value of longitudinal investigation for deeper understanding of women's agency over time (Brockington & Noe, 2021). Spirituality emerged as a recurring theme in participants' accounts, connected to land struggles and strategies of resilience. While the study acknowledged these dimensions, their complex role lies beyond the analytical focus of this research. As an insider, I recognised and understood practices such as prayer, blessings, and sharing as integral to moral and economic relations, yet my familiarity also limited the depth of analysis: I took certain nuances for granted or did not fully interrogate them. An outsider perspective might have highlighted additional layers, suggesting that future research could more systematically explore spirituality and moral economies in urban agriculture.

Positionality further shaped the insights gathered. Fluent in Lingala and French, I could build trust and access participants' experiences in ways that would have been difficult for an outsider. At times, participants treated me "as a daughter", fostering intimacy but potentially influencing disclosures on sensitive topics such as land, income, or market negotiations (Robertson, 2023). Interpretation remained bounded by my positionality and ethical judgement, highlighting how knowledge production in feminist ethnography is both situated and relational (Manning, 2016; Beoku-Betts, 1994).

In conclusion, these limitations indicate that the study provides a situated, contextually grounded account of women's strategies in Ndjili Kilambu, rather than a universal explanation of urban agriculture in Kinshasa. The research prioritised depth, relational insight, and participants' voices over breadth or statistical representativeness. Recognising these boundaries situates the findings within their local and temporal context, while also highlighting opportunities for future research.

8.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could adopt multi-actor approaches that include men, land chiefs, state officials, and other women actors, such as helpers or input suppliers, to capture the broader governance and social dynamics of urban agriculture. Longitudinal and intergenerational studies, following women's farming trajectories over multiple seasons or years and incorporating younger and older generations, would illuminate how strategies and networks evolve over time and across life stages. Comparative research across urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts in the DRC or cities in other African countries could identify which patterns of women's agency are context-specific and which may be transferable. More in-depth attention to spiritual practices and moral economies would enhance understanding of how beliefs, rituals, and blessings shape land access, legitimacy, and economic decision-making. Integrating mixed methods, triangulating life histories with ethnographic mapping, archival records, and structured observation, could further validate and enrich narrative data.

Finally, future research could explore the transferability of the logic of Toyokani, as observed in Ndjili Kilambu, to other contexts. Scholars might examine how locally grounded practices of agreement, reciprocity, and adaptive negotiation are expressed and recognised in linguistic

or semantic forms. Such work could generate insights into locally meaningful expressions of women's agency, grounded in language and relational logics that are accessible and recognisable to participants

8.7 Reflexive Journey

Beyond its conceptual and methodological contributions, this thesis has also been shaped by the lived realities of time, distance, and return: realities that have deepened rather than diminished the relevance of the stories it tells. Between the completion of data collection in May 2023 and the writing of this thesis in 2025, I had to take intermittent time away from my PhD due to health challenges and difficult personal circumstances. This created a gap between fieldwork and write-up that, at times, was deeply frustrating, particularly given the rapidly evolving nature of the research context. In Kinshasa, entire landscapes can transform within months: a plot returned to women in May could be overtaken by housing construction by November. Yet despite these interruptions, I remained under the guidance of the same supervisory team and committed to completing this work. The time away did not weaken my engagement with the data; if anything, it deepened it. With distance came sharper insight into the tensions I had witnessed, and how urban farming in Kinshasa is at once precarious and resilient. The land loss I documented in 2023 has since taken on new meaning. Lemba Imbu, for example, is now marked for state-led demolition. This shift is not only material but also symbolic: land that once seemed permanently lost can be reclaimed, and development that appears irreversible can be undone. Though I was no longer in the field to document these most recent changes, they underscore the continued relevance of the stories gathered. These are not static accounts of the past but living testimonies of how women navigate an ever-shifting terrain. This thesis is grounded in a commitment to honouring those stories and the agency of the women whose persistence continues to shape Kinshasa's contested agricultural future. I hope that this work contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to a broader recognition of urban farming's significance, and women's place within it, as Kinshasa's future continues to unfold.

8.8 Conclusion

This thesis examined how women in Kinshasa's urban farming sector navigate land access and sustain their presence within precarious and shifting conditions. It demonstrates that women's agency is not reducible to survival but is enacted through negotiation, relational engagement, and strategic presence. Central to this analysis is the concept of Toyokani, a locally grounded lens bridging nego-feminism, with its focus on negotiation and relational accountability, and structuration theory, which highlights the interplay between constraint and agency. Toyokani illuminates how women navigate structural limits through situated acts of resourcefulness, relational manoeuvring, and forward-looking adaptation. By grounding this concept in women's lived experiences, the thesis contributes to African feminist thought and shows how locally rooted ideas can extend and nuance broader theoretical debates.

A key empirical insight is the pivotal role of middlewomen: intermediaries who work alongside female farmers to secure produce, manage market access, and navigate social and economic networks. These actors were not initially the focus of the research, but their interactions emerged as central to understanding how urban agriculture is sustained. Middlewomen facilitate market access and create interdependencies that extend the reach and stability of women's agricultural work. Recognising their role deepens understanding of agency as relational and collective, highlighting the networks underpinning everyday farming practices.

Methodologically, the thesis demonstrates the value of a decolonial feminist ethnography attentive to women's voices, silences, and everyday practices. By privileging participant-led narratives, relational engagement, and local epistemologies, the study captured forms of agency that might remain invisible in externally imposed frameworks. Life history interviews, dialogues, and participant observation revealed not only explicit strategies of negotiation but also the subtle, everyday acts through which women sustain presence and legitimacy. Beyond techniques, this stance foregrounded my ethical responsibility to engage collaboratively, reflexively, and accountably, underscoring that understanding agency requires attention not only to what people do, but also to how they represent, narrate, and make meaning of their actions.

Although grounded in peri-urban Kinshasa, the study offers insights with broader relevance for African feminist thought, urban agriculture, and knowledge-making. By framing women's practices through Toyokani, it demonstrates how locally generated concepts can enrich theory when recognised on their own terms. The findings challenge portrayals of African women's farming as merely survivalist, highlighting it instead as a domain of creativity, social organisation, and future-building. The research opens avenues for further study, including comparative inquiries across urban, peri-urban, and rural spaces, and analyses of how middlewomen, male actors, and institutions intersect with female farmers' strategies. While focused on Ndjili Kilambu, these insights provide a lens for understanding how agency is enacted in constrained and dynamic contexts elsewhere.

At stake is more than the story of women in Kinshasa's urban farming sector. This thesis shows that agency is exercised not only in overt acts of resistance but also in quieter practices of negotiation, relational weaving, and sustaining presence within constraint. Naming this practice as Toyokani affirms that analytical insight can emerge from women's everyday lives, enriching feminist and sociological debates without claiming universality. By foregrounding these practices, the study illustrates that knowledge-making is most powerful when collaborative, accountable, and grounded in lived realities. In this way, the experiences of women and middlewomen in Kinshasa's urban farming sector do more than sustain livelihoods. They sustain the possibility of imagining theory and practice otherwise.

Figure 8.2 Female farmer (Ma Nseka) and vegetable seller Ma Chantal

(Source: Photo by P. Tshomba, fieldwork in Kinshasa, 2023)

Illustrative photograph showing Ma Nseka (left) posing with her hoe to represent her farming work, and Ma Chantal (right) posing with her bag of vegetables after purchasing them from the field, on her way home to prepare them for sale. Together, they represent the key actors discussed throughout this thesis.

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