Marginalization of Women’s Role in Sub-Saharan Africa towards Crop Production: A Review

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Sub-Saharan African women in crop production with particular reference to the North West Region of Cameroon. While Sub-Saharan African women contribute a significant amount of their time in weeding, harvesting, animal husbandry, cleaning, fetching water, baking, cooking, sewing and childrearing, they have not received adequate recognition for the intensive time spent on their dual roles as producers and reproducers. Crop production remains the major source of food for most Sub-Saharan African countries. The bulk of the production processes are carried out by women, but they have the least access and use of those resources that lead to the final output. The underestimation of women’s contributions to crop production makes them invisible to planners and policymakers. This makes it difficult to advocate appropriate policies and hence programs that recognize and compensate women based on their level of contribution to the growth of the national economy. There is need to actively educate Sub-Saharan African rural women and involve them in agricultural decision making processes. Discussions with rural women farmers on the problems they face in arable farming with their inclusion in the design and implementation of programs and possible solution is paramount.

Keywords: Women, sub-Saharan African, crop production

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture represents one of the major economic developments in Sub-Saharan African Countries. Agriculture constitutes the main source of livelihood and important sources of employment for most people in the region (Mies, 1986). It provides food to both the industrial and service sectors (IITA, 1993). A United Nations document states that while women represent half of the world’s population and perform nearly 66 per cent of all working hours but receive only one tenth of the income generated and own less than one percent of the property (Staudt, 1991). Rural women in Cameroon spend most of their time daily on crop production activities (cultivating, harvesting, weeding, and processing) and domestic tasks (home improvement, and child rearing) with little rest or recreation (Logo and Bikie, 2003). It is estimated that women in Africa spend about 15-18 hours a day performing these essential chores for the livelihood of the farming household (Anunobi, 2003). In all regions of the world, poverty and household food insecurity are more prevalent and severe in rural than urban areas (Dixon et al., 2001). This may be because food insecurity is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Poor rural households lack the purchasing power to acquire adequate food. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, a vast majority (80 percent) of the population live in rural areas, and 70 percent of this rural population is dependent for a large part of their livelihood on food production through farming or livestock (PELUM,
Women and agricultural production

In almost all agrarian societies, women perform essential economic functions and are heavily involved in agricultural food production activities (Bradley, 1989). Boserup (1970) in an analysis on Woman’s role in Economic Development and the FAO (1994) alluded to the vital women’s role in food production in many countries in Africa. Contrastingly, in more developed countries, such as the United States, women’s role in agricultural and related activities has diminished significantly. This may be attributed to female movement into wage employment. In Australia, agricultural production is presented as a male occupation, and when women are given any recognition, they are depicted as ‘helpers’, wives, mothers or daughters of the principal operator (Alston, 1995). Yngstrom (2002) observed that women’s actions are considered as secondary or unimportant to changes in landholding systems. There is a need to look at agricultural policies as they can influence rural women participation in small-scale arable farming.

Male Dominance

Eighty percent of the Sub-Saharan African population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture and available natural resources (FAO, 2005; PELUM, 2005). Women are producers of food crops and men are producers of cash crops (Boserup, 1989). Sachs (1996) differentiated between women’s crops and men’s crops. She explained that crops are associated with the gender that control the management and disposal of the crop rather than with those individuals who actually work on the crop. Boserup (1989) and Manuhi (1998) agree with Sachs’s argument that men produce cash crops, and in turn reap the income from sales, but women provide large amounts of family labour. Despite gender association with the type of crops produced, there is no gender separation in terms of manpower.

Saito (1994) in assessing the time spent on agricultural production activities concluded that women work more hours than men. The World Bank (1996) aggregate raw data shows that Sub-Saharan African women provide about 90 percent of the labour for processing food crops and providing household water and firewood. They also carry out 80 percent of the agricultural produce transportation activities from the farms to the village as well as storing food. In addition, they perform 90 percent of the work in hoeing and weeding; and 60 percent of the work in harvesting and marketing.

In Uganda, Nabulo et al (2004) observed that women contribute to all household expenses including those reviewed traditionally as male responsibilities. Similarly, in Nigeria, Akinsanmi (2005) observed that no man shouldered all or more than half of the financial responsibilities at home. However, despite the importance of women’s economic contribution to the household unit, male authority and household requirements dictate their activities.

Notwithstanding Sub-Saharan African women’s importance in agricultural production activities, Blumberg (1989) noted that agricultural projects typically bypass or undercut them in the allocation of extension services, inputs (fertilizers, seeds etc.) and credit. The non-consideration of women in agricultural development programs may be attributed to the fact that they are perceived as dependents, as supplementary caretakers of homes and children, and as service providers. Ferguson (1990) argues that the failure of programs to provide aid to women are as a result of their tendency to institutionalize in their programs that men are the breadwinners while women are the keepers of the home. These attributes conceal the extent of women’s contributions to the household and community at large. Waring (1995) pointed out that the perception of women as non-agricultural producers keeps them invisible to the agricultural policy planners. This Mollel and Mtenga (2000) point to the fact that development planners only look at work in the modern cash sector of the economy.

According to Bradley (1989) women’s labour is hard, backbreaking, time consuming and almost all done by hand, using traditional tools and methods. Gerd et al (1989) refer to a situation of higher labour inputs where a new technology like tractor clearing is introduced. They explain that tractor clearing of land usually means more labour in terms of weeding and harvesting. They further refer to a study in Malawi where women labour inputs were greater in sprayed fields than unsprayed fields as weeding and harvesting are the greatest labour bottlenecks.

Anunobi (2003) noted that the mechanization of agriculture has reduced the work traditionally done by men but increased the work performed by women without any consequential increase in their income. This is because weeding and harvesting which are the greatest labour bottlenecks are carried out by women. In addition, Mehra (1991) asserted that most of the time, the obligations of women are more strictly enforced, and when there is conflict in labour demands, men’s request for women’s labour takes precedence.

Women’s Devaluation

The devaluation of women and their contributions to agriculture has been a constant historical feature. Most published statistics on women’s involvement in agricultural labour force are misleading because they
under report women's activities in the area of food production (Alston, 1995). Waring (1995) observed that, without female agricultural production contribution, most rural households would cease to be economically viable. This is because small-scale farmers use mostly local resources and thus face local constraints, which are deeply affected by global economic change. No society provides women equal status as men and rural women's work burden increases with economic and social changes making women experience conflicts of time, energy and resources, and even cultural and institutional barriers (Giele, 1977; Gerd et al, 1989).

According to Stephens (1995), agricultural research is notoriously biased in favour of male farming, in cash crops, agro-industry, export commodities and mechanization. For example, the rich and the powerful enjoy most of the benefits of development, such as agricultural extension services, technology and access to credit (Rwelamira, 1999). Technical training and extension programs are almost exclusively targeted at men thereby denying women opportunities to improve their skills, and access to important channels of communication and state sponsored support services. Agricultural research programs have rarely taken into account rural women's knowledge of, and opinion on, crop varieties and planting systems (FAO, 1997).

Rural women are rarely considered as clients for agricultural research and development programs or users of improved technology (FAO, 1997). Programs for development activities often do not take into consideration the time women spend on household chores (Otsyina and Rosenberg, 1999). Despite the fact that women produce 80-90 percent of food grown for domestic consumption, most agricultural extension services are directed at programmes for men (Truitt, 1999). Policy makers give too little attention to women farmers, many development policies and programs are directed at programmes for men (Truitt, 1999). Policy makers give too little attention to women such as where to cultivate and what to plant. Jacobs (1992) held that men are legally entitled to the payment of bride wealth and thus retain all rights to property and children upon divorce. However, in Cameroon as in Zimbabwe and Burkina Faso, women have the legal right to own land and trees, but, in practice, men control nearly all the property. Recent privatization measures have helped to erode the secure usufruct rights women had on land under traditional laws (Goheen, 1991).

In most of Sub-Saharan Africa, widowed and divorced women have virtually no tenure or inheritance rights with which to ensure food security for themselves or their children. Jacobs (1992) held that men are legally entitled to the payment of bride wealth and thus retain all rights to property and children upon divorce. However, in Cameroon as in Zimbabwe and Burkina Faso, women have the legal right to own land and trees, but, in practice, men control nearly all the property. Recent privatization measures have helped to erode the secure usufruct rights women had on land under traditional laws (Goheen, 1991).

In Cameroon like in other Sub-Saharan African countries, women and men labour on export crops such as coffee. However, women, who grow virtually all the food consumed locally, have to beg for land to cultivate food crops (Gladwin, 1991; Goheen, 1991). This is because as observed by Feder and Noronha (1987), Cameroon recognizes different types of tenure such as individual, group, indigenous systems and public lands. Some Cameroon customs and traditions are generally more rigid with regard to women (Logo and Bike, 2003). Women are therefore marginalized for the benefit of men, who remain the decision-makers, even over matters directly concerning women such as where to cultivate and what to plant.

According to Sachs (1996), women do the majority of work in agriculture, but elder men own the land, control
women's labour, and make agricultural decisions in patriarchal social systems. Men appropriate the best land for their cash crops, while women must grow food crops on small sized, poorer land or land at a greater distance from the village (Boserup, 1989 and Saito, 1994).

**Rural Women and Agricultural Input**

Ineffective agricultural input limits economic food production particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (IITA, 1993). According to Saito (1994) the potential agricultural output is reduced owing to women's limited access to agricultural inputs and support services. According to Begum (2003) biotechnological inventions introduced to improve the agricultural economies of developing countries, made Sub-Saharan African farmers dependent as it ignored the local knowledge of the people which contributes to the destruction of biodiversity.

Plant breeders put emphasis on qualities that bear little relation to poor farmers' need. In selecting seeds, the plant breeders are concerned with marketing quality and quantities of grain, while rural Sub-Saharan African women select seeds based on their cross crop effects, stability, multiple uses, and maturation dates (Lipton and Longhurst, 1989). Furthermore, improved seeds cannot be preserved using indigenous knowledge and high inputs of fertilizers and pesticides are required for the farming of high yielding varieties (Begum, 2003; Sachs, 1996).

**Rural Women and Agricultural Technology**

There is no agricultural technology that is gender neutral. Whether it is a hand tool, a machine, a storage bin, or biotechnology, all carry different implications for men and women (Stephens, 1995). Alistair (1994) argued that although gender makes a difference, women's views and activities are as important as men's and as relevant to the design of improved technologies. The goal of agricultural research and extension he noted is to provide technologies that increase food surpluses and improve farm household wellbeing. Thus, a key issue is to respect the knowledge of traditional communities.

Agricultural technology packages often require increased labour input (Kumar, 1987) and, in fact, technological innovations increase women's burden. Current agricultural development hurts women as it cuts women off from access to arable land, creates more work for them to do, and increases their dependency on men as technologies introduced tend to enhance men's work (Otsyina and Rosenberg, 1999). Afonja (1986) researched on sexual division of labour among the Yoruba showing that male control of technology and capital ensures the predominance of men over women. There is an array of technologies and scientific discoveries, which could bring about economic growth and rural development in poor countries. Women are ignored in technological development application packages. Rural women are not involved in selecting agricultural research topics, and therefore the research agenda does not focus on technologies that are suitable for small farmers and labourers or on food crops such as cassava (FAO, 1996). According to Gladwin (1991) extension agents and development officers in Salim district, Malawi, started a groundnut seed multiplication project with male household heads instead of their wives, even though groundnuts are clearly women's crop in central Malawi.

**Rural women and agricultural extension information and/ or services**

Poor research-extension farmer linkages reduce the effectiveness of technology transfer and increases in agricultural productivity reside in research and extension efforts (IITA, 1993). Agricultural extension is essential for promoting increased production by small-scale producer through adopting improved agronomic practices (Goldman and Holdsworth, 1990). Extension personnel have a crucial role in furthering the access of the rural poor, especially women, to productive resources and new technologies. They have the responsibility of linking them to research and planning institutions. Extension personnel tend to be male, poorly paid, and inadequately trained to provide technical help in a gender sensitive manner (Truitt, 1999).

Manuh (1998) stated that most resources and technical assistance (improved seeds and tools) have been channelled to men who grow export crops. Additionally, Nindi (1986; Truitt, 1999) pointed out that male technicians and extension agents usually communicated with men and thus tended to provide information, technology and credit to men neglecting women, in spite of the demonstrated contribution of women to agriculture. Generally, women's access to credit are limited by the perception that they produce crops for subsistence, and not for the market, by less secure land tenure and by provision of credit through organizations that are geared toward men (Doss, 1999). When women are formally eligible for loans, collateral requirements favouring men often exclude them. Alistair (1994) noted that despite the fact that gender is universally one of the key ways in which societies and cultures demarcate rights and responsibilities, the different roles of women and men in agricultural production frequently have been ignored in research and extension activities. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa in 1985, there were 1800 women farmers...
per female extension agent, as against only 461 male farmers per male extension agent (IFAD, 1986).

Appraisal of the Marginalization of Women’s role in Sub Sahara Africa

This paper has highlighted the diversely recorded dynamic but unappreciated role of women in agricultural crop production in Sub-Saharan African society. It is clear from this review that besides their procreative role and intensive care of the family, the Sub-Saharan African rural women produce most of the staple food. A large proportion is for home consumption and reasonable quantities are sold for family monetary income. This and other attendant women’s agricultural activities such as clearing, hoeing, weeding, storing of harvested farm produce, and processing and transforming of many harvested produce contribute to the economic growth of the rural farm families in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In spite of the role played by women in rural agriculture, they have been marginalized and neglected in important policy considerations in many Sub-Saharan African countries. Women are not given the same opportunities and facilities for agricultural crop production activities as their male counterparts. The Sub-Saharan African rural women have very little or no access to the major agricultural production inputs, no access to agricultural production credit facilities, and many government agricultural production and resource policies, do not include women as beneficiaries or as participants in policy formulations.

In reality, conventional agricultural development strategies have marginalized women farmers. Instead of increasing the productivity of food crops and domestic food production, which is controlled by women, governments and international agencies have promoted export crops, which are generally controlled by men. Given the crucial contributions of women to food production and provision in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, household and national food security will only be achieved when the roles, responsibilities and needs of women farmers in the region are fully addressed at all levels.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore suggested to reduce Sub-Saharan African women’s marginalization in agriculture. Firstly, there is a major need to make the role and contribution of women in agricultural crop production visible and support rural women’s rights to land and productive resources. This can be achieved by actively educating Sub-Saharan African rural women and involving them in the agricultural decision making processes. Secondly, agricultural research must be directed to food crops for which women are responsible and to technologies to improve women’s productivity and alleviate their household and agricultural labour. To achieve this, discussions with rural women farmers on the problems they face in arable farming, their inclusion in the design and implementation of programs and possible solutions is paramount. Agricultural extension workers assume that each family has a single male decision maker; that economic benefits are shared equally with the household, and that only products marketed through official channels need to be studied. Field research has shown that the normative views of family structure, income distribution, and farm output need to be reconsidered. Agricultural extension officers and agents should disseminate agricultural information to individuals and not to families.

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