

WOMEN AND AGRICULTURE IN RURAL KENYA: ROLE IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Women play a very significant role in agricultural production in Kenya. However, they are accorded little attention. The lack of inadequate information on the level of women participation in agricultural production has helped to underestimate their importance in agricultural production and hence led to their neglect in sector development. This paper sought to examine the role of women in Agricultural production in Kenya to give them an impetus upon which they can voice their concern in agricultural related issues. To improve women visibility in agricultural production, the author suggests that women contribution to agricultural production should be understood based on their contribution to food security in household and community rather than their contribution to commercialised agriculture which is dominated by men. With this, the author hopes to persuade policymakers to re-examine their perception of rural women involved in agricultural production for prompt policy action.

KEYWORDS

Women farmers, rural development, Agricultural Production, food security.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Kenya, Agriculture remains the backbone of the Kenyan economy and it is considered the most important sector in the economy, contributing approximately 25% of the GDP, and employing 75% of the total national labour force (Republic of Kenya, 2005). Similarly, it is a key sector whose functions have been devolved by the Constitution of Kenya, 2010. Women play a pivotal role in agricultural production and they make up between 42% and 65% of the agricultural labour force in Kenya (World Bank, 2014) in addition to their traditional domestic role. Furthermore, women produce between 60 and 80 per cent of food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the food production in the world (Chinery, 2011). Women's roles in agricultural production are not the same as it varies considerably among and within regions and is changing rapidly in many parts of the world where economic and social forces are transforming the agriculture sector. However, despite women being a critical force in agriculture and rural development in sub-Saharan, their central role in agricultural production has been largely ignored, particularly in policy (FAO, 2011). For a developing country like Kenya, the agricultural sector has direct implications on at least two critical areas that the country has to address, namely food security and employment creation. This directly impacts the poverty incidence levels, the health of Kenyans and their general quality of life (Republic of Kenya, 2005). As such, sound agricultural sector governance is critical in ensuring its success in addressing the aforementioned. Therefore, it is paramount for the government of Kenya to involve and recognize the key stakeholder in the sector, such as the women in the policy process by encouraging their active participation in agricultural related issues to accurately respond to their needs in terms of the constraints they face and how best to address them. This paper will therefore critically examine three main issues in an attempt to highlight the role women in agricultural production in rural

areas to answer to the question why their contribution in agricultural production should be recognized by extensively looking at their contribution to rural agricultural production, constraints they face and prospect for improved involvement in agricultural production in Kenya.

2. WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN KENYA

World Bank estimates that women make up between 42% and 65% of the agricultural labour force in the world (World Bank, 2014). Similarly, in many parts of the world today, including Kenya, there is an increasing trend towards what has been called the feminization of agriculture. One of the main reason behind this phenomenon is the rural-urban migration of men in search of paid employment in towns and cities, either in their own country or abroad. As men leave their rural homes, the role of women in agricultural production becomes increasingly dominant (Adenugba, 2013). In Sub Saharan Africa, women make up almost 50 percent of the agricultural labour force, an increase from about 45 percent in 1980. However, the averages in Africa range from just over 40 percent in Southern Africa to just over 50 percent in Eastern Africa. These sub-regional averages have fairly been maintained particularly when compared to the 1980's, except for Northern Africa, where the female share appears to have risen from 30 percent to almost 45 percent. The sub-regional data for Africa conceal wide differences between countries both in the share of female labour in agriculture and the trend (Sofa and Cheryl, 2011). Women in rural areas of Africa have to bear with the responsibility of taking care of children and the elderly. They also constitute the majority of the agricultural labour force in small-scale and subsistence farming in rural areas (FAO, 2011)

The role women play in agriculture and rural society in Sub-Saharan Africa is fundamental to agricultural and rural development. The Technical Centre for Agriculture and rural cooperation (CTA, 1993) reported that women in Africa make up more than one-third of the workforce, within pastoralist and mixed farming systems, livestock play an important role in supporting women and in improving their financial situation, and women are heavily engaged in the sector. Approximately two-thirds of poor livestock keepers, totalling approximately 400 million people, are women (Thornton et al, 2002).

According to Food and Agricultural Organization (2011), women represent a considerable share of the agricultural labour force, either as individual food producers or as agricultural workers. This is estimated to be around two-thirds of the total agricultural labour force in developing economies (FAO, 2011). The chart below compares FAO's estimates of the proportions of the female active population working in agriculture production at the global level, in developing countries, in low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs) and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

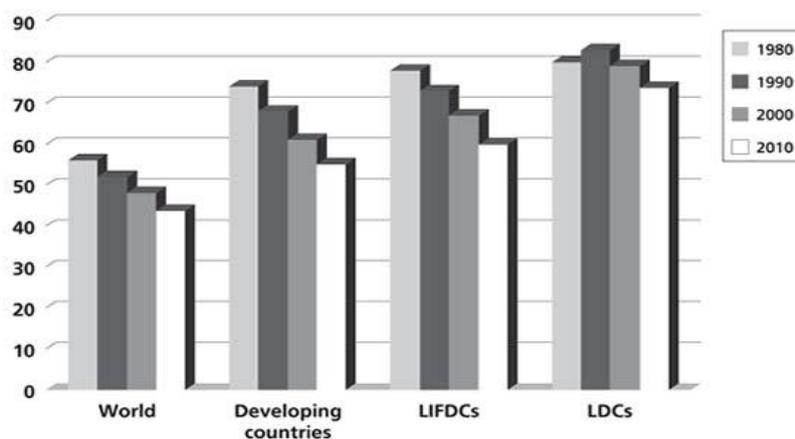


Figure 1: Percentage of economically active women working in agriculture, 1980-2010 (projected)

Source: FAO 2003 - Rural Women: Key to Food Security, Gender and Population

As shown in the figure above, women comprise just over 50 percent of the agricultural labour force in the developing world, 60% in low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs) and over 70% in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). This points to the fact that food production has long been recognised as primarily a woman’s activity, but women also participate increasingly in other agricultural activities such as processing, cash cropping, animal husbandry and marketing. Women work in agriculture voluntarily as farmers as unpaid workers on family farms and as paid or unpaid labourers on other farms and agricultural enterprises. They also play a critical role in both crop and livestock production at subsistence and commercial levels. Women produce food and cash crops and manage mixed agricultural operations often involving crops, livestock and fish farming. All of which women are still considered part of the agricultural labour force (FAO, 2010).

In Kenya, women make up between 42% and 65% of the agricultural labour force (World Bank, 2014), in addition to their traditional domestic responsibilities. Agricultural production is considered the main source of money and security for the majority of households in Kenya, and arable land is highly valued and sought after. Rural women in Kenya are heavily dependent on males due to the socially constructed traditional gender roles that define the division of labour, and are therefore subordinate socially, economically and politically (Feldman, 1983). A study by National Agriculture and Livestock Extension Policy (NALEP) in Kenya, (2010) indicate that division of labour in crop farming, for example is influenced by gender as shown below.

Table 1: Division of labour in crop farming

Task	Male (Percentage %)	Female (Percentage %)
Ploughing	55	45
Weeding	49	51
Harvesting	51	49
Marketing	53	49
All processes	47	53

Source: NALEP, 2010

The study affirmed that more women are involved in light duties like weeding (51%) while men are involved in heavier tasks like ploughing (55%), harvesting and marketing (53). However, female farmers dominate in all other processes. The productive role of women in agriculture, therefore, embraces both subsistence crops and cash crops for the market. As such, the women's farm activities in Kenya cover the entire agriculture cycle-including hoeing, planting, weeding, scaring birds and animal pests, and harvesting. Furthermore, they also keep poultry and care for livestock, activities which traditionally were for men (Republic of Kenya, 2005).

Similarly, women often play a prominent role in managing poultry (Guèye, 2000) and dairy animals (Tangka, et al., 2000) and in caring for other animals that are housed and fed within the homestead in Kenya. When tasks are divided, men are more likely to be involved in constructing housing and the herding of grazing animals, and in marketing products if women’s mobility is constrained. However, the influence of women is mostly felt in the use of eggs, milk and poultry meat for home consumption and they often have control over marketing these products and the income derived from them. Perhaps, for this reason, small-scale dairy and poultry projects have been popular investments for development projects that aim to improve a lot of rural women (Bravo-Baumann, 2000). A study by Okitoi et al, 2006 in western Kenya indicated that there is a division of labour with specific duties for males and females in different enterprises.

DIVISION OF LABOUR IN RURAL POULTRY PRODUCTION

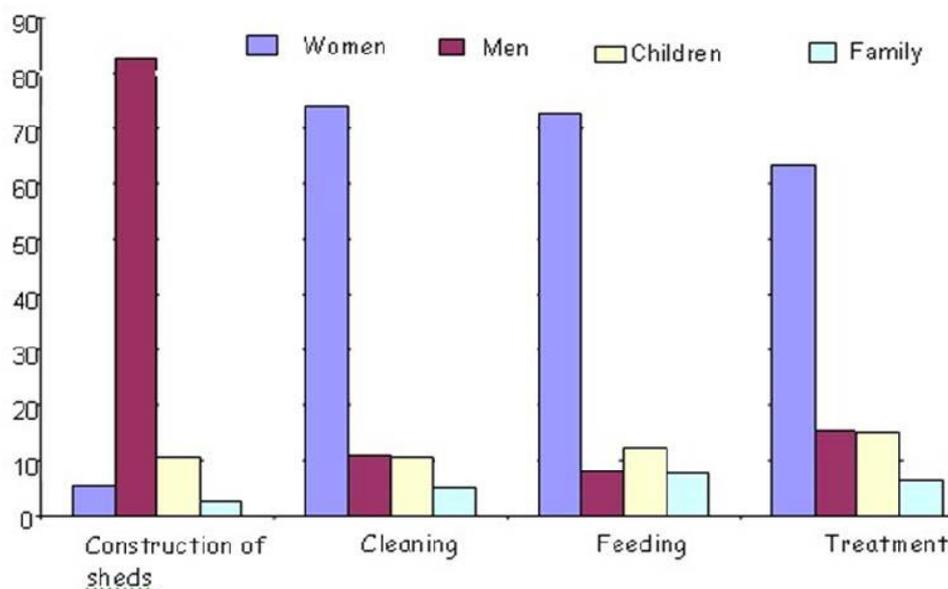


Figure 2: Division Of Labour Among Family Members In Rural Poultry Production In Western

Source: Okitoi et al, 2006

The above set of data indicates a division of labour among family members in rural poultry production in Western Kenya. Participation in selling eggs and consumption of eggs is predominantly for women. Men and children mainly do the construction of poultry sheds. Women mainly do cleaning, feeding and treatment of rural poultry.

The importance of agriculture in rural Kenya is emphasised on plot cultivation and food production for home nourishment and trading or selling as the primary means for the income (Wane, 2003). Approximately 85 percent of females over seventeen years of age work regularly on the family holding compared to 54 percent of males. (Smock, 1981). It is estimated that one quarter of all Kenyan rural households are single-female headed. In these, the husband is either dead or absent for long periods, and women assume responsibility for satisfying both the domestic and income needs of the entire household which largely revolve around farm work (Republic of Kenya, 2008).

Women's role in Agricultural production in Kenya is also linked to household food security. As such, households overall access to food relies to a great extent on the work of rural women in farms (FAO, 2011). The world Food Summit of 1996 described food security as a situation that exists when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life (WHO, 2019). In Kenya, women spare up to 16 hours a day doing housework, caring for children, preparing food, and growing between 60 and 80 percent of the food for the family (Fagley, 1976 and World Bank, 2014). Furthermore, in the social context of rural areas in Kenya, women may head a household in case a principal male is missing, either temporarily due to internal or international migration or permanently due to divorce from or death of the male partner when legally married. Focusing exclusively on these female-headed households, which make up 5-30% of rural households in Kenya depending on location, results in overlooking the importance of understanding the relative position of women in male-headed households (Deere, Avarado and Twyman, 2012). For example, women do more than two-thirds

of the work involved in coffee farming in Kenya. However, fewer than 5 percent of leadership roles in coffee cooperatives in the country are currently held by women).

A study of western Kenya by the Swedish Agricultural International Network Initiative (SAINI) found out that female-headed households had agricultural yields that were 23% lower than those of male-headed households, and attributed the inequality experienced such to less secure access to land and lower educational levels. Similarly, a male farmer from Zambia told the organization that “there were men who have died and left their spouses and children. However, their farms are still being cultivated and are even doing better after their deaths. This is because the women were involved in planning and decision-making.” (Nirit, 2014). Women are, therefore, prominent economic actors in land related activities, with a major stake in crop and small stock husbandry, crop preservation, processing and marketing and food preparation for both domestic consumption and sale (Republic of Kenya, 2008)

2.1 CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN EFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN RURAL AREAS OF KENYA

Despite women's important role in the agricultural sector, however, empirical evidence shows that they face a number of constraints and lag behind men with regard to agricultural productivity in Sub Saharan Africa due to the gender inequalities that persist in respect of access to, control over and utilisation of productive resources such as land, livestock, labour, education, extension and financial services, and technology (Slavchevska, 2015). For instance, Land is considered the most important household asset for households that depend on agriculture for their livelihoods (FAO, 2011). However, across all developing regions of the world, women are consistently less likely to own or operate land; they are less likely to have access to rented land, and the land they do have access to usually be of poorer quality and in smaller plots (FAO, 2010). Furthermore, a study by African Women's Studies Centre (2014) in Kenya found out that only 20.7 per cent women own land compared to 43.8 per cent of men. Additionally, legal regulations and customary laws in Kenya often restrict women's access to and control over assets that can be accepted as collateral such as land. Biased land inheritance rights often favour male relatives, leaving both widows and daughters at a disadvantage (Agarwal, 2003).

Notably, Kenya is an agriculturally based economy where land is the primary form of collateral through which there can be economic empowerment, this essential requirement is unavailable for women. Thus, they cannot benefit from credit facilities in contexts where land can be used as collateral to secure loans. This inhibits women's access to credit thus a serious obstacle to improving their agricultural productivity, as without credit women farmers are unable to buy inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and improved technologies or they are unable to hire labour (Daman, 2003). Furthermore, agricultural extension services are in favour of males in Kenya. It should be noted that Agricultural Extension Services play an important role in the dissemination of agricultural information on new technologies and research aimed at improving agricultural productivity as it is important in promoting household food security, improving incomes and reducing rural poverty. (IFPRI, 2009). However, women farmer in rural areas faces numerous challenges in their quest to access Agricultural Extension Services (GOK Report, 2002). This situation results from women's lower influence over resources due to a range of institutional- and norm-based constraints. Similarly, women inputs are always not taken into consideration in policy making because, the Policy-makers, managers, agents and participants in agricultural support services are mostly dominated by males who are not always sufficiently informed of the specific problems and needs of women farmers (Udry & Hoddinott, 1995). Their triple gender roles also constrained their time and mobility with a higher proportion of them being illiterate and engaging in subsistence agriculture without being up to date with current technologies.

2.2 PROSPECTS FOR WOMEN'S IMPROVED INVOLVEMENT IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN KENYA

Women's empowerment is widely perceived to be a key factor in closing gender gaps in agricultural productivity in Kenya. As such, Kenya has enacted policies documents aimed at improving the subordinate nature of rural women in agricultural production (Muriithi and Matz, 2015). For instance, the role of women's rural livelihoods is recognized by various policies that focus on agricultural development for such as the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Policy on the Improvement of Agricultural Productivity. Additionally, the Agricultural Sector Development Strategy (ASDS), proposes to develop a gender policy for the agricultural sector in order to achieve female empowerment and mainstream the needs of women, men and youth in all agricultural sub-sectors (GOK, 2010). Similarly, in 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitution which created a two-tier system of governance, the national and county government. After the 2013 general election, the counties became functional with the national government having ceded most of its functions including agriculture. According to Rodriguez-Pose & Gill (2004), the devolved system of governance brings services closer to the people enhancing inclusive development. This echoes the objective of devolution in Kenya that seeks to empower Kenyans to have a greater influence and impact in the decision-making process. Devolution also seeks to promote social and economic development and improve the provision of proximate, easily accessible services (the constitution of Kenya, 2010). The new constitution guarantees equal rights for women: they can now inherit property and own land.

However, in rural areas of Kenya, many people including women farmers are still unaware of the new constitution as they still live under the old system that undermines women and girls putting them at a disadvantaged position, particularly concerning property rights. Owning land gives women access to capital and the freedom to leave abusive marriages (Wasike, 2013). Devolution further seeks to protect and promote the interests and rights of minorities and marginalised communities such as women and this is realised through the implementation of affirmative action to correct and equalise long-standing imbalances that are the root cause of marginalisation. Gender mainstreaming on issues of gender marginalisation is addressed by devolution (the constitution of Kenya, 2010). Lastly, the Kenyan national horticultural policy also recognizes the existence of gender inequality in the distribution of gains derived from horticultural production and gender discrimination in the horticultural labour market (GOK, 2012).

3. CONCLUSION

This paper collates the empirical evidence on women's roles in agricultural production, setting the stage for subsequent analysis on the gender inequality experience in agriculture. The main findings are: women comprise half or more of the agricultural labour force in Kenya, but their role in agricultural production is underpinned by customary laws which are in support of men thereby hindering their effective contribution in agricultural production. Secondly, the role of women in agricultural and food production is significant. However, it is difficult to statistically estimate the exact share produced by women because agriculture is usually a venture among household members and involves a range of resources and inputs that cannot be readily assigned by gender. As a result, this has largely contributed to the little attention being given to women by policymakers in responding to their challenges. Lastly, women farmers tend to be ignored by programmes designed to improve agricultural production, even though they play a critical role in food production. Therefore, integrated rural development plans to increase food production, improvement in nutrition and provision of primary health care are unattainable without the cooperation of rural women. It is not only about provision of employment opportunities for women, as they are already overburdened with work, but rather of including women fully

into the process of development and its benefits. Finally, a potential limitations of this research article which needs to be considered is that it was unable to acquire the disaggregated data on the exact volume of agricultural output of women thus relied on assumption that because women constitute majority of the labourers on farm and are responsible for food security in the household, they play a major role in agricultural productivity. Similarly, african cultural norms frequently dictate that a household will not be defined as female-headed if there is an adult male present. Thus, female-headed households almost invariably have fewer adult members.

3.1 RECOMMENDATION

There is plenty of compelling evidence that the agricultural sector is a powerful driver of economic growth in Kenya. Women make a significant contribution to Kenya economy through their agricultural activities. According to Sabo (2016) agricultural initiative which fails to recognize the role of women in agricultural production will only achieve 'false growth'. It is, therefore, necessary that agricultural policies, programmes, and projects to recognize the women's productive role in specific issues related to agriculture to raise their voices especially in the decision-making process at household, local, national and regional levels. From the government perspective, women contribution to agricultural production should be understood based on their contribution to food security in household and community rather than their contribution to commercialised agriculture which is dominated by men.

The Rural areas of Kenya have many geographically dispersed smallholder women farmers that are not integrated into key agriculture value chains. Dispersion increases production costs and reduces small farmer's competitiveness. Therefore, support to women's organisations in the rural areas should be made a priority and government through the ministry of Agriculture, livestock and fisheries should invest heavily in such organisations and movements to support the women from their subordination role in agricultural production. Despite the significant role of the Kenyan constitution, 2010 is playing in ensuring equal rights for both gender in regards to the acquisition of agricultural resources such as land, many people are still unaware. Therefore, the government should partner with the civil society organization to offer civic education to community members regarding the legal rights of women. Lastly, financial institutions are very important in increasing productivity in Agriculture by rural women. The ministry of agriculture, livestock and fisheries should create a special program that will encourage existing female farmers and target potential female farmers to invest in the agriculture sector by supporting them financially.

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4.1 AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

This paper was written by Paul Otieno Onyalo as the author while Mr. Moeketsi Kali (PhD candidate-Pan African University) edited the paper by ensuring that plagiarism and ethical standards were met. His kind contribution is well acknowledged in this work.

4.2 ETHICS

Ethics were observed in this paper by acknowledging all the sources used in the paper. And all the references were put in the reference page.

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