

Journal of

Gender Related Studies

(JGRS)

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE TODAY

Quinn Wanjiru



CARI
Journals

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE TODAY

Quinn Wanjiru

Post Graduate, Cape Town University

ABSTRACT

This article assesses the role of women in agriculture today. Agriculture is an important engine of growth and poverty reduction. However, the sector is underperforming in many countries in part because women, who are often a crucial resource in agriculture and the rural economy, face limitations that reduce their productivity. This article draws on the available empirical evidence to study in which areas and to what degree women participate in agriculture. Aggregate data shows that women comprise about 43 percent of the agricultural labour force globally and in developing countries. But this figure masks considerable variation across regions and within countries according to age and social class. Time use surveys, which are more comprehensive but typically not nationally representative, add further insight into the substantial heterogeneity among countries and within countries in women's contribution to agriculture. They show that female time-use in agriculture varies also by crop, production cycle, age and ethnic group. A few time-use surveys have data by activity and these show that in general weeding and harvesting were predominantly female activities. Overall, the labour burden of rural women exceeds that of men, and includes a higher proportion of unpaid household responsibilities related to preparing food and collecting fuel and water. The contribution of women to agricultural and food production is significant but it is impossible to verify empirically the share produced by women. Women's participation in rural labour markets varies considerably across regions, but invariably women are over represented in unpaid, seasonal and part-time work, and the available evidence suggests that women are often paid less than men, for the same work. The analysis shows that women play a crucial role in all farm-related activities from land preparation to marketing. They contribute a higher proportion of labor in agricultural sector than men. Available data on rural and agricultural feminization shows that this is not a general trend but mainly a sub-Saharan Africa phenomenon, as well as observed in some sectors such as unskilled labour in the fruit, vegetable and cut-flower export sector. This paper re-affirms that women make essential contributions to agriculture and rural enterprises across the developing world. But there is much diversity in women's roles and over-generalization undermines policy relevance and planning. The context is important and policies must be based on sound data and gender analysis.

Key words: *Women, Agriculture.*

INTRODUCTION

Women produce 60-80 percent of the world's food, and women are inherently better stewards of the environment than men. Or are they? Although frequently repeated, many such "truths" about women in agriculture are increasingly being debunked. The myth of the noble and responsible rural woman still permeates many development initiatives. Within this narrative,

all rural women have unwittingly been appointed the caretakers of not only the household, but also farms and landscapes. This persistent discourse leaves women shouldering an unreasonable share of responsibility, and its misconceptions results in ineffective and, at times, counter-productive efforts to increase gender equity in agriculture. The millions of women engaged in agriculture across the globe are a heterogeneous group with vastly different realities, opportunities and challenges. Today, their roles are changing as part of the constantly evolving social, environmental, cultural and economic contexts they live in. This complexity makes it challenging to design and implement interventions to improve gender equity in agriculture. Yet, doing just so—increasing equity—is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable intensification of agriculture, concludes a recent synthesis of three years of gender research carried out by the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE).

There is increased equity is both a practical and a social justice issue. Practical because, after all, women make up half the population and play an important (however varied and evolving) role in agriculture. Ensuring that women have opportunities to participate in making food systems more sustainable therefore increases the chances that such a transformation will succeed. Equity is a social justice issue because some of the old gender myths do hold true—in many cases, women have less access and control, fewer rights and opportunities, than men. The simple answer is that there is no single truth about the role of women in agriculture today. There are many truths, and it is imperative that development interventions and investments are based on solid understandings of gender roles and dynamics in the local context. Over the past three years, WLE researchers have been shedding light on such dynamics, and have developed approaches to better understand them.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the study was to assess the role of women in agriculture today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical review

1. Role Theory

The structural role perspective as a result of a mixture of insights (Linton, 1936; Davis, 1949; Moreno, 1953; Park, 1955; Simmel, 1950; and Mead, 1934), has often been captured by quoting a famous passage from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. But even though role theory owes much to the theater, its perspective and language allow for more than a metaphorical characterization of human behavior. The role analyst is concerned with describing and understanding many complex aspects of human behavior. The role analyst focuses on the behavior of a given individual, on specific aggregate of individuals, or may study particular grouping of individuals who display given behaviors. Many aspects of real life such as the individual's appraisal of self and others, a person's performance and how this performance affects others, how people learn to perform, and how performance of some

groups are related to those of other groups are studied. In addition, role theory deals with the Met II, Scene vii: All the world is a stage, all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts. examination of patterned forms of complex real-life behavior, which includes the types and varieties of differentiated aggregates, social positions, specializations and division of labor.

Communication, learning and socialization, sanction, conformity, and interdependence are some among many more processes examined (Biddle and Thomas, 1966). For the structural role theorists, the social world is viewed as a network of variously interrelated positions, or statuses, within which individuals enact roles (Biddle and Thomas, 1966). For each position, groups and classes of positions, various kinds of expectations about how incumbents are to behave can be perceived. Therefore, social organization is composed of various networks of statuses and expectations (Moreno, 1947). Statuses are analyzed in terms of how they are interrelated to one another to form various types of social units. In terms of variables such as size, degree of differentiation, and complexity of interrelatedness, status networks are classified into forms ranging from various types of groups to larger forms of collective organization. There is a close relationship between form and content because the type of expectations that typify particular networks of positions represent one of their defining characteristics. The assumption is that behavior of individuals is a function of the structure as well as the kinds of expectations that are inherent in these positions. The range of expectations denoted by role theory is diverse and can be classified as expectations from the "script;" expectations from other "players;" and expectations from the "audience" (Moreno, 1960).

Then the social world is assumed to be composed of relatively clear cut prescriptions as in a prescribed role. The individuals self and role playing skills are seen as operating to meet such prescriptions. In subjective roles, the implication is that all expectations are mediated through the prism of self, and they are subject to interpretation by the individuals in statuses. There is emphasis upon perception and interpretation of expectation, and the social world is seen as structured in terms of individuals' subjective assessment of the Interaction situation. Ultimately, expectations and subjective assessment of expectations by individuals are manifested in behavior as enacted roles. When conceptual emphasis is given to overt behavior, the social world is viewed as a network of interrelated behaviors.

Role theory is useful because it provides a set of concepts for categorizing items of behavior and expectations which link the individual actor into the social and cultural system. The concept of role focuses attention on the one hand on activities and one the other on expectations, which are characteristics of particular categories of people and relevant to certain contexts. In the present case, it facilitates our special aim of looking at individual women's varied positions, in particular those of workers and mother and associated activities and 35 resources and expectations about them, and serves to link them with specific socioeconomic contexts and differential levels of employment and sociodemographic data. It provides modes of measurement for role related phenomena and assists in description and understanding of social role systems and social change as well as individual role playing.

2. Functional theory

Functional theory is useful in particular for understanding the organization and persistence of the gender institution. Three aspects are relevant: the concept of social system, social control and the latent ideology of sexism (Parsons, 1951). The social system model provides us with a number of useful guidelines. Society is conceptualized as a system of interlocking status roles. Status and roles are derived from the shared expectations of a group. Social life (family, economy, religion, education, etc.) is depicted as an arrangement of status roles, an institution, and society as a system of institutions. What is central to the social system model is the natural complementarity between status roles in an institution and between institutions in a society. This explains the enduring quality of an institution-like gender.

The social control model provides us with a second explanation. Social arrangements are anchored in consensual social support so broad and basic that those who reject the arrangement in action or thought are subjected to society's control pressures. This control can be external or internal. The concept of latent sexism, the belief that the separate and inferior status of women is natural and right, is evident. This comes from the fundamental importance of the family for overall well-being. For socialization, for internalized and external social control, the family is considered the primary source of social order. Men's instrumental role and women's expressive role are necessary for society's well-being. The theory gives us useful tools for analyzing the persistence of sex roles but it leaves us with some crucial problems.

METHODOLOGICAL REVIEW

The methodological approach for these articles is based on qualitative research methods of previous articles. Five articles were reviewed using the content analysis method. In this sense, the research techniques aimed to capture the subjective experiences of women who do agriculture.

Thus, women's experiences will alert about the limits in the existing concepts and indicators and provide information on the factors that we need to consider in order to design indicators that will help women play their role well in the agricultural field.

Empirical review

Women play a significant and crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields. The nature and extent of women's involvement in agriculture varies greatly from region to region. But regardless of these variations, women are actively involved in various agricultural activities. As per Census 2011, out of total female main workers, 55 per cent were agricultural labourers and 24 per cent were cultivators. However, only 12.8 per cent of the operational holdings were owned by women, which reflect the gender disparity in ownership of landholdings in agriculture. Moreover, there is concentration of operational holdings (25.7 per cent) by women in the marginal and small holdings categories. Rural women perform numerous labour intensive jobs such as weeding, hoeing, grass cutting, picking, cotton stick collection, separation of seeds from fibre, keeping of livestock and its other associated activities like milking, milk processing, preparation of ghee, etc. Details of activities taken up by women in Agriculture and its allied activities are as follows.

Agriculture: Mainly rural women are engaged in agricultural activities in three different ways depending on the socio-economic status of their family and regional factors. They work as: Paid Labourers, Cultivator doing labour on their own land, Managers of certain aspects of agricultural production by way of labour supervision and the participation in post-harvest operations. The types of agricultural activities taken up by women include the following : Sowing, Nursery management, Transplanting, Weeding, Irrigation, Fertilizer application, Plant protection, Harvesting, winnowing, storing etc.

Livestock: Livestock is the primary livelihood activity used to meet household food needs as well as supplement farm incomes. It is a common practice in the rural areas to give an animal as part of a women's dowry. Studies have revealed rural women earn extra income from the sale of milk and animals. Mostly women are engaged in cattle management activities such as, Cleaning of animal and sheds Watering of cattle, Milking the animals, Fodder collection, Preparing dung cakes, Collection farm yard manure. Except grazing, all other livestock management activities are predominantly performed by women. Men, however, share the responsibility of taking care of sick animals. It is evident that the women are playing a dominant role in the livestock production and management activities. While the role of women in small-scale livestock production is well recognized, much less has been documented about the engagement of women in intensive production and the market chains associated with large commercial enterprises. Demand for livestock products has grown much faster than the demand for crop staples during the past 40 years, fuelled by rising incomes, particularly in Asia and Latin America, and this trend is expected to continue. While pastoralist and small-scale mixed farming systems continue to be important in meeting the needs of rural consumers, the demands of growing urban populations are increasingly supplied with meat, milk and eggs from intensive commercial systems. This has important implications for the engagement of women in the livestock sector because of the different roles, responsibilities and access to resources that are evident within different scales of production system and at different points on the production and marketing chain.

Women and Poultry and Fisheries farming: Poultry farming is one of the major sources of rural economy. The rate of women participation in poultry farming at household level is central in poultry industry. In 2008, nearly 45 million people world-wide were directly engaged, full-time or part-time, in the fishery primary sector (FAO fishery database). In addition, about 135 million people are estimated to be employed in the secondary sector, including post-harvest activities. While comprehensive data are not available on a sex-disaggregated basis, case studies suggest that women may comprise up to 30 percent of the total employment in fisheries, including primary and secondary activities. Information provided to FAO from 86 countries indicates that in 2008, 5.4 million women worked as fishers and fish farmers in the primary sector.⁹ Women have rarely engaged in commercial offshore and long distance capture fisheries because of the vigorous work involved but also because of women's domestic responsibilities and/or social norms. Women are more commonly occupied in subsistence and commercial fishing from small boats and canoes in coastal or inland waters. Women also contribute as entrepreneurs and provide labour before, during and after the catch in both artisanal and commercial fisheries. For example, in West Africa, the so called "Fish Mamas" play a major role. They usually own capital and are

directly and vigorously involved in the coordination of the fisheries chain, from production to sale of fish.

Feminisation of Agriculture

Economic Survey 2017-18 says that with growing rural to urban migration by men, there is 'feminisation' of agriculture sector, with increasing number of women in multiple roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs, and labourers. Globally, there is empirical evidence that women have a decisive role in ensuring food security and preserving local agro-biodiversity. Rural women are responsible for the integrated management and use of diverse natural resources to meet the daily household needs. This requires that women farmers should have enhanced access to resources like land, water, credit, technology and training which warrants critical analysis in the context of India. In addition, the entitlements of women farmers will be the key to improve agriculture productivity. The differential access of women to resources like land, credit, water, seeds and markets needs to be addressed. With women predominant at all levels-production, pre-harvest, post-harvest processing, packaging, marketing – of the agricultural value chain, to increase productivity in agriculture, it is imperative to adopt gender specific interventions. An 'inclusive transformative agricultural policy' should aim at gender-specific intervention to raise productivity of small farm holdings, integrate women as active agents in rural transformation, and engage men and women in extension services with gender expertise.

RESULTS

The analysis show that women play a crucial role in all farm-related activities from land preparation to marketing. They contribute a higher proportion of labour in agricultural sector than men. However, they are not active in decision making. This research note discusses the impact of Green Revolution and mechanization on farm women in India. It stresses the need for a new agricultural research and extension agenda which integrates gender analysis into the process of technology generation and dissemination. It also comes up with future strategies to make women a more active part of important farm decisions both at the household and legislature level. This research note emphasizes the importance of balancing agricultural research systems, extension education, and policy-making bodies to attain women empowerment in agriculture.

Variations in women's participation in agricultural work depend on supply and demand factors linked to economic growth and agricultural modernization. Countries with high rates of urbanization and female-dominated rural-to-urban migration, like Latin American nations in the last two decades, experience shortages in the supply of female farm labour. Conversely, countries with low rates of urbanization (like many in sub-Saharan Africa) have an abundant supply of female farm workers. The demand for female farm work varies with land tenure patterns, the commodity being produced, and the degree of integration of agriculture into the market economy. Women's participation in agriculture is greater, as is their contribution to farm income, in small farms oriented to local rather than export markets (Dixon 1983). The demand for female farm labor has also increased with male labour migration and with agricultural policies that foster the development of agribusiness, in which

women comprise the bulk of the work force. The time women spend in farm activities supplementing male labour as well as farming their own plots has increased notably among small farmers who grow groundnuts and cotton for export in Senegal, snow peas for an agribusiness firm in Guatemala, and flowers for export in Ecuador. Export fruit companies in Chile and Costa Rica rely almost exclusively on female labour for harvesting, processing, and packing fruits.

Discussions, Conclusion and Recommendation

The foregoing both reveals and obscures an understanding of African women farmers in terms of conditions of access to agricultural resources and their contradictory location in agricultural development. For decades the policies of national governments and international institutions have identified the importance of the agricultural sector to the region's development, while at the same time neglected sub-Saharan Africa's rural and agricultural development in favour of the urban sector (UNDP, 2012). The neglect of Sub-Saharan Africa's smallholder farmers, in particular, has been through biased policies, inadequate market information and other relevant institutional arrangements, making it difficult for them to compete against the world's most formidable agricultural systems. Women farmers, in particular, are invisible and not fully supported in their competing roles and hence are not at the centre of policy interventions (Kent, 2009). Generally, although agricultural policy explicitly references the importance of gender, agricultural support is directed more towards commercial farmers – therefore missing out women farmers and their specific agricultural needs (Kent, 2009). The result is the persistence of gender inequalities as women had few benefits or say in farming activities yet play a major role in the agricultural activities as studies in Kenya, Zambia, Mozambique, Ethiopia have clearly demonstrated (Farnworth, 2010; Farnworth and Obuya, 2010; Farnworth and Munachonga, 2010).

Promoting gender equality in agriculture will in the long run help address the gender specific constraints that reduce their productivity and limit their contributions to agricultural production, economic growth and the well-being of their families. It will also reduce hunger and extreme poverty. This is because, when and if women farmers have equal access to the agricultural resources and rewards, they will be better able to participate in and contribute to agricultural development. Closing the gender gap in agriculture would put more resources in the hands of women and strengthen their voice within the household – improving the food security, nutrition, education and health of the children (FAO, 2011). Several African governments have undertaken and continue to pursue different initiatives to support women farmers. Land tenure systems will have to integrate gender issues into policy reforms. The significance of land is how it, in turn, frames access to other critical agricultural inputs. The enduring problem is that agricultural policies are initiated in a manner that make it difficult to measure any gender impacts, as policy reforms in Senegal have shown (Koopman, 2009). Studies in Kenya on women in agriculture in the 1990s show huge gender inequalities with women having few benefits and say in farming activities though they perform a high percentage of the work (Farnworth, 2010). Women empowerment, by providing financial and technical support for projects that support women and gender equality (NEPAD, 2012). The fund is financing a pilot project, a Business Incubator for African Women Entrepreneurs

(BIAWE) programme in East and Southern Africa (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa - COMESA) and West Africa (Economic Community of West African States - ECOWAS). Thousands of women and women groups are receiving agricultural inputs, micro-credit schemes are being established, and research studies are also being carried out through the NEPAD programme. African governments and their development partners, both public and private, are the major actors in addressing the barriers of women farmers in agriculture. Thus, any practical recommendations will have to bear in mind the different motivations of each actor. First, although there is the widespread acceptance of the significance of gender, the question is whether or not these actors are only being gender sensitive or whether they truly mainstream gender in their development planning and implementation process. This is because being aware of gender issues does not necessarily mean one is also taking gender issues seriously in planning and implementation. For example, steps have to be taken to increase and extend data collection and dissemination systems. Data should be presented in a format that is more readily available and accessible to all stakeholders, having the different technological and varying contexts in mind. The breakthroughs in communication technologies have enhanced the use of mobile payment systems in Kenya (M-PESA) (Mas and Radcliffe, 2011). These breakthroughs can also apply to women farmers and their needs in other African countries, given the proliferation of mobile technology systems on the continent. Again, a very simple, but meaningful step is how the provision of small-scale storage and dedicated sales stalls can improve the welfare and status of women in agriculture. It will assist in marketing of fish products and increase the shelf life of fish with the women fishmongers.

Second, it is an opportune time to revisit the role of farmers' organizations with a gender orientation. Cooperatives, a veritable feature of the agricultural landscape in Africa for several years, have survived neo-liberal agriculture in Africa and are offering a new platform for their membership in forging relations with both state and non-state agricultural organizations and institutions (Francesconi and Heerink, 2011; Bernard and Spielman, 2009; Barham and Chitemi, 2009; Wanyama, Develtere and Pollet, 2009). The key requirement is to focus on the needs of women farmers within the context of emerging cooperative associations, with clear guidelines on how to coordinate the needs of farmers across gender lines, nature of farming systems and types of crops. Third, while partnerships are always required in development, the emphasis should be on the nature of such partnerships. Partnership can only flourish in an atmosphere of mutual respect and a relative consensus on means and ends. The international donor organisations can have ambassadors for improving the status of women in agriculture in Africa. These ambassadors will be the direct link at national and local levels and responsible for giving timely and location specific feedback to the multilateral organisations. This means, there is a need for stronger partnership with national governments and local NGOs, especially as the international organisations cannot directly formulate policies that result in changes at the local level. They only suggest and encourage. A reconfiguration of external assistance can lead to a more direct support for women in agriculture at the national level. The implications of the existing global north and south divide has the potential to undermine any framework for mutual respect and consensus building when it comes to the difficult and necessary task of negotiating a global compact on

development. However, if the African Union continues to assume its leadership role in continental affairs, it can also use the emerging importance of resources on the African continent to strategically reposition the importance of the region in global development initiatives.

Finally, multilateral development institutions can raise awareness of the issues of gender inequality among national governments in sub-Saharan Africa. However, national policy makers and practitioners have to move beyond the issue of awareness and actually acknowledge the multiple roles that women and marginal farmers play in addressing hunger and malnutrition and to help with relevant interventions to meet their needs more effectively (Kent and MacRae, 2010). That requires a bold resolve at systematic collaboration or cooperation among sectors in order to arrive at policy successes. Doss (2001) indicates that very good baseline surveys are needed and the results studied and well interpreted to understand the implications of, for example, technology transfer on women as opposed to comparing adopting and non-adopting households. Agricultural policies also need to shift from an exclusive focus on production to other aspects of agricultural organization. Otherwise, interventions will remain piecemeal, and fail to recognise the multiple roles and challenges that women farmer perform as producers, distributors and caregivers.

REFERENCES

- Biddle, B. J., & Thomas, E. J. (1966). Role theory: Concepts and research (No. BF774 B5).
- Bharadwaj, Ch. , Satyavathi, C. Tara , Brahmanand, P.S. , & Verma, Mahender K. (1999, November 13–19). Agricultural sustainability in the 21st century. *Employment News*, 24(33), 1–2.
- Brahmanand, S.P. , Singandhupe, R.B. , Reddy, G.P. , & Bharadwaj, Ch. (2000). Agronomic strategies for an evergreen revolution. *Yojana*, 44(3), 21–25.
- FAO. (2003a). *FAO Focus: Women and the Green Revolution*. Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization.
- FAO. (2003b). *FAO Focus: Employment consequences of technological change in agriculture*. Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization.
- Farnworth, C. R., & Munachonga, M. (2010). *Gender Aware Approaches in Agricultural Programmes—Zambia Country Report. A special study of the Agricultural Support Programme (ASP)*, UTV Working Paper, 8.
- Hart, C. H., Lawrence, F., & Thomasson, R. (1990). Article Metrics Related Articles Cite Share Request Permissions Explore More Download PDF Measuring Socioeconomic Status in Child Development Research.
- Jiggins, Janice . (1986). *Gender-related impacts and the work of the international agricultural research centres*. Washington, DC: World Bank Report.
- Ramprasad, Vanaja . (1999, October). Women and biodiversity conservation. *COMPAS Newsletter*, 1(October 2), 24–25.
- Moreno, J. L. (1947). Organization of the social atom. *Sociometry*, 10(3), 287–293.

Parsons, T.

1951 The Social Systems. New York: Free Press

1961 Theories of Society. New York: Free Press.

1964 Social Structure and Personality. New York: Free Press.

1966 Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.