

The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Women Rice Producers in Ndop, Cameroon and the Implications for Gender Roles

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Abstract

In most communities in Cameroon, traditional norms mandate that rural women fulfill the reproductive roles of child bearing, home management and food provision for the family. Thus, these women are unable to exercise any influential economic voice—they can hardly earn income. Cash agriculture like rice production provides a possible outlet for the empowerment of these women in rice producing areas. However, this agricultural work would solve one problem for the women and create another. Any attempt to encourage these women to work outside their homes may increase their workload. This paper examines the situation of female rice farmers in Ndop, Cameroon and argues that although rice production may have been beneficial to women and the society as a whole, it has implications for gender roles that go beyond the purview of women's empowerment.

Keywords: rice production, gender division of labour, gender roles, Ndop, Cameroon

Introduction

Many authors (Moser, (1993), Mosse, (1993) and Taylor, (1999), have recognized women's triple roles in development as meeting their strategic and practical gender needs. Moser (1993, 48-49), for example, classifies women's triple roles into reproductive, productive and community management. Although Taylor (1999, 18) acknowledges this categorization of women's triple role by Moser, she argues that women perform multiple roles, which are too simplistically enveloped into Moser's framework of triple roles. Many societies, particularly in developing countries, usually emphasize only women's domestic and community roles. The economic and political spheres are considered in these communities as exclusive domains reserved for men. Even where women's economic role is obvious such as in the case of water and fuel wood collections, vegetable gardening, dairy and poultry keeping, these economic contributions are minimized and dismissed as emanating from their biology (Mosse, 1993, 30). Thus, women's productive work is often less visible and valued than men's (Williams et al. 1994).

Nonetheless, with increasing economic intensification and diversification as a result of the emergence of new challenges, there is a gradual movement away from the status quo. The forces of colonization, and globalization accelerated the circulation of new ideas and cultures around the globe. As a result women are being gradually brought into the center of development. In the economic domain for example, rural women are involved in the cultivation of crops like rice, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, wheat, and others

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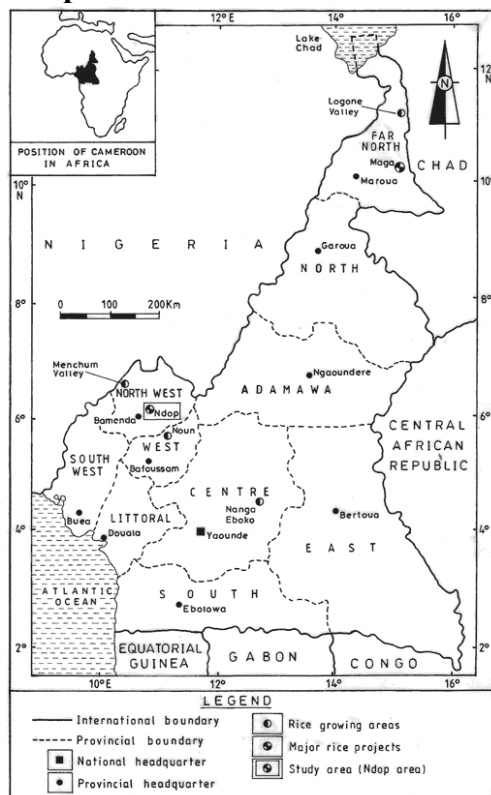
for cash, which are considered male crops. Their expanded economic activities significantly alter their traditional gender roles with far reaching effects on their empowerment and national development.

Rice is one of the most remarkable of cultivated crops in the world. It is a staple diet of over half of the world's population, most of whom live in developing countries such as countless millions in Asia who subsist almost entirely on rice. Although irrigated rice is grown in the tropics, Jesse et al (1995) noted that 90% of the world's supply comes from the monsoonal lands of Southern and Eastern Asia.

The cost notwithstanding, the taste and nutritive value of rice as food explains the shift in consumer preference from other traditional food crops to rice in West Africa (Nyantang 1983). As a consequence, the consumption of rice has increased much faster than that of other food crops in the sub region. In addition to its availability through imports and food aid programs, the demand for rice increases as income rises for the poor. According to WARDA (2003), the most important factors contributing to the shift in consumer preferences from traditional staples to rice are rapid urbanization and associated changes in family occupational structures. Rice is easy to prepare, takes relatively less cooking time, and it is also easy to handle and serve.

Modern rice cultivation is carried out in several regions of Cameroon. In the Logone valley of North Cameroon, within the Menchum valley and Mbo plain in North west Province, the Upper Noun Valley in the West Province, and around Nanga Eboko in the Centre Province. In addition to these to these general rice-producing areas, the major rice cultivation projects in the country are in Maga in the Far North Province and Ndop in the North West Province (see Map 1).

Map 1: Rice Production in Cameroon



In Ndop, the Upper Noun Valley Development Authority (UNVDA) handles rice cultivation, which dates back to the 1960s. It is a government parastatal charged with the supervision of the production and marketing of rice in this area. By 1978, an area of about 800 hectares had already been put under cultivation in Ndop, with an average output of 2-2.3 tones of rice per hectare (Ngwa, 1999). Presently, the surface of land cultivated stands at about 1,877 hectares. During the 1994/95-production year, about 4.985 tones of rice were produced (Ngwa 1999). Although these figures may look insignificant when compared to huge volume of rice production from Asian countries, they nevertheless have significance in Cameroon, which is amongst the chief importers of rice in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Throughout the world, rural women historically have played and continue to play an important role in rice production. Women's involvement in rice production varies from region to region, and even within regions. Huvio (1998) observes that the percentage of labour supplied by women in rice cultivation varies from 3% for floating rice cultivation (using animal traction) in Mali, to 80-100% in mangrove swamp rice cultivation in the Gambia and Liberia. In the latter case, women participate in most of the operations and usually undertake post harvest processing of the crop. This production work is of course, in addition to their traditional gender roles as home managers and community organizers.

In many areas of West Africa, rice is produced primarily by female farmers and generates an important share of family income. Women's income tends to benefit children and other vulnerable groups more than the men's income does. While men tend to spend their earnings on heavy investments such as landed property and durable household furniture like cars and television sets (Fonjong, 2002, 125), women spend available funds on food items and children needs, which are indispensable to family survival and well being. It further explains why Engle (2001, 213), insists that women's income has a stronger association with children's nutrition than men's. Besides the importance of women's expenditure on children as part of their triple roles, children are usually the first beneficiaries of women's earnings in women maintained households. This spending priority is exemplified in the Caribbean, Central America, and Sub-Sahara Africa, with 20%, to 30% of the households supported by women (Mosse, 1993, 45). The increase in numbers of these women maintained households are promoted by strict emigration legislations, which do not allow labour migrants to move with their families. About 60% of male workers, as Mosse, (1993, 46) observes, have migrated to South Africa from Lesotho, Mozambique, and Botswana, leaving behind women maintained households due to South Africa's emigration restrictions on the family of labour migrants. These female heads of households, like those in Latin America, (Feijoo (1989,91), have to take care of both their children and themselves from whatever income they earn while waiting for possible remittance from their husbands.

This important role of women's income in both male-headed and single-headed households was either minimized or not well understood by agricultural authorities in Cameroon. WARDA (2003) for example, notes that past efforts to generate and transfer new rice technologies have most often by-passed women farmers. Thus, rural women are not usually aware of improved agricultural activities that are supposed to increase their productivity. The result is that these women are not knowledgeable about and have very

little access to modern technology that could benefit not only them, but also the nation and nations, which they feed. The neglect is due in part, to rural women's exclusion from the process of setting research priorities and generating and disseminating conventional technologies (Nyantang, 1983). This is a phenomenal error stemming from the traditional gender division of labour, which has tended to ignore women's economic contribution and relegate them to unpaid domestic tasks.

Women in Sub-Sahara African countries play an important role in rice marketing, and rely on income from rice to meet a variety of household and personal needs (FAO, 1984). In Sierra Leone and Nigeria, Jones (1972) reported that as far back as 1972 female farmers in the form of paddies customarily sold rice. In societies where men are responsible for marketing rice and controlling income, FAO (1984) observed that women have no incentive to increase the area under cultivation or to intensify production since this would only increase their already substantial work-load without reaping material benefit for them. Yet, a careful analysis of the involvement of men and women in current rice production shows women's labour input as being far above that of men's.

It is against this backdrop of the mixed fortunes of women rice farmers and the mitigating circumstances surrounding their participation in rice production, that this paper examines the situation of women as rice farmers in Ndop. This investigation provides profiles and reasons for their involvement and illuminates how rice farming relegates to their traditionally assigned roles as women. In order to adequately address the above elements of the study, we adopted a data collection method that conveniently captures these elements. A cross-section of the population of the villages of Bamunka, Bamali and Babungo, which are the major rice farming villages in Ndop, was chosen for the study. Using a random sampling method, questionnaires were administered to 100 women from all the strata of the studied villages in December 2003. The main criteria used for the stratification of the population included age, marital status, occupation and social background. The questionnaire, which was designed with the nature of the rural population in mind, focused on the profile of the respondents, reasons for undertaking rice production, tasks as rice farmers, and changes brought on their socio-economic lives as a result of rice farming.

The questionnaire survey was complemented by six interviews on the same subject conducted with both very poor and influential female rice farmers in Ndop. These categories of key informants are representative of the studied community. Individuals that were selected for interviewing cut across the social and demographic composition of the population of Ndop. The discussion with the interviewees focused on a common theme, that is, their perception of women in rice production and its impact on the family. These interviews provided opportunities to gain clarity about some of the issues raised by the questionnaire, and the particular viewpoints of respondents of different ages and social groups. The data collected from the key informants has been analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively alongside data from the questionnaires. The results obtained have been discussed alongside existing related literature to project the implications of the activities of female rice farmers on women's triple roles.

Women in rice production

Rice has been cultivated for such countless ages that its origin can only be a matter for conjecture. The rice plant according to Oyenuga (1967), originated in the Far

East where the bulk of the world's rice is cultivated and consumed. It is an Asiatic cereal par excellence. The crop has spread from these parts to other tropical and sub-tropical countries and it is now widely grown and consumed in most parts of the world. In Nigeria, Udo (1970) points out that some early Christian missionaries introduced rice production into the grassland areas of Abeokuta as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century.

In Cameroon, rice cultivation dates as far back as the colonial era. Although modern rice cultivation is carried out in several regions of Cameroon, there exist two major projects of cultivations in the country, that is, at Maga in the Far North Province and Ndop in the North West Province, which are the cases under consideration. Rice production, which is the backbone of livelihoods in Ndop, is the main cash giver of the area. When the colonialists in the Ndop plain first introduced rice, most of those who were interested in its cultivation were men. These colonial authorities, of course, generally favored men over women as plantation laborers. There was therefore a marked division of labour in the agricultural sector in which the women were exclusively concerned with food-crop production and the men with cash crop production.

However, today, local and global economic dynamics have caused the situation to change. Both men and women have become competitive farmers in Ndop and in Cameroon as a whole. Mbah (2004) noted that because of the ravaging effects of economic crisis that plagued the entire country in the early 1990s, many women became involved in rice production as the only means of supplementing family incomes. This view is shared by Elson's (1992) who observes that structural adjustment policies compelled women to devise survival strategies to meet their family needs by stretching their husbands cash contribution with good housekeeping or earning an income themselves. No matter the good intentions of women to earn income, it is still generally difficult particularly for rural women to enter into previously male-dominated occupations in large numbers (Baden and Milward, 1997, 28). Even where women's access to these jobs is possible, Humphrey (1997) believes it is accompanied by a fall in both the status and remuneration associated with such jobs.

The UNVDA, which is charged with the supervision, production and marketing of the whole operation of rice in the North West Province, evolved from the failure of an earlier project begun in 1967, *Bureau de Developpement de la Production Agricole* (BDPA). The failure of BDPA to obtain good results, led to the creation of UNVDA in 1970. The new structure had just one mission: rice cultivation in the Upper Noun valley. UNVDA was later transformed into a development corporation in 1978. Just like all other government corporations, it suffered enormous setbacks during the mid 1980s economic crisis in Cameroon and the harsh structural adjustment measures that later accompanied the crisis.

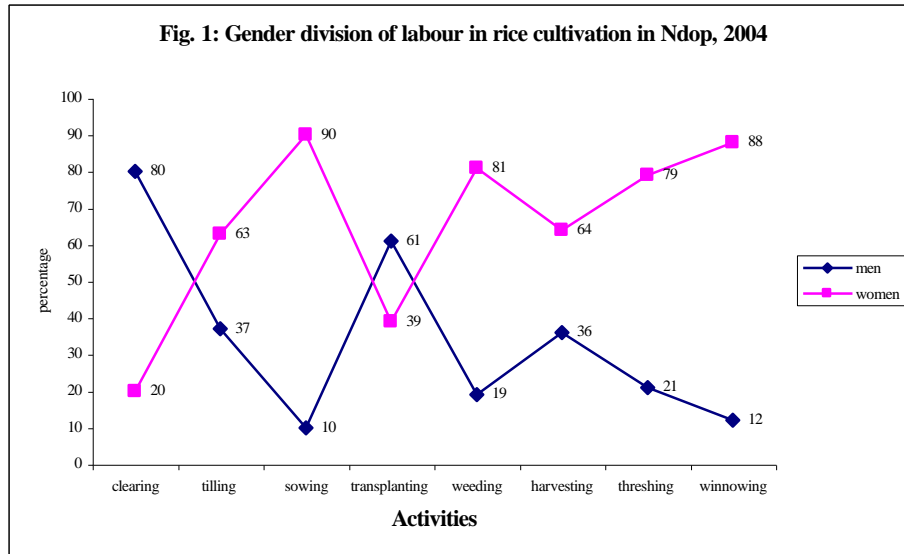
In Sub-Saharan Africa countries, women play an active part and rely on their income from rice to meet a variety of household and personal needs (FAO 1984). Many more women in Ndop have become involved in rice production irrespective of their economic and social backgrounds. Apart from the need to earn wages and become financially independent as indicated by 58% of those surveyed, the women see rice production as a means of employment, given that 84% of them are not adequately educated for white-collar jobs, which in any case are not readily available. Rice cultivation is also a means to fight hunger. Some respondents (10%) reported that they

became rice farmers simply because they got married to rice farmers, while some were motivated by others. These reasons are closely related to the socio-economic profile of the individual farmers and the economic realities of the country.

Female rice cultivators in Ndop fall mostly within the early 20-25 years and late reproductive and productive (ages) stages of life. This is the period when women tend to shoulder more reproductive and/or productive responsibilities as mothers, single parents or widows. The fact that most of them (64%) are married and 54% have between 6 to 10 persons in their households, justifies their involvement in rice cultivation. Moreover, the responsibility involved in taking care of a large household, coupled with the fact that the women are not sufficiently literate to pick up well-paid jobs, pushed them into rice production. Thus women have to work for longer hours, engaging in cash and food crop production as well as other income generating activities like petty trading, to increase household income, cushion the stress of family financial demands, and meet the needs of household members. This can lead to negative health outcomes, as they remain overburdened with their triple roles (reproduction, production and community), which in this case are labor intensive and energy sapping.

Women and men's respective responsibilities in agricultural production are in part determined by the local ecosystem and farming systems (Huvio, (1998). Although women in Ndop play a crucial role in rice cultivation, supplying about 70% of the labour needed for rice cultivation, there is a need to understand the age-based power relation within households and cultural norms of cooperating and dealing with conflict in families as well as the dynamics that shape the distribution of work, income and assets (Cagatah, 1998,4). The field realities in Ndop reveal that women are mainly involved in activities such as sowing, weeding, threshing and winnowing. Men, on the other hand are involved in clearing the rice fields. Both men and women undertake activities like tilling, transplanting and harvesting (see Fig. 1). Van-Est. (1997) also recorded the same pattern of gender division of labour for the cultivation of sorghum amongst the Mousgoum people of North Cameroon.

This situation is similar to what FAO (1997) observed in all rice growing areas in Asia while men undertake activities like land preparation and field leveling, women are responsible for sowing, transplanting, weeding and crop processing. But the difference between Asian countries and Cameroon relates to the original workload assigned to women within these two countries. In Asian countries, women may have been traditionally socialized into rice production since time immemorial considering the fact that rice is a traditional crop. Monsen (1991) adds that though rice production has been largely feminized in S.E Asia, men and women play equal role in intensive irrigated agriculture. This is certainly not the case with communities like Ndop where women have been socialized into other activities related to local crops before the introduction of rice cultivation in the area. Rice production was a solution introduced by women to tackle their general problems of economic dependency and hardship. In other words, bargaining over who does what in the process of rice production does not take place in a vacuum. It is closely influenced by the historical context, social norms, and differential access to resources and opportunities by men and women (Sen., 1990, Agarwal, 1997)



Fallouts of women's involvement in rice cultivation

As the most reliable and major source of income for most female farmers in Ndop, rice production is fast becoming an integral part of the culture of the people. It serves as the mainstay of the present day economy of Ndop. Rice production has employed the women, raised the income levels of the population as well as changed local consumer preferences. Employment rates have reached high levels in Ndop. This is especially true for women who are hired for most of the farming activities. The increase in employment favoring women has drastically challenged traditional patterns of gender roles in the work force and in home. Previously women were socially forbidden to engage in economically profitable activities.

Women's income from rice production has an overall impact on household income. The incomes of these women have a positive and significant effect on household maintenance and feature prominently in terms of expenditures on children's education and health. It was observed that money raised from rice production has been very instrumental in the education of children as indicated by 40% of the respondents. Respondents reported that they have been able to educate their children through primary school (grades) and in some cases they have succeeded to put their children through, the university from incomes earned on rice farming. It confirms the earlier analysis of WARDA (2003) that in many areas of West Africa, the income women generate from rice tends to benefit children and other vulnerable groups, and the general view that women's incomes in poor societies are mostly spent on their children (Engle, 2001, Fonjong, 2002)

Another important gain from rice production has been in the domain of infrastructural development. Some respondents (14%) confirmed that their houses were constructed from rice income. Income from rice has provided 36% of the women with the initial capital to start up other businesses such as provision stores and taverns. All these provide outlets for women's economic and social empowerment. 'Rice wealth' one widow remarks "has completely changed my story from a sad homeless widow to one with a roof over my head and with an assurance of my daily bread..." No wonder Pa Bonjong, a rice farmer, stressed that the first ambition of every rice farmer is to build a

personal house (Ngwa, 203, 224). These women demonstrate that owning their own shelter for their families is a main priority.

In the domain of health, women reported that income generated from rice has been crucial in meeting the health needs of their families. Contrary to what Elson (1992) and Fonjong (2004) observed that women's utilization of health services in most developing countries declined when economic conditions improved, findings in these study show that women increased their demand for health services. In the case of Ndop, as a result of their income generated through rice production women have been able to obtain modern medical care both for themselves and for their children. They are able to get services from government, Christian missionary facilities and private hospitals, and also settle their bills with relative ease. This has led to a reduction in the use of alternative and traditional medicine, and to a marked increase in the use of modern health care and therapeutic services. This access to modern health care has had far reaching positive impacts on women's health, and the health status of the community as a whole. Infant mortality has reduced in particular, but one should not forget that most of the health complications experienced by these women that give rise to their high demand for health services, are caused by an increase in their workload from their involvement in rice production.

All the many gains from women's participation in rice production in Ndop should not push us to the conclusions that agricultural specialization is a panacea for the elimination of the feminization of rural poverty. Not minimizing the relevance of rice specialization and commercialization in fighting poverty and empowering rural women in Ndop, the implementation of such a policy must be made with caution. This is especially so for predominantly agricultural and non-monetary economies that exists in most developing countries. Agricultural specialization and commercialization has the danger of reducing the stability and security of rural livelihood, at least for the short-run (Ahmed and Lipton (nd), even though Sahn, Dorosh and Younger (1996), believe that they are key elements of sustainable development in the long run. Agricultural specialization can be very catastrophic in years of climatic failures or bad harvest. In such situations, there are undesirable nutrition and health effects, which could have been avoided if there were no specialization. While these problems can be avoided in developed countries because of embedded technological development, it is a fundamental problem in developing countries where there are no early warning systems available to farmers.

Access to land, labour and technology

Before the introduction of rice in Ndop, respondents confirmed that the swamps (which are now rice fields) were developed lands, and under the control of the *Fons* or traditional chiefs of the various areas. When rice cultivation was introduced, these swamps were put into use and claimed as natural state property. As the Upper Noun Valley Development Authority (UNVDA) was created to take charge of rice cultivation in Ndop, these swamps were kept under its control. The swamps were developed and mapped out into plots (rice fields) of 10 meters wide and 20 meters long ($200\text{m}^2 = 2$ Acres).

Plots are rented out to farmers without any sex discrimination, upon payment of registration fee ranging from 500FCFA to 2500FCFA or above, depending on the number of plots for an unspecified period, (550FCFA = \$1US). Even though there seems to be

equal opportunity between men and women with regards to obtaining plots, women's chances could be affected by their inability to afford the registration fee as reported by 12% of respondents. This places them in a more disadvantageous position compared to men. Women without savings fall back on their husbands and relatives for loans to acquire rice fields, a situation similar to what Tripp, (1992) observed in Tanzania, where women largely depend on their husbands for take-off capital in order to develop thriving businesses. However, the principle of equal access to rice fields based on a common cost (500FCFA) is a positive step in giving women access to land that the traditional land tenure system denies them. Nonetheless, when this payment is borrowed from her husband, he is likely to have a say in the revenue she derives.

Once registered, farmers are free to cultivate whatever fields are allocated to them. They are levied a development fee of 1000FCFA or a bucket of rice depending on the decision of committee members of their area. They are expected to give a bucket of paddy after each harvest to the royalty or the *Fon* of the area where they cultivate. If these conditions are fulfilled, then a farmer can continue to exercise her *usufruct* right over the land. Occupancy of plots could be transferred to the next-of-kin of a deceased farmer, on condition that the benefactor adheres to the stipulations of the contract regulating the tenancy. This is true in Banfora region in Upper Volta where women have secured access to rice land, and have the right to use the land until death or until they are too old to farm. Then her daughters have the first right to request this land from the "*Chef de Terre*" (FAO, 1984). Women rice cultivators in Ndop have secured access to rice land, provided they can continue to abide by the rules and regulations governing their tenancy. The major limitation of such a tenancy agreement is that women can only use this land for rice production. Women's control of the land can be considered as partial ownership and is subjected to the use and land disposal as defined by the empowerment framework (Moser, 1993).

In performing the various farming activities, 46% of the respondents make use of family labour. Family labour is employed more in activities such as field leveling, weeding, sowing and threshing, while hired labour is employed for preparatory tillage, harvesting, transplanting and at times for weeding. When labour is hired, most of those who supply this labour are women and children. However, 50% of the respondents' make use of both family and hired labour, while 4% depend on hired labour only. This shows how demanding rice cultivation is for women. The other side of the story is that high demand for labour in rice production encourages child labour with its harmful effects on child development.

Although there are success stories where women farmers in some rice growing areas use modern technology such as tractors, power tillers and animal traction, a majority (79%) of the women in Ndop are unable to afford these technologies. The main reason is the lack of funds and credit. As a result, work in rice fields is very labour intensive, requiring about 10 hours daily. A lack of access to initial agricultural inputs acts as a barrier to women rice farmers. Their limited means to hire labour or afford available technology, purchase fertilizer and acquire equipment because of the lack of credit hamper their ability to improve and expand their rice productivity, and generate higher incomes. Research in other contexts also reveals that in most rice growing areas, the lack of access to agricultural resources and services poses a fundamental constraint to

women farmers. Women's inability to access technology is thus, an age-old problem in developing countries that must be addressed by development planners at a macro level.

Implications for gender roles

Traditionally, any activity that is geared toward the upkeep of the home is looked upon as a woman's domain. This amongst other reasons is due to gender segregation, which has narrowed women's range of occupational choices (Baden and Milward, 1997, 28). However, women are increasingly working outside their homes. Women in Ndop perform a number of key roles; first as food producers (subsistence farmers), secondly as mothers, where they bear and raise children. Thirdly, they are responsible for the overall household management that is, cleaning and preparing meals. Finally women execute a number of community tasks such as dancing during traditional festivals, and orchestrating death ceremonies, and annual celebrations. All these activities are more or less linked to women's reproductive rather than productive roles. Crow et al. (1988), in a study of gender division of labour in India observed that the productive work that women perform is often linked to their role as food providers. The authors cited activities performed by women such as tending and milking animals, harvesting and husking grain, as tasks, which only go to assist women in feeding the family, Crow et al. (1988, 155). The introduction of rice cultivation in Ndop, in which women's labour constitutes an important component, has drastically changed the traditional patterns of division of labour and gender roles, which formerly forbade women from engaging in economically profitable activities in this area. Today, the women do not only engage in food crop production, but also in the cultivation of cash crops as well as other income generating activities, through which some of them have become major breadwinners. The logical outcome is a phenomenal reduction in household poverty among many families, particularly female-headed households.

Despite women's role in rice cultivation, their limited access to hired labour as well as their heavy domestic responsibilities has had negative effects on their gender position. The fact that women have to prepare food and do other household chores before going to the farm, leads to a drop in the number of hours, which they will have to devote for rice cultivation. This is worsened because they spend a lot of time walking to and from the rice fields, which are located far away from their homes. For example, 45% of the women surveyed reported that they trek for a distance of 1km to 5km to get to their rice fields. Furthermore, because they conduct other money making or subsistence activities in addition to rice cultivation such as farming other food crops, petty trading, poultry and small livestock rearing, they are truly over-loaded. Women are greatly overworked and have less time to rest and revive themselves. This situation is a common characteristic of most rural women in Cameroon since the advent of structural adjustment. For example, Fonchingong (1999) observes that women in Northwestern Cameroon work longer hours than men in order to support their households. The implication is that they are over burdened, and this could result in negative health from stress, physical deteriorations and nutrient deficiencies. The situation is more complicated for expectant and nursing mothers, who are especially at risk when their diet is deficient of nutrients. Mebrahtu (2000, 41), points out that women's onerous workload if associated with poor diet and poverty, can lead to serious nutritional deficiencies that

increase the risk of contracting diseases. Besides, the absence of basic social amenities like pipe borne water and energy for cooking darkens the whole picture.

However, women's ability to earn income especially through rice production and other economic activities as a result of the changing gender roles have conveniently moved women in Ndop from their traditional domestic/reproductive role to major actors in performing productive and community roles. While some men have no problems with this change, others see female income earners as a threat to their authoritative position as providers. Some men react to women's increased earnings by abandoning their financial responsibilities toward their families and pushing the total burden of household maintenance over to their wives. Fonjong (2002) observed a similar situation among some households in Yaoundé in which cases the husbands' financial contribution to home upkeep dropped remarkably as soon as their wives began to earn income. This is a very serious problem when women use their income principally for household maintenance. As observed in our survey, 39% of the women indicated that they use the income they generated from rice production principally for household maintenance. Such women can contribute financially like men not only to the running of the home but also to self-reliant community initiatives and other development projects. "...women do not provide only common labour to village development associations as in the past, they make a significant financial contribution just like men do...". (A male member of the Ndop traditional council remarked). Such a gender-friendly admission could not be expected thirty years ago especially uttered by a man. There is therefore a new wave of positive change nationwide in which women are increasingly being regarded as counterparts in development.

As previously mentioned one of the critical factors that affect women's gender roles is the traditional methods used in agriculture. These methods are labour intensive, involving the use of non-mechanical and very simple tools such as hoes and cutlasses, which make the work very time and energy consuming. Heavy workload causes a high demand for child labour, particularly upon the female, which has far reaching long-term effects. For example, UNICEF/MOE (1996), concluded that heavy workload for women prevents girls and women from attending primary education because girls are expected to assist their mothers, who initiate them into heavy domestic responsibilities early in life. This notwithstanding, women try to stretch their time to meet up with other activities. A careful look at the calendar for various farming activities in Ndop nonetheless, indicates that rice cultivation can conveniently be carried out alongside the cultivation of other food crops since they have different farming seasons.

Table 1 Calendar for various farming activities in Ndop.

Crops	Planting	Weeding	Harvesting	Approximate duration
Beans	March-April	May – June	July –Aug	4 months
Beans	Sept-Oct	Oct-Nov	Jan-Feb	5 months
Maize	March-April	May-June	Aug- Sept	5 months
Groundnuts	March-April	June-July	Aug – Oct	5 months
Yams	Jan-Feb	April-May	Nov- Dec	11 months

Coco yams	April- May	July- Aug	Nov-Dec	7 months
Rice	July- Aug	Sept-Oct	Dec-Jan	5 months

Adopted from T.F. Leke, “Reconnaissance survey...” in Ngwa (1999).

In fact, one can easily agree with Leke and Ngwa (1999) that rice cultivation in Ndop complements rather than disrupts the cultivation of other food crops, but tends to keep women working throughout the year. This, again, has implications for their health and productivity, especially when one considers that 81% of the women are still within reproductive ages. This is one of the mixed blessings for women. It could easily be managed by introducing women to labour-saving devices both at home and on the farms. Such innovation is cost worthy since it will not only minimize the health effects on the women, but also will boost their productivity, and in a way contribute significantly to national food self- sufficiency.

Conclusion

The question of women inclusive development particularly in developing countries has been of primary concern to feminist activists (see Boserup, 1970, The Dakar Declaration 1982, Momsen, 1991, Moser, 1993, Young, 1993) national women machineries and many development agencies since the women’s decade. Most often, the critical concern is how to dismantle the already well-established male hegemony in these countries that is so well protected by traditional norms and national legislations. Even where there has been some relative success in giving women a chance in the development process, a blind attitude has always maintained that domestic work is the sole responsibility of women. Thus, women’s participation in economic development outside the home means an addition to their existing domestic chores, without sharing any of these chores with men. This is a serious problem. Women’s economic emancipation means women having a double work day alongside men’s continued abandonment of participating in the financial running of the home. The Dakar declaration is categorical on this. It insists that real development will only be achieved when there is clear redefinition of ‘... men and women’s roles in the family, with both having equal rights and responsibilities for shared parenthood. Secondly, there must be profound revalorization of the day-to-day work of the household and family maintenance... (The Dakar Declaration, 1982).

Thus women, particularly in developing countries, must be careful with the introduction of new ideas and concepts into their societies. In fact, innovations should be imported with care and accompanied by pre-empted measures since they may serve as a solution to some problems, but also create other problems. In the case of agriculture, the introduction of additional activity that requires extra hours from women should also be accompanied by labour saving technologies both at home and on the farms. This is not to say that innovations such as women’s involvement in rice production are negative in themselves. Such changes in agricultural practices bring a lot of hope for the future of global food security, which will rely even more than it does now on women’s capabilities and resources (Brown et al., 2001, 205).

Since its introduction, rice has become one of the major cash crops in Ndop; it is one of the staple foods of a majority of people in and around the area. Rice cultivation has provided both social and economic benefits for a vast population in Ndop. The

income women generate from rice is very crucial for family survival. Impacts have been felt especially with regards to children's education, health care, petty trading and improved standards of living. In fact, rice cultivation has been a profitable enterprise for most women; it has empowered them, making it possible for them to efficiently perform their productive and community roles. Female rice farmers have been ushered into a new horizon where their participation in local development is no longer felt just in their homes, but in the whole community. Women pay royalties to the *Fons* for their individual rice fields, a phenomenon that was nonexistent in the past and raises their status in the community. Daughters of rice farmers can inherit their mother's rice plots. Women can hire both male and female laborers to perform various activities on their rice farms. These cannot just be described as changes in the gender roles, but a revolution that is capable of ushering in a new era for men and women in Ndop and Cameroon as a whole.

For this revolution to take place and the new order marshaled in, however, there needs to be major reforms and sensitization at all societal levels. Land reforms, that take into consideration the status of women and other reform programs, which provide a secured tenure to farmers, have far reaching direct and indirect benefits to the environment, (Gueorguieva, 2000). Men in, local and public institutions must acknowledge the efforts of women as crucial for the well being of communities. This means lightening women's task by, men jointly participating in the household chores. Traditional authorities would be wise to eliminate traditional norms that act as a check on women's public activities and reduce their mobility. Public, private and non-governmental organizations should create an enabling environment, for female rice farmers to be more productive, by providing them access to credit, better farm technologies and labour saving devices at home. With the increasing responsibilities assumed by women as a result of rice production, society stands to gain if women are integrated into the main stream of development, and permitted to work together with men as partners in development.

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