

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN CASSAVA PRODUCERS IN BITYILI (SOUTH-CAMEROON) AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER ROLES

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Abstract

In Cameroon, rural women have a significant role in farming and post-harvest activities. Nevertheless, a complex set of rights and obligations reflecting social and religious norms prevail within rural communities, these dictate the division of labour between men and women and act as constraints to women farmers. In fact, women fulfil 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 cassava production provides a possible outlet for the empowerment of these women in cassava 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 cassava farmers in *Bitiyili*, a village of South region of Cameroon, by evaluating the gender specificities within division of labour, daily hours, access and control of resources and benefits. To address this, 44 women cassava producers-processors were randomly selected and interviewed. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used, including focus group discussions, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The results show that although cassava 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: *cassava, production system, gender roles, Bitiyili, Cameroon*

Introduction

Women's triple role in development has been recognized as meeting their strategic and practical gender needs (Moser, 1993; Mosse, 1993; Taylor, 1999). These women's triple roles have been classified into reproductive, productive and community management (Moser 1993: 48-49). Taylor (1999, 18) 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 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 centre of

development. In the economic domain for example, rural women are involved in the cultivation of crops like cassava, maize, grownup, rice, vegetable and others not only for the feeding and consumption of the family but also for cash. They also cultivate cocoa, palm oil, coffee 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.

The cassava sector in Cameroon, where women are primarily farmers, generates an important share of family income. It appears that, for men, the family is not always a priority, unlike women. Thus, in estimating demand functions, Lachaud (1998: 9) argues that the share of female income significantly and positively influences food and energy costs and negatively expenditure on cigarettes, tobacco, etc. Engle (2001: 213), also confirm that women's income has a stronger association with children's nutrition than men's. The importance of women's expenditure on children can be explained as part of their triple roles.

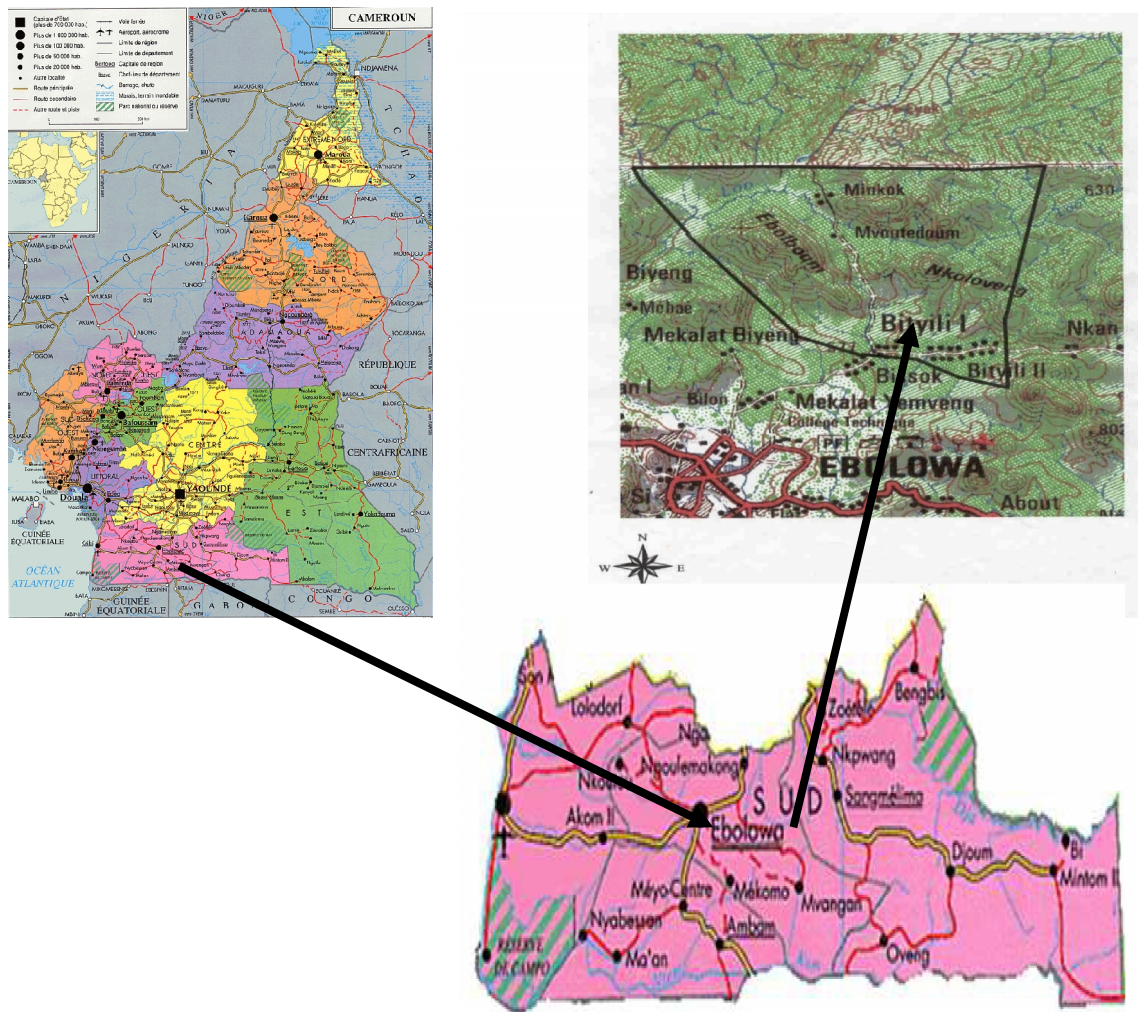
Women in Cameroon play an important role in cassava marketing. While this presents opportunities for women farmers, the challenge is to ensure that women retain control over production, processing, and marketing. Ogbu and Lyelaran-Oyeyinka (1995) observe that while urban markets for cassava thus create opportunities for women farmers, smallholder farmers often cannot marshal sufficient working capital to meet supermarkets' demands for products of consistently high quality. Thro (1994) observed that in Tanzania, men usually control the profits when cassava is grown as a cash crop, while women control small cassava sales and often use the money to buy household necessities and support their children's education. Thus control over cassava profits vary depending on the end use of the crop. It is against this backdrop of the mixed opportunities and challenges of women cassava farmers and the mitigating circumstances surrounding their participation in cassava production, that this paper examines the situation of women as cassava farmers in *Bityili*. This investigation provides profiles and reasons for their involvement and illuminates how cassava farming relegates to their traditionally assigned roles as women.

Material and methods

Our study was conducted in 2012 in *Bityili*, near *Ebolowa*, capital of the south region of Cameroon (see figure 1), where cassava production and processing is a tradition. 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 *Bityili I*, *Bityili III*, *Nvoutedoum* and *Minkok* which are the major cassava production areas in *bityili* was chosen for the study. We started by collecting qualitative data through focus group discussions to get an idea of the overall activities and task involved in cassava production and processing. Based on insights from the qualitative research phase, we formulated a structured questionnaire and individual interviews. Using a random sampling method, questionnaires were administered to 44 women from all the strata of the studied villages in September to December 2012. 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 cassava production and processing, tasks as cassava producer-processor, and changes brought on their socio-economic lives as a result of cassava farming. The questionnaire survey was complemented by four interviews on the same subject conducted with both very poor and influential female cassava producer in *Bityili*. The discussion with the interviewees focused on a common theme, that is, their perception of women in cassava production and processing 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 analysed 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 cassava producers on women’s triple roles.

Figure1: Location of the study area in south Cameroun



Results and discussion

Women in cassava production

In Cameroon, cassava cultivation dates as far back as the colonial era. In the centre and south region, responsibilities’ allotment in a Bantu family prior and just after the independence states the man was the financial provider and in-charge of the hardest work. In rural areas, his activities scope was hunting for bush meat, fishing and picking. Additionally, he cultivated cash crops such as coffee, cocoa and rubber tree. He also took part in community farms and nation building initiatives. The woman was in charge of children’s education and housekeeping. She has to provide food, placing herself at the bottom line of the family diet manager (Vincent, 1976; Anonymous, 2012). 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.

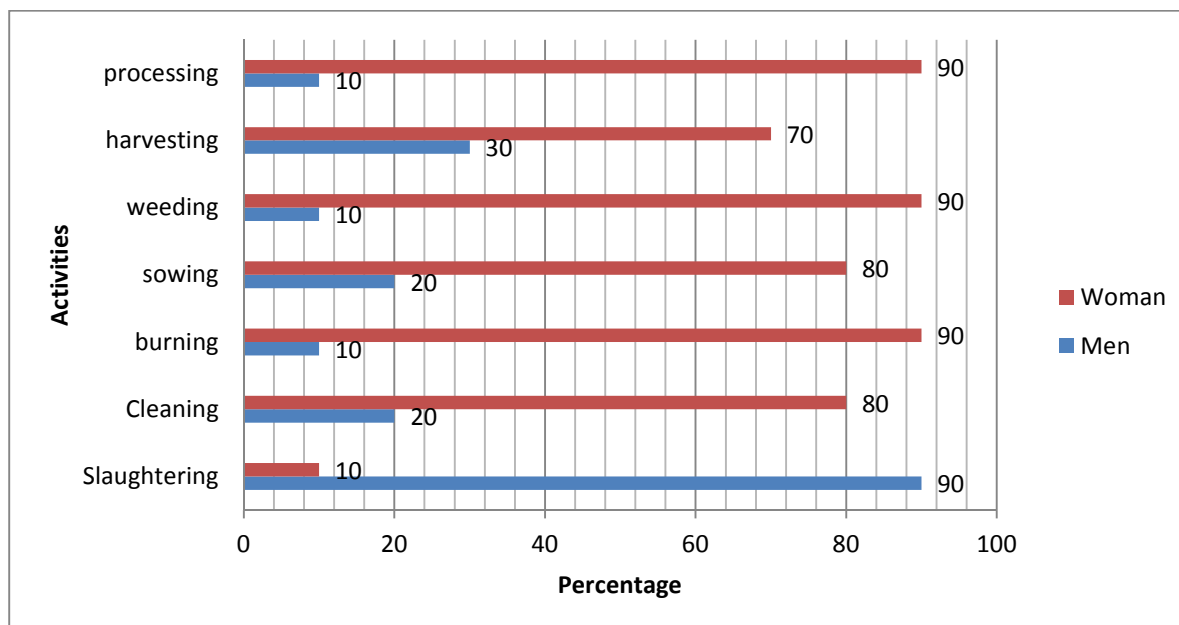
Nowadays, because of the dynamic of local and global economic the situation have change. Both men and women have become competitive farmers in *Bityili* and in Cameroon as a whole. The mid 80s crisis, The Breton Woods institutions structural adjustments in early 90s and the country’s currency devaluation in mid 90s made cash crop prices unpredictable and the government ceased to provide financial aids to farmers (Fonjong, 2004). Many rural-

farming households faced critical financial down sloping and many coffee and cocoa farms were abandoned (Sonwa et al., 2006). In addition, the increasing number of women in the intellectual arena, some with high-institutional positions and women empowerment initiatives contributed to the raising of a self-determined and powerful generation of women, with the quest of using what they have in order to upgrade their family's living conditions. All these created market opportunities for many food crops, among which cassava holds an upright place, moving from a family food crop to a high financial return crop.

Apart from the need to earn wages and become financially independent as indicated by 60% of those surveyed, the women see cassava production as a means of employment, given that 80% of them are not adequately educated for white-collar jobs, which in any case are not readily available. Cassava cultivation is also a means to fight hunger. The majority of respondents (90%) reported that they became cassava producers because cassava is the staple of their diet, 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.

Most female cassava producers in *Bityili* fall within the early 20-45 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 (67%) are married and 70% have between 6 to 10 persons in their households, justifies their involvement in cassava production. 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 cassava 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 labour 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 *Bityili* play a crucial role in cassava cultivation, supplying about 70% of the labour needed for cassava 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 (Cagatay, 1998: 4). The field realities in *Bityili* reveal that the average cassava field per household was less than one hectare and contained on average 8,000 cassava plants. Women are mainly involved and provide the majority of the labour in activities such as, cleaning, burning, sowing, tilling the soil and creating mounds that house the stem-cuttings from which cassava is grown, 1st and 2nd weeding, harvesting and processing for both household consumption and market sale. Processing begins with peeling the root, which is laborious and time consuming. Men, on the other hand are involved in slaughtering or clearing the cassava fields. Both men and women undertake activities like clearing and harvesting (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Gender division of labour in cassava cultivation in Bityili, 2013

This situation is similar to what FAO and IFAD (2005), Nweke *et al.*, (2002), observed in the Collaborative Study of Cassava in Africa (COSCA) where because of the physical demands, men more often than women prepare land for cassava planting, provided 85% of the labour in clearing the land, though their share of labour dropped during tilling and planting to 65% and 40%, respectively. These findings were fairly constant across the six countries, with the exception of Congo, where women provided over 75% of the labour for both ploughing and planting. This production work is of course, in addition to their traditional gender roles as home managers and community organizers.

Fallouts of women's involvement in cassava cultivation

As the most reliable and major source of income for most female farmers in *Bityili*, cassava production and processing is fast becoming an integral part of the culture of the people. It serves as the mainstay of the present day economy of *Bityili*. Cassava production has employed the women, raised the income levels of the population as well as changed local consumer preferences.

Women's income from cassava 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 cassava production has been very instrumental in the education of children as indicated by 80% 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 cassava production and processing. It confirms the general view that women's incomes in poor societies are mostly spent on their children (Engle, 2001; Fonjong, 2002)

Access to land, labour and technology

Women's ability to access land for cassava cultivation varies considerably across regions and cultures. Some women may have legal rights to land but lack of enforcement restricts *de facto* rights (Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2009). In *Bityili*, this is not true because 90% of respondents argue that they have access to land by inheritance. When married or widowed

women grow on land belonging to the family of their husbands. However, when single or divorced, they are entitled to a share of their father's land. Also, women can own land for cassava cultivation by buying a plot because there is no sex discrimination, upon payment of the amount of money desired from the seller. Women cassava cultivators in *bityili* have secured access to cassava 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 cassava and other staple food 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, 80% of the respondents make use of family labour or help group. Family labour and help group are employed more in activities such as weeding, sowing, harvesting and processing. Hired labour is employed for land preparation (slaughtering and clearing) and certain stages of processing (crushing and attaching the cassava sticks). When labour is hired, most of those who supply this labour are men and children. However, 60% of the respondents make use of both family and hired labour, while 6% depend on hired labour only. This shows how demanding cassava cultivation is for women.

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 *Bityili* 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. The introduction of cassava cultivation in *bityili*, 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, 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.

Conclusion

Since its introduction, cassava has become one of the major cash crops in *bityili*, it is one of the staple foods of a majority of people in and around the area. Cassava production-processing has provided both social and economic benefits for a vast population in *Bityili*. The income women generate from cassava 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, cassava 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 cassava 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 can hire both male and female labourers to perform various activities on their cassava 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 *Bityili* 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. By emphasise the status of women' farmers, land-reform programs, which provide secure tenure to farmers, can have direct and indirect benefits for environment (Gueorguieva and Bolt, 2003). Men in local and public institutions must acknowledge the efforts of women as crucial for the wellbeing 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 cassava 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 cassava production and processing, 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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