Multiple Roles of Women in Food Production in Nigeria: Implications for National Development

Obademi Agnes Olufunke, Ako Jean Ada, and Iordaah Terumbur
Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies, University of Agriculture, Makurdi, Nigeria.

Abstract
One striking characteristic of African women in Nigeria as representatives of Africa is the multiplicity of roles. African women make contributions to subsistence farming and wage activities, their active involvement in marketing, processing, food distribution network, and their continued responsibilities as mothers and wives combine to make their roles most important in the survival of the family. The long hours' African women involves in labour and the near impossibility of shelving any of their many responsibilities or the roles necessary for their daily survival hinder their ability to participate fully in agricultural and rural development activities. Nevertheless, women in African with special reference to the Nigerian women, have made important contributions to rural economics through their roles as crop producers, home-makers, mothers, breadwinners and unpaid farm labourers as well as their husband's farms engagements, women therefore, form the backbone of rural development and subsistence agriculture.

The constraints face by women woven around the prevailing cultural, traditional, religious, educational, social and economic norms in the country. This work examined what can be done to improve women’s lot in food production starting from the very local level to national and international levels.

Introduction
In every society, a woman is seen to be responsible for various roles including wife, mother, home-making, cooking, farming and all other unpaid domestic work in and around the home. She is also involved in many community services for the benefit of society. Above all these, a woman is naturally responsible for procreation, that is bringing people into the world. Traditionally, women perform most if not all the family's farm labour. In most societies, it is the women that weeds, plants, fertilizes and harvests food crops and even cash crops grown for the family.

Ijere (1991a) referred to women as “invisible farmers of the world”. Similarly, Omoregbe and Agbonifo (1994) observed that “women in Africa make up more than one third of the work force. They account for nearly 70 percent of the entire agricultural labour force, 80 percent of food producers, 100 percent of those who process basic food stuff and yet undertake 60-90 percent of the marketing”.

In any developing societies, especially the African society, women are the cleaners of rural roads, regular visitors to the weekly markets, impartial arbitrators in farming or clan disputes and
disagreements, preservers or custodians of age-old customs like yam festival, childbirth ceremonies, marriage ceremonies or feasts, etc (Ijere, 1991a).

The heavy work load on women is a product of cultural tradition and nature’s creation (childbirth and related aspects). It is obviously not possible to alter the biological aspect of women although some temporary changes in cultural aspects have been made due to intervention of education and training. Therefore, the tasks that are done by women will broadly continue to be performed by them, for a time to come. What can, however, be done is to reduce the women's work hours necessary to perform the tasks so that they can have more time to themselves and the well being of the family.

The participation of women in agriculture is not a new thing in Africa. Maigida (1991) reported that the role of women in agriculture was noted by anthropologists such as Baumann. His study on gender-based division of labour in 140 African societies showed that women has always participated in agricultural work and that their contribution in this respect has never been in doubt.

In the past few years, the growing literature on the role in agriculture in Nigeria have revealed that women play an important role in the small-scale traditional agricultural system because their labour has been found to be crucial (Spencer, 1976: Spiro, 1977). A World Bank study by Saito and Widmann (1990) showed that women in the sub-Saharan Africa (including Nigeria) provide most of the labour and make key decisions for many agricultural activities. The report further showed that, this does not apply only to food crops production but to other agricultural activities such as cash cropping and animal husbandry.

Potentials of Women Farmers in food production

Women farmers have shown that they can be expects in their own domain. Scientists at the Rwandan Agricultural Research Institute (ISAR) and the International centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Colombia collaborated with local women farmers in an attempt to breed improved bean varieties. Formerly, the breeders' success at predicting the 2 or 3 varieties that displayed most potential under actual growing conditions resulted in mildly successful increases in bean productivity. In this collaboration, the women farmers were invited to examine more than 20 bean varieties at the research station and take home and grow the 2 or 3 they thought most promising. The selections or the women farmers substantially out performed the selections of the bean breeders (Brown et al, 2001).

In addition, it is observed that Zambian wealthier farm households headed by females were more likely than households headed by males to adopt improved maize varieties (Brown et al, 2001). Not only in producing higher maize varieties but also by managing the same resources skillfully.

Women In the evaluation of new technologies showed an excellent way of efficient diffusing technology since women are likely to share their knowledge with other women (Brown et al, 2001). This was found in many reports that women farmers easily do extension of the technologies very effectively.

The centre for indigenous knowledge systems in India noted that women have intimate knowledge and understanding of the traditional rice varieties and their preparation as well as in vegetable seeds as compared to men (Regnan, 2001). Similarly, khoj Research and Publication Centre in Pakistan has reported that women see weeds not as a pest problem but as a source of food for humans and animals. Baathu in wheat field are plucked and cooked in a 'greens' preparation that is considered a delicacy. Similarly, “Saavari” “Patraala” and “Vissa” are of course weeds, which are offered to animals (Rengam, 2001). It was further mentioned in the same study that women in many Asian countries have been engaged in seed selection, conservation and breeding for ages.

Many studies have shown that if/when women farmers have access to resources, they are actually more productive than men farmers. It has been reported in Kenya that when women use the same resources as men, women's productivity would increase 22 percent and surpass the productivity of men (Kesteijn, 1998). Similarly, given equal access to opportunities and resources, women, like men, have proven to be efficient, dynamic and indispensable partners in development. Together on the farm and at all levels of society, women and men constitute a formidable
partnership to achieve food security in the 21st Century (FAO, 1999).

According to Diouf (1996) despite limited access to resources or services and an unfavorable legal environment, 'the perseverance with which rural women confront these obstacles signals the vast untapped potential that could be released to benefit this and future generations'. Considering the less access to public loans, women in Nigeria have been regulating number of agricultural credit schemes where women predominate. These schemes are considered very successful in the case of Nigeria. Similar example is found in Jamaica (FAO, 1998).

It is stereotyped that only men can do the ploughing in agricultural production. But according to FAO (1995) women took over traditional roles or men in the farming system, such as ploughing during the war years in Cambodia and this has continued to the present time. Women fulfilled the gap of shortage of manpower not only in Cambodia but in other parts or the world also.

According to FAO (1998) in Nigeria, only well-to-do urban Muslim women in seclusion do not engage in agricultural work or some kind. But poor Muslim women are heavily involved in processing all tasks involved in food production and processing, including those previously done by men.

Implications of giving women farmers opportunity to use their potentials in food production.
- Women will be less dependence on their husbands, father, brothers as they get involved in more income generating activities food production.
- It leads to women empowerment to be able to take care of their immediate needs, get mechanize farming, modern system of fish production, grain storage and others.
- It leads to mass enlightenment and socialization especially those who venture into political and academic ventures.
- It helps women to assert their political and socio-economic rights.
- It narrows down the existing gender gap between the female and the male. This is because the roles that are traditionally reserved for males are now being taken over by females.
- It generally leads to general and balance development of the society.

Factors and constraints affecting Women's roles in food production

There are several factors and constraints affecting the roles of women in food production which inhibits the women's productivity quality. The agricultural environment faced by women in the developing countries is intricately woven around the prevailing cultural, traditional, religious, educational, social and economic norms in the country.

1. Culturally, Nigeria is a patrilineal society, a factor which negatively affects the access of women to inheritance rights. This factor is reflected in the land tenure arrangement that exists all over the country. For instance, world wide only two percent of all arable land is owned or registered in the name of women (FAO, 1998). Access to land through ownership or secure tenure is a prerequisite improving agricultural productivity. Without secure land rights, women have little or no access to credit are the benefits of membership in rural organization which are often important for obtaining inputs and service. Before marriage, women all free to cultivate farmlands belonging to their fathers, brothers, and other relations while after marriage, they cultivate farmlands belonging to their husbands.

Ega (1991) states that, the land tenure system is basically an arrangement, which determines the ability of individual to get access to land and the security over the use of the land. According to him, the ownership of land differs from the ownership of any other property in the sense that land ownership is a legal profession of a bundle of rights and obligations while some of the rights may be held by individuals, groups and others by political entities. No one anywhere holds land in a totally exclusive way.
He further noted that, notes that the concept that land belongs to the lineage negates the concept of ownership and this implies at control over land cannot reside with the women who are not usually considered household heads even in matrilineal societies.

In northern Nigerian where a strong Islamic culture predominates women are entitled to inherit half the parcel of land due to men. However, such land is redeemed in cash by the brothers to ensure that it remains in the family. Where there are no male members ready and/or able to redeem such land, the inheritance passes over to husband of the woman who cultivates it on her "behalf" especially, since Islamic culture permits the keeping of women in seclusion (Sesay and Odebiyi, 1988).

Ega (1991) stressed further on a sad note that women's ownership of land has not been addressed by any legislation or custom despite the fact that they provide a substantial labour force in agriculture.

Closely related to the problem of lack of access to land is the factor of restricted access to credit and finance. Due to lack of ownership of land, which is one of her conditions demanded by financial institutions before credit is granted, women fine it difficult to obtain credit (Ekwe, 1996; Ijere, 1992).

Accessibility to farm inputs like fertilizers chemicals and seedling is another factor that affect the agricultural activities of women until recently, in many third world countries farming was termed a man's job and all farm inputs were still directed to the men with the assumption that they would trickle down to the women Gabriel (1992); Dankelman and Davidson (1988) reported how Tanzanian women could not adopt hybrid maize because fertilizer and pesticides were allocated to men instead of the women that did most of the fieldwork.

The religious life of the people in Nigeria is largely mixed up with the culture but because it has been use to the detriment of women, it deserves special mention. All the religions in the country preach that women take a back seat with respect to men, although in varying degrees. Thus the right to make crucial decisions is reserved for men. Consequently, the men appropriate for themselves the best and fertile agricultural lands leaving the marginal ones for the women to grow food crops to meet family needs, with rudimentary traditional farm implements (Sesay and Odebiyi, 1988). Furthermore, in the three crop producing areas, only distant farms may be available for the women, thus as Ajayi (1995) noted, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for women to combine larger personal farms with their domestic chores and the work load in the family plots. Religious ethics in some parts of the country make imperative to reduce the contact between women and men who are not their husbands and/or relations. Another crucial factor is education. One aspect of its influence is low its influence is low adoption of modern agricultural technology due to high illiteracy rate of women in the rural areas who tend to rely on others for even the basic instructions concerning modern agriculture (Okorji and Ayichi, 1977).

The influence of education on the activities of women is the migration tendency of educated women like the men into the wage labour sector of the economy, thus further worsening the work load situation on women. The implication of this is that educated women work the same hours with men in their office in addition to their domestic roles. Gyang (1987) reported that due to the low remuneration in the agricultural sector, educated women have gone into wage labour sector since wage sector is the most popular form of work as it offers greater security of social benefits and income. Today, more women are going into wage labour sector since education is being emphasised as the bedrock of any society's development.
7. Technologically, both women/men are still tied to the use of hoes as the major tools for farming. This is due to their poor financial position that would not afford them the use of improved technologies. Another side to it is the unwillingness of technologists to develop affordable tools for the use of women Osuala (1991). Chambers (1993) reported that until recently technology to reduce the drudgery of women was regarded by technologists as uninteresting and of low priority.

8. Inaccessibility to extension information and training is another factor that influences agricultural activities of women. All over Africa, women are neglected as regards information training in agricultural innovations, An FAO (1974) survey showed that whereas 100% of information and training in home economics was directed to women, only 15% in agriculture and 20% in animal husbandry were directed towards women. Spiro (1985) noted that women were not sought and informed about the uses and potentials of fertilizer by extension workers, Anokoyo et al (1994) discovered during a survey that many extension staff of the WIA component of the ADPs did not have extension training.

9. Neglect of women's knowledge in agriculture mostly in extension services affects food production. Dankelman and Davidson (1988) reported that women's agriculture knowledge provide security for themselves and for others. The example of the Zimbabwean women who used traditional millet seeds while others used new seed but at the on set of drought their traditional crops survived stand out clearly to be appreciated. The use of new agricultural technologies to the neglect of traditional practices and tools threatened the sustainability activities of women as women no longer selected seeds after each harvest for the following year; thus the genetic-erosion of crop varieties (Dankelman and Davidson, 1988).

Women experience a lot discrimination that influences their participation in agriculture studies on gender division of labour indicated that tasks which were tedious and needed hours to be accomplished were allocated to the women (Mueller, 1985: Adekoye, 1984: Palmer, 1991).

Conclusion
The ultimate goal for the society is to experience balance development.

There is need to promote equal opportunities basically for agricultural education follow by empowerment in order to strengthen skills capabilities of rural women to reduce the burden of their work lord/labour and improve their productivity in all spheres of work.

This will help them give their substantial contributions to the society and reach their full human potentials.

Recommendations
The following suggestions are recommended to improve women's lot in food production starting from the very local level to national and international level.

1. Many researchers are of the opinion that agricultural development programmes should foster more on women in rural areas. This will serve as a means of promoting self-sufficiency in family food needs. Such programmes will also increase the employment opportunities of women.

2. Grazing areas with improved pastures should be created to solve the problems of feeding animals. Government should ensure that adequate veterinary services are extended to the rural women farmers. The government system should provide legal access to women to exercise all the production factors independently that women need access to technology, and resources to improve and expand their farm activities which includes encouraging cash crop production for export, very much based on the Green Revolution framework of improved seed s, fertilizer and pesticides (Rengam, 2001). Improving productivity will depend to a great extent on ensuring that
Karki, Lila Bahadur (2002) pointed out that, there must be national priority and consensus to compulsorily incorporate women farmer development programme intensively. The concerned policy makers and planners should be aware about gender issues, their roles, constraints and potentialities in agricultural production. Hereafter, the plan document should adequately retain women's needs on priority whereby development workers are compelled to implement it gradually. This emphasized situation would make women more responsible and encourage them further for higher contribution to increase agricultural production ahead. This whole scenario regarding women's issue would be possible only when the government takes initiation in making plans and implementing it.

Sessay and Odebiyi (1998) suggested that women in high places of authority should pressurise the society to give the kind of recognition due to women, particularly the vast but poor majority in the rural areas involved in farming. They need to mobilize their counterparts in the rural areas to exploit their economic potentials to the fullest. They also need to campaign for the massive education of young women in the area of agricultural training where the interest of a vast majority of women will be better served.

Sessay and Odebiyi (1998) noted that the type of tenurial arrangement practised in many Third World counties do not favour women and must be modified to accommodate their interest. With the current drive towards registration of land, the right of women to be part-owners of any piece of land belonging to their husbands either in their life-time, or after the death of the latter, should be recognized and given legal backing. In addition, women should be allowed to inherit land belonging to their fathers just like their male counterparts. This suggestion will be difficult to execute within the present framework of polygamous...
family set-ups that are backed up by religious and cultural institutions. There should be a long term plan for achieving monogamy in the Third World countries which can only be done though aggressive social-orientation of the populace.

There is also the need to de-emphasize the cultural value or land that has been the main cause of ‘disinheriting' women of land. The economic value of land as a production resource to enhance one’s economic well-being, and to which all siblings are entitled to, should be stressed.

Agricultural research and extension programmes should be more responsive to the needs of women. The World Bank (1989) noted that women farmers should be involved in on-farm research to make it largely correspond to their needs and constraints. A way must be found within our cultural and religious setting to access women who farm, to extension services. This may involve training female extension workers who can then reach other women, including those in seclusion. The Family Support Programme can serve as a veritable vehicle towards accessing women to extension services and integrating agricultural research findings to women's activities. The problem of inadequate capital for investment is a major factor plaguing women's agricultural production activities. As a way out, Sesay and Odebiyi (1998) suggested that women farmers should form cooperatives bodies that can source for loans for on-lending to individual women members to invest in farm and non-farm ventures. The efforts of the Family Support Programme in accessing women to a number of economic and production ventures in Nigeria 1S highly welcomed, especially those that are both rural and agro-based. However, there is the need to de-emphasize the influence of government sponsored urban middle class women that tend to spend more financial resources on organizing fanfares, than in establishing visible production projects. The Family Support Programme should limit its activities to mobilizing the women, sourcing and guaranteeing loans for identified women's projects that are economically viable.

References


Multiple Roles of Women in Food Production in Nigeria Implication...


