

Male-out Migration and the “Left-Behind:” Agriculture and Food Security Policy Supports and
the Woman Smallholder Farmer in Ghana

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Abstract

Migration has a deep effect on families, and small-holder family farms. When men migrate for economic opportunities, the “left-behind” women family members, already burdened with time poverty, often fill the gap to manage the farm without the resources, knowledge, or farm inputs required to succeed. Using the agricultural policy of Ghana as an example, this paper addresses the need for better agricultural policy to address the challenges that these invisible women farmers face is necessary to ensure global food security.

Keywords: time poverty, small-holder farmers, women, left-behind, migration, agriculture

Introduction

In 2014, over five and half million people – mostly men – migrated from the West Africa nation of Ghana; a number that represents 22% of the total population (“Ghana Demographics Profile 2014,” 2015). Most of those numbers, the exact number unknown, are men from the predominately rural and poverty-stricken areas of the country. Migration out of and around sub-Saharan Africa is, and has been for centuries, a common family survival strategy to increase personal and economic opportunities. It is also considered a rite-of passage (especially for young men) for many cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, impacting their social and family standing, and their availability of mates, as young women prefer men who migrate (Yabiku, Agadjanian, & Sevoyan, 2010). While it is also true that many women migrate as well, most women are referred to as the “left-behind,” the family member chosen to stay in the village to care for family members, manage the household, and agricultural activities (Archambault, 2010). While this is not surprising, the effects of male-out migration are disturbing. Rural women make up one-fourth of the world’s population and are much worse off than rural men in all spheres of life, including agriculture. This is increasingly dangerous for global food security, as women smallholder farmers are under-resourced in nearly every capacity (Danziger, 2009).

In 2011, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States published an astonishing fact: if women worldwide had the same productive resources as men, they could increase on-farm yields by 20-30%; raising the agricultural output in developing nations 2.5-4%, which in turn would reduce hunger by 12-17% (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). The official numbers of the hungry and food insecure people of the world vary by about a million,

depending on the organization and definition of food insecurity¹; however, the additional number of people fed in the world would range from 135 to 200 million if the gender gap in agriculture could be breached. There is global recognition across development organizations, governments, and scholars that “the feminization of farming” must be addressed, and there are promising starts; yet overall, the global socio-economic condition of women is declining (Olivier De Schutter, 2013). This is a human rights issue (O. De Schutter, 2012).

The reasons for this gender gap are complex and yet simple at the same time. Universal discrimination, gender stereotypes, and low-social standing have kept women from improving their economic status (Olivier De Schutter, 2013). In the report to the Human Rights Council on Women’s Rights and the right to food, Oliver De Schutter writes:

“...discrimination against women remains pervasive in all spheres of life. It may result from laws that themselves discriminatory...the discrimination the women face is the result of social norms and customs linked to certain stereotypes about gender roles; unequal access to productive resources such as land and to economic opportunities, decent wage employment, unequal bargaining position within the household; gendered division of labor with within households that result in both time poverty...and lower levels of education, and women’s marginalization from decision-making spheres at all levels (O. De Schutter, 2012).”

De Schutter also reports that a crucial factor in the in the agriculture gender gap has nothing to do with farming yet is critical to food security; women are caught in the “care economy;” women are principal caregivers, along with other responsibilities, and are therefore caught in time poverty. Women and girls around the world must perform the unremunerated work of cooking, cleaning, fetching water, collecting firewood, and caring for the very young and elderly. These

¹ The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that there are 795 million food insecure people in the world in 2015. There are two forms of hunger: protein-energy malnutrition and micronutrient hunger.

activities are equivalent to as much as 63% of the gross domestic product of India and Tanzania (Olivier De Schutter, 2013). Even if women and girls had access to educational and economic opportunities; due to time poverty they would neither be able to attend or participate in the other spheres of life which is their right and international law.

Women Smallholder Farmers: The “Left-Behind”

Despite global study and awareness, many countries are not addressing the situation of the woman smallholder farmer and the “left-behind” women farmer is nearly invisible. When researcher Maria Reimao arrived in Guatemala to study the women left behind after spousal migration, she was told by the experts and policymakers that they simply didn’t exist – as the women were receiving remittances, they left the farm and farming. The population was small and marginal at best, and probably didn’t exist at all. Reimao found that not only was this untrue, but there were a great many women in this situation. They were invisible (Reimao, Theis, & Coelleo, 2015).

Along with the pervasive type of gender discrimination described by De Schutter, these women also had to deal with the colloquial label of “left-behind,” and stigmatization, as a result. Many of them had no knowledge of farming before their spouses left and had to rely on fathers or other male relatives for information. They also experienced stigmatization in extension services, not only because of the very common practice of women being ignored by male extension agents, but also because as they received remittances, it was assumed extension assistance was not needed. (It was reported that this continued even after the women established themselves as capable farmers (Reimao et al., 2015) .) Also invisible are the predominantly relatively older women, over 35 years in age (O. De Schutter, 2012). Although this research was

done in Guatemala, comparable results from all over the world have been reported in the literature. The combination of male-out migration and the pervasive, destructive discrimination women face is now called “the feminization of farming (Olivier De Schutter, 2013).”

Although the trend of the feminization of farming has been noted in the literature for at least 6 years, it has received very little attention from governments and agricultural policy makers (Danziger, 2009). As reported by Special Rapporteur on The Right to Food to the United Nations, Oliver De Schutter, writes:

Data in this area are often imprecise and difficult to interpret, partly because of the lack of gender-segregated data, ... women’s contribution to “subsistence” agriculture goes unreported in official statistics, and because the share of women’s employment in agriculture varies from crop to crop and activity to activity...Nevertheless ...this feminization of farming is well documented.

Not only are the policy supports missing for these women, but manufacturers of agricultural inputs have not noticed a new market and customer base developing in these areas of men-out migration. Sacks of fertilizer remain too large and difficult for a woman to carry, and “farming equipment continues to be designed for men, forcing women to use tools that are inadequate in weight or size (Danziger, 2009).” Indeed these women are invisible.

Ghana: Agricultural Policy

Ghana is one of the most prosperous countries in sub-Saharan Africa having reached middle-income status in 2009. Although there is considerable poverty in the north, southern Ghana and the capital city of Accra is very developed (n.a., 2015). Despite the attention that the Ministry of Agriculture is focusing on large and medium size farms, 80% of Ghana’s agricultural output is from small farms using rudimentary technology; 90% of those farms are less than 2 hectares in size (n.a., 2007). It is understandable that the Ministry of Agriculture would create

partnerships with tractor suppliers (Diao, Cossar, Houssou, & Kolavalli, 2014), create partnerships with the American Soybean Association (USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, 2015), or celebrate the “National Farmer’s Day (Ministry of Agriculture, n.d.); yet there seems to be little effort or government dollars being spent on the woman farmer, especially the vulnerable or marginalized, even though it is considered a key element to the Food and Agriculture Development Policy (n.a., 2007). I entered the following keywords into the World Bank database: “women,” “agriculture,” and “Ghana.” Two projects were listed, the Commercial Agriculture project and the Land Administration project. In neither of the descriptions were gender-based methods, protocols, or measurements named; nor were there indications that these areas were being addressed in the implementation reports² *even though addressing the gender imbalance is a clear priority in the Food and Agriculture Development Policy* (n.a., 2007). There are several NGOs working in this content area, however coverage, communication, and efforts are not organized and have little support from the Ghanaian Ministry of Agriculture. If this is a case of policy doublespeak, the mouths that are speaking are not the ones going hungry.

Conclusion

The feminization of farming clearly needs more attention, both from scholars and policy makers. The woman smallholder farmer is not typically considered; and more seriously, the “left-behind” woman smallholder farmer is often ignored. Ghana, one of the wealthier countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as an example, can capitalize on this opportunity and project itself as the policy leader it aims to be. “Across the developing world, millions of people are migrating from

² These implementation reports are included with the cited report.

farms to cities in search of work. The migrants are mostly men,” de Schutter writes. “As a result, women are increasingly on the front lines of the fight to sustain family farms (Olivier De Schutter, 2013).” It is a fight yes, and front-line combatants require support and resources. Let us open our eyes to the discrimination the left-behind smallholder woman farmer faces and equip these women with the means to win.

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