

Shifting Gender Power Dynamics: Agricultural Commercialisation and Its Impacts on Gender Relations in Yekemi

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Abstract

It tends to be the case that within Nigeria contexts, broadly speaking, there continues to exist patriarchal forms of social organisation and normative gender relations. As such men tend to be regarded as the dominant drivers of decision-making and the heads of the households. Agricultural activities similarly continue to be perceived as male activities, and subject to male authority, despite the fact that in many contexts women constitute the majority of agricultural workers and produce most of Africa's food for subsistence. Women are regarded as farm assistants or subsistence farmers with little or no economic value or power. Little attention or recognition is paid to women's role within agricultural production and their economic contribution to national economies through commercial agriculture. At the level of commercial agriculture there is little or no gender segregated data on agricultural outputs. Societal job demarcations, coupled with cultural expectations are major factors in divisions of labour traditionally which serve to maintain women's perceived status as subordinate. Research conducted in 2012 on gender relations in cash crop production in Yekemi village in Nigeria reveals the power dynamics associated with female cash crop farmers. Yekemi, though a traditional rural setting, has overcome some of these traditional gender divisions and gender segregation in agricultural labour. It was discovered that women in Yekemi empower themselves through their agricultural commercialisation in cash crop production which provides them with recognition in the village and grants them the ability to exercise agency in decision making within their households. This paper examines the impact of women's involvement in the commercialisation of agriculture on gender relations, using processes of agricultural commercialisation and rural change as a lens through which to explore shifting gender power dynamics. The paper concludes that if participation in commercialisation could be responsible for economic independence and shifts in gender power dynamics beyond traditional norms, we should start to conceptualize ways to empower rural African women to gain a more visible and recognised foothold within commercial agriculture.

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Introduction

The commercialization of cash crop production is perceived by rural farmers as a means of increasing the quality of rural farmers' livelihoods, and employment opportunities in the rural areas and providing better lives for their families. Participation of rural farmers in cash crop production in global market networks is expected to improve their living standards because agricultural commercialization stimulates specialization and market orientation of agricultural production (Hinderink and Sterkenburg 1987). Though commercialized agriculture tends to be regarded as large scale production with modern mechanisms in place, in Nigeria small scale farming still dominates the production of these crops. The significance of rural farmers' input into cash crop farming is indicated by Nigeria's position in the world market. According to Onwumere and Njoku (2010) citing Oyinloye (1999);

'Nigeria as a developing country had long ago commercialized her cocoa production and was rated the second highest producer of cocoa in world ranking, until 1971 when its export declined' (Onwumere and Njoku, 2010:11).

Nigeria, a nation with 50% of its population in rural areas (CIA: 2011) with each area depending on their farm resource for their livelihoods, cannot claim any success in commercialization of cash crop production without referencing the contribution of small-scale farmers in rural areas. However, 'there is a fear that commercialization essentially means promoting change that is in the interests of larger, more powerful players, to the detriment of smallholder farmers' (Leavy and Poulton, 2007:2). Akande (2003:5) reveals that the major source of employment for rural dwellers is still agriculture. The fact remains that rural people continue to rely on their farming activities and most of them combine subsistence with commercial methods to make ends meet. Moreover, Nigerian agricultural commercialization still depends on small holder rural farmers in products like cocoa. The important role of rural farmers of cocoa crop could be felt from the report of Nigeria's position in world export dwindling, with exception of cocoa crops. This is attested to by Aderibigbe who states that

‘by the mid-1980s, Nigeria’s world market share for agricultural products had dwindled to less than 0.1 percent. Today, none of the country’s export crops, with the exception of cocoa, commands any significant world market share. With the increasing need to eradicate poverty and put an end to hunger and malnutrition as enshrined in the MDG targets, Nigeria and indeed many African countries are returning to the agricultural sector for possible solutions (Aderibigbe, 2007:14).

The same Nigerian cocoa that still commands significant world market share is in the hands of rural people, and now often specifically in the hands of women, as in the case of Yekemi. The need to study their roles in cash crop farming becomes pertinent due to the fact that despite the growing literature analyzing agricultural activities through a gendered lens, there remains a dearth of detailed research documenting women’s involvement in farm activities in the Nigerian context. In Yorubaland where women have tended to be recognized as traders, female farmers in the rural areas continue to be under-recognized in as much as their roles as farmers in their own right tend to be overlooked and they are more likely to be seen as farmers’ wives, subordinates or merely farm labourers. This is so because their roles have not been adequately researched and the dynamic nature of rural society not fully appreciated when it comes to agrarian change. This can result in traditional views of farming roles and experiences being perpetuated rather than capturing the shifting gendered power dynamics within the household, and, where it occurs, women’s increased involvement in agricultural commercialization.

From agriculture’s earliest beginning in traditional settings to its most modern period women have always been active participants, both as subsistence and cash crop farmers. The reality of this fact is however often ignored as men are generally held to be farmers while women who engage in farming are regarded as gardeners (Whitehead and Bloom 1992). Their contribution to agriculture is not seen as ‘production’ but as ‘helping out’ (Brydon and Chant 1989:69, Spring 2000:1). Many studies have shown the subordinate position allocated to women who engage in agricultural production e.g. Boserup (1970), Brydon and Chant (1989), Spring (2000) and Momsen (2004). Nigerian women have always been active participants in the agricultural system, both at the subsistence level and at the commercial level. They take part in both food and cash crop production; although not many studies in agriculture have focused on this fact.

Although “Farmer” is a gender-neutral term in the Yoruba language, it tends to be that men are more likely to be regarded as farmers than women. Of the limited research that exists pertaining to Yoruba women, most has presented Yoruba women to be predominantly traders (e.g. Brydon; 1989, Ojo 2001). This illustrates how women’s contribution in farming is hardly acknowledged. Ojo (2004:238) also references Yoruba women, but again while she describes Yoruba women as ‘intelligent, lively, expressive, determined, courageous, devoted to family, enterprising and versatile,’ she does not reference women’s roles in agricultural activities. Men are described as predominantly farmers who engage in strenuous farm work. Cash crops have been gender-stereotyped as men’s production (Ogunlela and Mukhtar 2009). It is believed that men need to spend more money than women and so should engage in income-generating ventures while women should play complementary roles in business and agriculture.

Based on this view, this article attempts to analyse the situation of Yekemi village emphasising on the emergent of women participation in cash crop production, gender relation in agricultural commercialization of the produce, women access to farm resources, and effect of their participation in terms of power dynamics. There are different work on gender and agriculture that emphasized the need to incorporate women into agricultural developmental programmes and more importantly recognizing their contribution in agriculture. This article moreover seeks to expatiate the discussion beyond women as farm labourer to farm owners.

The findings reported in this work are from a research conducted in 2012 on gender relations in cash crop production in Yekemi village. Ethnographic approach was used to capture the intricate gender relations that exist among both female and male cash crop farmers of Yekemi. During the period of ethnography, unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, visitations, consultations, walking surveys of the farms and land use was conducted to have in-depth knowledge of both genders involvement in the cash crop farming. The findings called for researching into the dynamic nature of rural society when studying agrarian change.

The area of study and the commercial farming activities

This study took place in Yekemi, a Yoruba village in Ife East local government area of Osun State in Nigeria. The predominance of cash crop production activities in Yekemi and the preponderance of female farmers in cash crop farming make it a logical choice of location for this research. The village comprises different people from various towns and cities from

Yorubaland such as Osogbo, Ipetumodu, Ogbomosho, Ibadan, Ife, Ikirun, Igosun and Offa who have come to the community purposely for farming. Most of the Yorubas migrated there for farming as a result of availability of fertile lands in Yekemi and the need to diversify efforts towards economic activities, especially where large expanses of arable land are not readily available. Yekemi's main crops are cocoa, palm trees, and kolanuts. These are the principal crops for commercialisation.

Engagement in cash crop production activities by both women and men in Yekemi is a reflection of the importance of survival strategies, to secure better livelihoods and self-reliance in every household. The struggle for economic self-sufficiency which brought about women's participation in cash crop agricultural economy is a way of fighting against poverty. Rural farming is traditionally family work in which every member has their role to play. Boserup's (1970) work on women in agriculture identified however the gender-specific nature of distribution of labour input and its effects on development strategies in African agriculture. Despite the efforts of both men and women in agricultural production, Boserup argued that most attention paid to male farmers. For Boserup then, women's voices were not heard nor was their labour given adequate recognition in the economy. Since Boserup's ground breaking study, a range of authors have emphasized women's different roles in development (for example Moser, 1993; Mosse, 1993; Momsen, 2010) recognising their triple roles in terms of reproductive, productive and community management work. This was summarised by Momsen (2010:2) as 'housework, childcare and subsistence food production'. These roles have increased with women's involvement in commercial production.

Rural women and men have always been working jointly on the farm, yet women's contributions have tended to lack recognition and documentation (Ogunlela and Mukhtar 2009; World Bank 2008). In recent years there has been an increase in the recognition of women's participation in agriculture in Africa by both national governments and international agencies (Van Vuuren: 2003) The rate of changes in the roles of both women and men, their inter-relationship and the nature of the family system that is operating in the households are rapidly increasing (Blau & Ferber 1986). However women's issues are yet to be adequately addressed in planning and programmes (World Bank 2008).

Patriarchal assumptions in Yoruba culture sees cash crop farming as a predominantly male domain. Women are traditionally seen as helpers when it comes to cash crop farming

activities (Ojo 2001:1) and this deters women from participating or functioning as co-operators in this area of agriculture. This is a major limiting factor for women farmers who may wish to embark on lucrative agricultural business, beyond petty trading in agricultural produce. Thus women's involvement as co-owners in cash crop farming and the changes in gender relations in Yekemi show significant changes, and this significance underpins my study of these shifts and their effects on women's ability to carry these changes forward.

Yekemi and cash crop commercialization

The main economic activity in Yekemi is cash crop farming. Most farmers also have small subsistence farms for family food consumption only. Significantly in Yekemi, while both genders engage in cash crop production as their main source of income, women are in the majority.

Most of the cash crops (cocoa and palm trees) planted in Yekemi are lifelong crops. According to the farmers, changing to high yielding crops is a gradual thing in the sense that they cannot clear old ones off and start planting the new breed, replacement could only be done on those trees that are not as fruitful as expected. The performance of cash crops depends greatly on the kinds of input and attention the crops receive. Male cocoa farmers often use their wives as labourers while female cocoa farmers often hire labourers when additional hands are required. This is because the husband may not be around, or he may only assist in arranging for labourers, and advises when there is a need. Cocoa plantation requires both genders in making it thrive. One of the male palm tree climbers confirmed the importance of joint efforts in cocoa farming:

‘A cocoa farmer may be married or not but he needs women to assist in the farm because he can't do it alone. If he does not have a wife, then he will employ women to work for him and he will pay them. If it's the fumigation period, it's the women that will fetch water which the man will mix the chemical with, before fumigating the trees. When it gets to harvest period, it's the women that will do the packing and gathering, pod cutting and bean packing processes. All these are women's works. ..., same thing with women cocoa farmers, both need each other ... most of these women are even hardworking and committed to these farms than the men ... their effort make it a lucrative one for them’ (Gabriel, male, palm tree climber)

This comment shows that women are not just starting work on cocoa, they have been doing so for a long period of time. The difference now however is the new trend of women who have cocoa farms for themselves. Involvement of women in cash crop production is highly demanding but from my findings women see it as economic freedom and a way of making ends meet. There are different reasons for women participation in cash crop production, according to a discussion had with a group of female farmers,

‘... the pride and dignity of being able to discharge one’s responsibilities when called upon by the family is enough as a source of inspiration’ (Damilola, female, cash crop farmer)

‘There is a lot of respect when you are seen as a reliable and responsible person when you are called upon’ (Tolu, female, palm oil farmer)

‘I have to sacrifice for the future of my children, they must not suffer like I do ... they need to be educated’ (Simbi, female, cocoa farmer)

Contrary to cultural practice where women are expected to be meek and mild, some of the young rural women in agriculture appear to be more assertive than older women. They make decisions about the sale of their agricultural products more freely, have input in household income, invest in houses or purchase land at their own will and more importantly, they express themselves freely. All these reflect major changes in the traditional gender divisions of responsibilities both at levels of household and farm work. This is obvious in the comment of a young female farmer I met working on her farm. Although her husband is alive, she regards him as good as dead!

‘The future of my children is my focus. I’m investing in my old age since it appears I have no husband. I’m married and my husband also is hale and hearty, but I’m solely responsible for my welfare that should have been the duty of my husband. This palm fruit business is my source of livelihood’ (Lolade, female palm oil farmer)

The causative factors for increased female participation in agricultural production may not be precisely determined. However, the issues of rural men migrating, coupled with the effects of increasing numbers of households being headed by women, and women inability to work beyond the petty trading level due to not being educated are common. The migration of men can be seen as a kind of empowerment for women as it encourages women’s determination to survive without waiting for husbands’ remittance or presence to make a living. The journey

starts with making decisions, in the absence of men. Some of the female participants narrated how and the reason for joining farming during a focus group discussion. According to Mulikat, a palm oil farmer:

‘You see, I can say I resorted to farming in order to discharge my responsibilities as the eldest child in my family. You know my siblings can come any time to request for assistance, also my children too and the food stuffs which I was trading in was not bringing in profit at all. ...That’s why I decided to add farming to what I’m doing, in order to make ends meet, because the food selling business was not even going well before it packed up. It is because the businesses we are into do not yield reasonable profit and there are a lot of responsibilities on ground which must be honoured, that’s why we ventured into farming’ (Mulikat, Palm oil farmer)

In Tosin’s (female cocoa farmer) view

‘... what brought many of us into farming was because petty trading was not sufficient to bear the responsibilities of taking care of the home, that’s why we ventured into farming,, it goes a long way in ameliorating the burden. For example you can quickly run to a produce buyer to collect or borrow money if you want to pay your children’s school fees, but that is not possible in petty trade because there is even no profit at all and the profit is spent immediately it is made’ (Tosin female cocoa farmer)

Kemi concluded that

‘This is why most people resorted to farming. You see, we women in this place are like men, we always wear trousers because we are responsible for those responsibilities that are meant to be borne by men’ (Kemi female palm tree farmer)

From these comments it could be perceived that cash crop farming is viable and serves as collateral for farmers to borrow money from produce buyers. This ability to borrow money from produce buyers acts as an encouragement for women to participate in cash crop farming in Yekemi.

Nevertheless, women’s involvement in production activities does not stop their domestic roles of cooking and cleaning. They are usually the last person to go to sleep at night and the

first to rise in the morning. After leaving the farm around 6pm, they still have to cook dinner for the family and begin household tasks when they return home.

The opportunity for both genders to participate in cash crop farming can be seen as a major step to development. This has given Yekemi women an edge, if not over everything, at least to overcome poverty. It is not that they are self-sufficient, but at least they have a means of surviving. From my findings, cash crop farming is not gender specific, though it has been associated with men for many years. When women do not own a farm they still have roles to play in the farming of cash crops. This has created a cooperative relationship between the two genders, as each has their roles to play for the success of the production.

Overall gendered assessment of inputs in cash crop farming in Yekemi shows that because women participate in all cash crops in the village they work round the year, whereas the majority of men work on cocoa alone which increases their income, but this is seasonal, while women (especially those who combine two or the three cash crops in the village) derive their income from a diversity of produce at various points in the year.

Women and men as farm owners in Yekemi village

Apart from both women and men playing important roles in cash crop production in Yekemi's agricultural production, ownership of farms is not limited to a particular gender. According to my findings it was not like this from the inception of Yekemi. Agriculture (especially cash crop production) was initially a male-dominated enterprise. Women's involvement in agriculture was a gradual process. This is in consonance with the views of Blua & Ferber (1986) who stated that we are in a world of rapid changes in the roles of women and men and their relations to each other.

Though farming in general incorporates both genders in its activities, its incorporation tends to subject women to subordinate positions, particularly when only men seem to be the owners. However in Yekemi, both women and men operate on an ownership level and ownership by women seems to be more significant and distinct as they control virtually every aspect of their production by paying either in cash or with the produce where payment is required. They engage labourers when additional hands are required and assign work to them. As one of the participants said;

‘ownership gives you confidence and dignity in the society ... though strenuous, we are enjoying it’ (Tosin, female, Cocoa and Palm tree farmer)

Some of my findings during my interactions with male farmers reflect why men prefer a joint family farming system. This is due to the benefit derived from total support they enjoy from their wives which is contrary to what is in operation when women now own and control their own farms. Although men assist their wives in getting workers occasionally they do not do the work for their wives. Conversely when women do have their own farms, they still assist their husbands when the need arises. With the increase in number of women farm owners, in the case of cocoa farming, the need of more farm assistants prompted the Gara people who work on palm trees to take over the cocoa labourer job too.

The palm oil season starts in January, reaches its peak in March and April and serious work on oil ends by July. By this time, the clearing and fumigation period of cocoa would be starting. Harvesting is by September through January. People of this community work round the year especially women, who during the oil season could be at the processing centre all night.

In terms of the nature of ownership there are three types of ownership of farmlands within Yekemi village. Some are original owners, some rent their farmlands while others bought their farmlands. These types of ownership apply to both genders. Women are in the majority among those who rent their farms and less among those who buy their farms. Women who are among the original owners are those who inherited the farms from their parents or their husbands. In the case of farm rentage, rent for the farms is usually paid using products from the farm every year. There is always an agreement between the owner of the farm and the farmer renting the farm. However farmers pay cash to the farm labourers who work for them on their farm.

Women and commercialization of cash crop production

Women's participation in cash crop commercialization with its attendant problems may not be noticed especially where there is no direct link between farmers, the final buyers or their agents and government. Women in Yekemi narrated their experiences of selling their produce, explaining in focus group discussions that when men in the village were fully in charge of cocoa production they do have buyers who will deposit money for the produce even in advance, so that the farmer will not sell it to other buyers. This advance payment enables them to take care of their cocoa farm and this always results in higher productivity. This is

not the case with the women in cocoa farming. Women do not have such opportunity of advance payment. They use their personal money to cultivate their cocoa for marketing and in a situation when they borrow money from buyers, the buyers will dictate the price and mode of payment, which in most case are done with the produce of the farm. Whatever the mode of payment they are at the mercy of the buyer. So for women 'to persist in a male-dominated environment can require a great deal of confidence and determination' (Fairbank et.al. 2007:74).

Another major issue is the impact of modernization of agriculture on gender. Agriculture is rightly noted by Fontana and Paciello (2009:3) as the primary source of employment for men and women mostly in the rural areas. The need to fully incorporate women that participate in cash crop production in to the market is important. Afshar observed that;

‘Although the process of modernization with its emphasis on capital accumulation and the move away from artisan production is not of itself necessarily gender-specific, its effect has often been to deprive many poorer women of ready access to a reliable revenue based on subsistence production’ (Afshar,1991:3).

Momsen also noted, it has tended to be the case that

“Modernization in agriculture has altered the division of labour between the sexes, increasing women’s dependent status as well as workload” (Momsen 2010:1)

Drawing on a gender analysis of the processes of commercialization of agriculture globally and historically from a conduct of gender analysis of those processes, it has been observed by Afsar (1991), Akeroyd (1991) Agrawal (1991), Ng (1991), Mosse (1993), Rai (2004), and Momsen (2010) that mechanization has led to increased masculinization. The extension services and technology have been targeted at men. The effect of this, is the displacement of women by men from their farm activities. This could be seen in the case of rice production of Malay women of Malaysia, which resulted in an increase in women’s dependency on men, which could be linked to housewifization, a situation of rendering women to domestic affairs only, with little or no decision-making power. It was also observed that agricultural policies have continued to assume that farmers are rural men. Modernization of agriculture comes along with innovative technological packages such as, new practices in irrigation and

farming, improved seed, use of fertilizers and use of chemicals such as pesticides, resulting to high productivity in agriculture without dealing with the gender dimensions. Rai (2004:33) is of the view that ‘the acceptance of commercialization and mechanization of agriculture meant the marginalization of women’s work in rural societies’. Its focus is on large scale farming which may result to proletarianization, a situation where the rich large farm owners buy up the farms of the poor farmers, changing their status from farm owners to landless labourers. These are the factors research has identified. The possible effects of such on Yekemi women cash crop farmers are better imagined.

Ng (1991) noted housewifization of women farmers in her work on Malay women and rice production in West Malaysia that the

‘women from the rich and middle households, displaced from their agricultural production, retire to the kitchen, so to speak – donning their new role and status as rural housewife. However, women from the poor households need to work as there is not sufficient cash to command labour nor to buy the whole range of inputs for increased productivity’ (Ng, 1991:206).

These differences directly and indirectly limit economic growth, productivity, and welfare, which continue to make agricultural change a gender and development issue. Yekemi women are buckling up with this trend to some extent. They continue to struggle against culture, norms and values of the society to address their economic needs. They are at the same time struggling with different issues that affect their full participation in cash crop production and agricultural commercialization, such as land issues, credit facilities, direct access to chemicals and other inputs for their crops and direct market access. Each of these issues has its own effect both on their income as well as their well-being.

Land control seems to be in the hands of men and though the majority of Yekemi women participate in cash crop farming, these are mostly on rented farms with the terms and conditions dictated by the main owner.

The unavailability of credit facilities is another major issue that slows down or reduces general production in rural areas. The credit facilities available to women in the village are mostly from their customers for palm oil, cocoa or kolanut. A cooperative society where

loans could be obtained does not presently exist in Yekemi. In some situations, women farmers have to borrow money from their cocoa buyers to pay their labourers to be able to meet the sale, while those labourers for the palm oil often wait for women to sell their produce in the five-day market system that operates in the village before they could be paid. Credit would also be beneficial in other circumstances for example, an increase in productivity requires more money and other inputs. Cash crop farming requires money for maintenance and if this is not done it could have serious effects on the productivity of the farmer which in turn affects their income.

Impact of women participation on power and agency

In village settings the socio - economic ranking of the household is according to the size of their lands. Hence access to farm land is a major determinant of economic position and future prosperity of farmers in rural areas like Yekemi. The transformation of women's economic activities from petty traders to cash crop farmers has created opportunities for women to improve their economic status and change the old cultural patterns of male domination in cash crop farming and their access to land rates them among those farmers respected in the community.

Women's full involvement in cash crop farming in Yekemi, prompted the investigation of how and why women change from their assumed roles of petty trading, home management and unpaid family farm labourers to full time cash crop farmers. One of the major incentives for their participation is the availability of farmland to operate on, not only through inheritance or on family farms but also on a rentage basis. Hence, migration plays a very important role both in production of cash crops and the empowerment of women in the community in that the migration of men provides space for women to take up cash crop farming. Women in Yekemi village now have access to farmland, with some of them building houses in the village. They are powerful sustainers of their homes against poverty, through their own visible farm labour and cash crop production, independent of their husbands. Women's involvement in cash crop production shows their genuine desire to enhance their socio-economic status, and as Brown (2008:19-22) states, "women make income gains by shifting from subsistence to cash crops".

The outcome of women's participation is the continuity of cash crop production in those farmlands that would not have received proper management, and the economic empowerment of women which reduces the poverty level of their household.

Different reasons were given by women for their participation in cash crop farming. These I have categorised in to three: the migration effect, the economic effect and family inheritance. In many instances the husband's migration paved the way for their wives to become cash crop farmers. Secondly, the greater availability of land for rent due to the retirement of some aged cash crop farmers and absence of men due to migration invites other women from town to try their hands at cash crop production. The last category relates to women who inherit the farm either from husbands or parents after death.

It was equally noted that women farmers in Yekemi participate in investment and building/purchase of houses both in the village and in their home towns Their participation reduces household conflicts and even domestic violence due to their financial contribution in their household.

In a nutshell, the higher your financial status, the more your power and agency in household decision making. Women of Yekemi are now contesting for change through their economic activities in cash crop production. This 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti 1998) reflects women's negotiation with culture.

Conclusion

In Yekemi, economic power of women confers on them some power of dignity in their household as well as in the community. The community seeks women's views on the plan of the new market in the village and women in Yekemi now have a female representative in the decision making body of the village. Gender relations are shifting in terms of both intra- and inter-household relations.

Their participation in cash crop farming has challenged the dominance of men in cash crop production and in so doing raised their economic status. Women now partake in decision making to some extent in their families. Though this involvement in cash crop production seems to have added to women's work or burden, combining both domestic and commercial work at the same time, it is a more prestigious work that gives them a voice in the family and in the community.

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