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## **Patriarchy and Women's Agricultural Production in Rural Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The crucial importance of women's contribution to food security in developing countries like Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. It is estimated that about 80% of women in rural areas are engaged in food crops production. Rural women are regarded as the mainstay of small scale agriculture. In most developing countries such as Nigeria, the concern for increasing women's economic participation especially in food production can be seen within the wider general concern to alleviate the economic conditions of the poor households, especially those in the rural sector, majority of whom are women and who occupy lower socio-economic status compared to their male counterparts. Nigeria is a patriarchal society and inheritance is patrilineal which invariably creates severe cultural inhibitions to the aspirations and productive capacity of women. This paper therefore discusses the constraints faced by women in Nigeria as producers and income earners for their families by focusing on women's burden of reproduction, decision making power, access to and ownership of land, capital, information and technology. In discussing this, it is recognized that both women and men are an integral part of the solution to increasing agricultural productivity and improving household food security and nutrition.

**Key Words:** Agricultural Production, Food Crops, Food Security, Patriarchy, Rural Women

### **Introduction**

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life. In other words, food security depends on the availability, accessibility, adequacy and acceptability of food. In each of these areas women worldwide play crucial roles: as food producers, as income earners responsible for the provision of food for their households, and as those who process and prepare the food to keep the members of their families healthy and active (Prakash, 2003).

Women are the majority of the world's agricultural producers, playing important roles in fisheries and forestry as well as in farming. Worldwide, women produce more than 50 percent of the food that is grown (FAO, 1995). Moreover, in many places of the world, women are responsible for providing food for their families and are nearly universally responsible for food preparation for their families. All this they do in the face of constraints and attitudes that conspire to undervalue their work

and responsibilities, reduce their productivity, place upon them a disproportionate work burden, discriminate against them and hinder their participation in decision and policy making.

On the situation of women across the world, they own about one percent of the world's land. The majority of the world's women do not equally own, inherit, or control property, land and wealth. Communities in sub-Sahara Africa are patriarchal and confer on women an inferior social-status even in the agricultural sector where they produce three quarters of the food. However, in terms of the increased demand for improved agricultural production on the continent, it is imperative that the efforts of women in agricultural development be recognized and remunerated. Over 85% of the Uganda's population live in rural areas where agriculture is the major contributor to their livelihoods. Most agricultural production comes from smallholders, majority of whom are women, using traditional methods of farming and family labour, but still produce over 94% of total agricultural output and supply, which is virtually all Uganda's food requirements (Tuhaise, 2000; Tuyizere, 2007).

Alston (1994) affirmed that the problems women have in attaining land ownership in Africa are monumental. Women's efforts to plant trees are hampered by their lack of ownership of land, just as they are denied access to credit facilities. In addition, women grow about half of the world's food, but own hardly any land, have difficulty in obtaining credit and are overlooked by agricultural advisors and agents. Also, discriminatory laws and practices are still widespread most especially in terms of inheritance rights such as that involving access to and ownership of land.

During the FAO sponsored World Food Summit of 1996, world leaders from 186 countries adopted the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and a Plan of Action. These international agreements specified that the role of women in agriculture and food security must be emphasized in order to create the enabling political, social and economic environment that will guarantee women equal access to and control of land and other productive resources (Prakash, 2003).

The majority of rural residents in many developing countries are women (Williams, 2000). The ownership of land and easy access to farm inputs and services by rural women are essential to increase their productivity and hence income status. In a developing nation like Nigeria, the concern for increasing women's economic participation can be seen within the wider general concern to alleviate the economic conditions of the poor households especially in the rural areas and guarantee food security for the country.

### **A Critical Assessment of the Problem**

Rural women are the main stay of small scale agriculture; yet, their rights of ownership and control of land are circumscribed by customs and traditions. Inheritance is most often patrilineal and a woman's right to land is pegged on marriage. Hence, a daughter does not receive land when her father dies and even a widow does not inherit land; she generally acts as a caretaker until her sons come of age. In some cases, a widow is willed along with the land to her deceased husband's brother. She may remain on the land and cultivate it if she marries the successor; but if she refuses she may lose access to the land and her livelihood. In all of these, a childless woman or a woman who bore only daughters is in a precarious position as she does not stand any chance of acquiring any form of land within the family.

The implication of this is that, once a woman loses her husband, her inheritance is more in terms of liabilities than assets. She is subject to sexual harassment from younger male in-laws who view her as part of their relative's property to be inherited, which invariably implies that a woman cannot aspire to own property. Since the women have no control over land and are often in subordinated positions, they are sometimes subjected to dehumanizing treatment from male relations and male in-laws when ever request for land is put forward to them. Even when such requests are granted, women suffer from inconsistent and temporary use of land despite their contributions to food production in the community.

There is a clear understanding that with increased agricultural production, there will be an expansion in farm income which invariably will stimulate the demand for non-farm products. There are however special constraints facing women's agricultural life leading to a reduction in economic growth. According to the World Bank 1989; Cleaver and Schreiber 1994, most working women are employed in agriculture and many of the constraints facing them exist in the rural economy. These include legal and customary constraints on land ownership and access to credit; work burdens on women in addition to farming, including household management, water and fuel wood collection, and cultural constraints on women's use of land for agricultural purposes.

It is quite obvious therefore that agriculture is critical to Africa's economic, social and rural development. But in most African countries like Nigeria, agricultural performance has not achieved the ambitious objectives set out for it. The result has been continuing high rural poverty. It is imperative to state here that Nigeria faces serious poverty challenges and it is estimated that two-thirds of Nigerians now live below the poverty line of 1 US\$ per day, most of them in rural areas.

The critical question that this scenario raises then is, how does one reconcile a situation, where a woman who is perhaps widowed and completely depends on land for her survival is denied access to land by those who may not necessarily need it? This becomes very worrisome when women who spend several hours everyday working on land are often denied ownership of land. Limiting women's access to and control of land invariably limits their ability to produce enough food and this affects the well-being of their families.

It is pertinent to state that in terms of food crop production, women engage in bush clearing, planting, weeding and harvesting of the crops to feed their families, the community and the society at large. Yet, the women cannot own or inherit land. This makes their work to produce sufficient food more difficult which also affects their income generating capacity and living condition.

The challenge facing women in Nigeria therefore, involves the interplay between access to land and ownership of land and how this has affected the challenge to agricultural production and food security. Coupled with this is the patriarchal structure across societies in the country which has accorded women low status and also created severe cultural inhibitions against the women which have greatly affected their inheritance rights especially that of land for agricultural purposes.

A critical issue affecting women's food production capacity is the subservient role of the statutory law to the customary law of land tenure. Ownership of land and other forms of inheritance under the customary laws are very discriminatory against female children, especially when parents do not usually document all their assets in a

'will' that would have been used as occasion demands. In addition, with the poor level of education, enlightenment and social learning, the women have become passive and voiceless and have not been able to develop capacity to challenge existing cultural practices which have hindered their access to land and other property.

Development policy makers and planners are becoming increasingly aware of the crucial contributions of women farmers to agricultural production and food security. Nevertheless, agricultural policies on the whole still do not address the needs of women farmers adequately. Where the roles and needs of women farmers are recognized in policy, these tend not to be adequately translated into practice in agricultural development programmes and planning. Agricultural research, too, gives inadequate attention to women farmers and their needs. As has been pointed out, for instance, women and men farmers are often responsible for different agricultural tasks and crops. Research is generally focused on the improvement of production and technologies for men's crops and tasks, while those of women are neglected. National agricultural policies focus on export-oriented crops, which are important for foreign exchange, and to give scant attention to food crops for domestic consumption, although the latter are essential for household food security. Moreover, the importance of local markets for national food security is also often overlooked (Karl, 1996).

This is the predominant situation in most rural areas where patriarchy is practiced. In the economic remoulding of our rural communities the significance of land compared to other factors of production, capital and labour has often been misplaced or underrated. The ground breaking work of Boserup (1970) on women's role in economic development and the activities initiated during the United Nations decade on women (1975-1985) have underscored the need for greater attention to be paid to women's issue. In this light, the Lagos plan of action 1980, called for the need to take account of the important role women played by providing solutions to the food crisis in Africa.

### **Women's Role in Household Food Security and Nutrition**

It is estimated that women produce 70% of the food grown for consumption in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, women play a central role in the provision of household food security and nutrition. However, their efforts have not been recognized or translated into concrete policies and programmes that would enhance their productivity in agriculture besides increasing their ability to earn income from non-agricultural sources that would guarantee adequate food supply throughout the year.

Women contribute significantly to agricultural production but the majority of them have no control over critical resources like land, extension services, credit as well as improved technology. The elimination of household inequalities in agricultural production in Africa, therefore, requires increased attention to gender differences in rights, responsibilities as well as access to productive resources. Economic progress and improvement of living standards depends largely upon the growth and efficiency of the agricultural sector of the national economy. Women play crucial roles in the food production chain in Nigeria; yet they face numerous agricultural production constraints.

Apart from its contribution to national savings, household savings provide very important mechanisms for consumption smoothing, particularly for rural women and men, who rely on agriculture, with considerable risks and uncertainty. Income

uncertainty can result into significant fluctuations in consumption with a negative impact on the welfare of both women and men, particularly in the rural areas where credit and insurance markets are incomplete or totally non-existent. Due to differences in power relations, access to, and ownership of resources between women and men, the impact of this situation on women as compared to men has been greatly hampered in terms of food security and nutrition in the country.

According to Brown (2002), rural women in India and worldwide own very little land. In a study in West Bengal, she examined the reasons behind this and the possible government steps for fostering women's land ownership. The first question asked was: Why do rural women need to own land? Most landless women answered this question very simply: "Owning land would give me security, in case my husband leaves me or in case I am widowed". Security of tenure is often the key to having control over major decisions such as what crop to grow, what techniques to use and the decision as to what to consume and what to sell. Given women's tendency to grow food as opposed to cash crops and spend income on family food, security of tenure for women must be viewed as a key link in the chain from household food production to national food security (FAO, 1995).

Osuntogun (1988) in his study of four communities in Oyo and Ondo States of Nigeria observed that the rural women in his area of study play very significant role in the farming operations of the communities. The women were involved in bush clearing, land preparations, ploughing, hoeing, planting and weeding. It was observed that men do not engage much in farming. They only clear the land for their wives and spend their time hunting and producing palm oil, while the women are left to carry out all the agricultural activities.

In rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, women make up the majority of subsistence farmers producing a large percentage of food crops for consumption. According to Foster (1986), and the Food and Agriculture organization of the United Nations (FAO, 1990), women produce more than 80% of the food in sub-Saharan Africa, 50%-60% of Asia's food, 46% in the Caribbean, 31% in North Africa and the Middle East and more than 30% in Latin America. This shows that women play a prominent role in the production of food crops for most developing countries of the world, but quite unfortunately most of them still belong to the poor class of people and grossly underpaid for their labour.

Neglecting women as agricultural producers and resource managers inhibits the attainment of food security goals (FAO, 1997).

Rural women play a significant role in domestic and social-economic life of the society such that national development is not possible without developing this important and substantial segment of our society. Also, landless women undertook farming on leased land and could not as such take decisions on the land without the owners' consent (Damisa and Yohanna, 2007). Women are the ones who carry out most of the agricultural work, yet have very little land. Access to land by women is largely determined by kinship rights and marriage. Women neither own land nor inherit it. In some cases husbands prohibit wives from tilling the husband's land if the wives do not give the returns to the husbands. If women refuse to handover the produce they have produced, the wives are beaten, divorced or neglected (Tuhaise, 2000).

With regard to organization of farm labour, all household members are obliged to work on the common or household fields. Private plots belonging to

individuals in the household are separately maintained by their owners. Members of extended families also form groups that that work on members' farms (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 1997). Under the gender-based division of farm labour male members of a community are generally responsible for performing the more arduous tasks, such as felling trees and clearing the land for farming. Women and children work at the sowing, weeding, harvesting, and processing of food. Where men cultivate farms, the scale of production is usually larger, mainly because men can more easily call on wives' labour; women who cannot demand the labour of husbands or relatives manage smaller farms. The division of labour between men and women in crop production and other agricultural practices vary considerably from one region to the other and from one community to the other. Each tradition seems to assign different and varying roles to women in the process of food production.

According to Mehra and Esim (1998), women's roles on the farm vary by region, economic conditions, cultural beliefs, norms and personal circumstances, and that these roles could change over time. Bullock (1994) corroborated this assertion when he noted that the actual tasks performed by women, the kind of labour provided, and the extent to which they retain the income from farm production varies greatly between and within regions and even sub-regions. Most of the work done on the gender division of labour in agriculture has also revealed that women are mainly engaged in food crop production, while the men are engaged in cash crop production. The pattern of production in sub-Saharan Africa is such that women are primarily responsible for food or subsistence crops, while men grow cash crops with a share of the labour provided by women (Mehra and Esim, 1998).

### **Statutory/Customary Laws And Women's Food Security**

The plight of the Nigerian woman in terms of her developmental and economic opportunities is often circumscribed by gender discrimination. Nigerian women continue to suffer the disadvantages of an unequal household division of labour, barriers to ownership of land and other property, discriminatory inheritance practices and lack of collateral for accessing bank credit. This array of obstacles is grounded in deep-rooted customary practices that are "justified" by ingrained presumptions about the role and status of women vis-à-vis men (UNICEF, 2001).

According to Adepoju (1997), in the Nigerian context, women still suffer discriminatory practices especially under customary law in matters pertaining to ownership of property and inheritance. Although women under statutory law have ownership and inheritance rights, under customary law, these rights are not upheld. Adepoju (1997) affirmed further that discrimination against women is especially serious in the case of widowhood, when women usually end up without inheritance rights and find themselves subjected to harrowing widowhood rites. Although statutory law provides for women's capacity to inherit assets following the death of their husbands, in practice this is often overridden by the local customary law of succession. It is almost universal in Nigerian customary law that widows have no capacity to inheritance. One reason for this is that there is no concept of co-ownership of property by couples in traditional Nigerian culture, the presumption being that all substantial property, including land belongs to the husband. Indeed, the woman herself is virtually considered a form of property.

Guyer (1986), writing about the Beti in Cameroon, notes that widows come in

three types: Old women, young women without children, or only with daughters and young widows with sons. An old woman remains with her sons. The younger woman without children will be evicted. The woman with young sons will remain with her husband's kin-tenuously surviving and protecting the interests of her sons (which may be her own interest) against in-laws who would rather exercise closer control over her deceased husband's farms.

Guyer (1986) further stated that it is more common to find systems where women have only limited rights. In Sudan-Sahelian West Africa, women usually have very limited rights to cultivate on their own-account; growing land scarcity and concentration are shrinking their allotments. In East Africa, where the house-property complex gave women certain kinds of well defined rights, in terms of their role in transmitting property from fathers to sons, land registration and titling have gone exclusively to men. In Southern Africa, by contrast, the presence of very large numbers of female-headed households has put pressures on government to protect the rights of women. These 'systems' are by no means hard and fast, and a lot of social groups in the geographic and cultural areas identified have quite different patterns of rights of women.

According to Bohannan and Bohannan (1968), women's land rights among the Tiv of Nigeria depend on either residence or marriage. A wife or widow has the right to a plot of land large enough to support herself and her dependants. A wife who does not gain a plot of land after marriage has the right to leave and re-demand her bride wealth. Invariably therefore, despite variations in customary law across regions and nations, there are some commonalities. Most customary law is not codified but emerges from unwritten social rules that ostensibly are derived from shared community values and traditions but which often reflect patriarchal relations between women and men. Under most systems of customary law, women regardless of their marital status cannot own or inherit land, property, or housing in their own names, and whatever property rights they may enjoy are dependent upon their male relatives (COHRE, 2003).

Many developing countries have, in the past several decades, adopted legislations that give women some rights to land and to elevate women's status within the household. Often, however, this legislation has not been successful in achieving its stated goals. RDI's research on these issues have shown that written laws have had limited effect on women's rights and access to land due to the continued prevalence of customary laws in governing gender-related cultural norms and intra-household affairs. In some cases, especially in matrilineal societies, customary law may offer greater protection of women's rights and access to land than new legal systems that formalize land rights, even when these systems attempt to reflect women's rights and needs (RDI, 2007).

Indeed, understanding the effects of laws - both written and customary - regarding land tenure and intra-household division of rights and responsibilities for women is critical in formulating effective policy measures to address women's secure access to land. There are clear distinctions among Nigerian societies as to the customary treatment of men and women. Ogunleye (1993) frames women's entitlements and rights in terms of restoring equitable access to resources. The inability of women to exercise independent control over their life relates to the role of culture in the exercise of social control over individuals. Women are in a subordinate position to



men and such control is directly beneficial to men economically, culturally and politically. Women themselves share the thinking that these practices have some validity to their lives.

In a study conducted by the researcher in Ozalla community, it was observed that the relationship between men and women is based on gender inequality, due to the discrimination and other cultural constraints suffered by women. The men are in the dominant group and the women are in the disadvantaged group. Since Ozalla community is a patriarchal one, in which the father or husband dominates and has the final say in decision making, there is therefore a lack of equity and social justice especially in terms of ownership and control of land for agricultural and food security due to its patriarchal nature.

The study revealed that while women constitute the bulk of those engaged in food crop production, they hardly have adequate access, ownership and control of land. Land ownership and control is highly intertwined with the culture and social life of the people. This has invariably affected the amount of food crops produced by the women in Ozalla community. Also, for a woman to have access to land, she must go through a male, such as, her husband, brother or brother-in-law, etc. A woman must be conscious of the fact that she could be asked to live the land at any time. As a result, the culture also stipulates what kind of crops one should grow. These are usually seasonal crops with short life span because land use is temporary.

In addition, women in Ozalla community do not have control over land. The men have control over land and other properties because women are usually not considered in inheritance rights. Invariably, this affects the amount of food crops produced by the women, which also affects food security. This view is in support of Adepoju (1997) that discrimination against women is especially serious in the case of widowhood when women usually end up without inheritance rights and are subjected to harrowing widowhood rites.

Unfortunately, while statutory law guarantees women inheritance rights as shown from the works of Oke (2001) and Strickland (2004) that numerous barriers impede women's ability to claim their de jure rights to property ownership and inheritance, the situation in Ozalla Community is that statutory law is subservient to customary law. This supports the view expressed by Nakazibwe (2003), who, in a 2002 study conducted on Land, Gender and Poverty in Uganda, observed that customary protections for women were weakening, and that unequal land tenure relations between men and women are contributing to conflict within families. Also, the absence of economic assertiveness on the part of the women runs counter to the male dominance of all economic activities and creates a gulf between men and women. This has often created avenues for enmity and hatred in the community.

The study revealed that the level of income women generated was a reflection of their status to the land cultivated. With a tenural system in Ozalla Community that denies women enough and unconditional access to land, they often get limited production from it due to the crops grown and their financial capacity with which to engage in adequate economic activities as they cannot own or inherit land. Such is the low status accorded women in the Ozalla Community.

As pointed out from the research in Ozalla Community, women do not own property as they are seen as part of the property to be inherited. As it was stated by some of the in-depth interview participants, "*Okhwo I ebe uku*", which means women

cannot own property left behind by their deceased husbands. This clearly is in consonance with the contributions of Kwesiga (2002) and Tuyizere (2007) that, in traditional African societies, women cannot own property as they are considered to be part of the household property. In the study, it was established that how land was acquired determined the choice of crops to grow. The reason why this has persisted can be traced to the deep-rooted customary practices that have often determined the role and status of women in relation to the men. This view was shared by UNICEF (2001).

The study established that majority of women in Ozalla community who hire land and some who receive land from their husband or his relations are those who are widowed and have little or no male support. This is aptly supported by the work of Boserup (1990) that women, particularly the female heads of households without male support, and who account for a large share of the agricultural population, are discriminated against in terms of access to land, agricultural inputs and credit facilities, leaving them with few resources to produce sufficient food.

The study further revealed that with its patriarchal social and cultural structures and gerontocratic style of rulership, in family, quarter and community meetings, women are not usually invited even when the issues under consideration greatly affects them. At best, a male representative attends to her needs. They are indeed the voiceless in the community. Hence, there is male preference in inheritance and male privilege in marriage because patriarchy thrives. This unfortunate situation is clearly observed in the work of Ebila and Musiimenta (2004) that in most African societies, women are oppressed and they suffer several disadvantages in all aspects of life.

While these issues are not peculiar to Ozalla community, they have provided insight and possible avenues towards approaching and addressing the challenges confronting rural societies across Nigeria and other African societies in their quest to develop and contribute to national development, including the suppression and subordination of women.

### **Case Study showing the interplay between Patriarchy and Women's Agricultural Production in Ozalla Community**

This story is that of a renowned farmer who had seven wives and several children. Three of his wives had male children while the other four had only female children. After his death, it was time to share his assets. At this time, three of his wives had also died. As the culture stipulates, the available lands and property were to be shared amongst the children whose mothers had sons. So, all the lands and property were shared for only the first sons of the three women who had male children. Those with female children got nothing because of the culture that says women are not entitled to property as they are expected to marry and go to their husbands' houses where they can benefit from any available inheritance. One of the women whose mother had died quite early without a male child, and who over the years worked tirelessly alongside her father until she got married, wanted a portion of land to farm as she had challenges getting land to farm in her place of marriage. She therefore presented her request before her half brothers. After several visits to them, one of her half brothers accepted to help her and took her to a thick forest several kilometers away. She spent so much money hiring labour to clear the portion of land given to her, including that of felling the trees as the land was like a virgin land. Thereafter she planted some food crops such as Yam,

Cassava and Maize. To get to the farm she would have to trek kilometers as she had to go from time to time weeding and maintaining the farm with the assistance of her children. At the period of harvest, her half brother who gave her the land met her in the farm and discovered that she had gotten very bountiful yield. But just before the beginning of the next planting season, when she had not yet harvested half of her crops, her half brother set fire on the land after which he began to plant Maize and Plantain without informing his half sister. So the next time she went to the farm, she was shocked and amazed to discover what had happened. She went to her half brother who said he was sorry and that he wanted to make use of his land. In the long run the wickedness of her half brother was talked about in the community and no one could do anything about it especially in terms of some form of compensation for all that she lost. This generated very serious conflict which over the years grew into so much bitterness, hatred and discord even among their children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are two highly related theories that can be used in understanding patriarchy and women's agricultural production in rural Nigeria. These are the Conflict theory and the African Feminist theory.

#### **The Conflict Theory**

The proponents of the conflict theory include Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, C. Wright Mills and Ralf Dahrendorf. Conflict theory is oriented towards the study of social structures and institutions. It emphasizes the fact that there are fundamental differences of interest between social groups. Due to these differences, conflict has become a common and persistent feature of society. The greatest influence on the conflict theory is based on the contributions of Karl Marx.

For Marx, mankind has created much of the physical world, and the social and political institutions that order it. The world is produced and reproduced through man's labour. To him therefore, the motivating force in history is the manner in which human beings relate to one another in their continuous struggle to extract their livelihood from nature (Labinjoh, 2002). In the effort to satisfy primary and secondary needs, human beings engage in antagonistic cooperation from which divisions of labour have emerged in human societies. It is the divisions of labour that have led to the formation of antagonistic classes in all societies throughout history.

The nature of any society at any one time is determined by the interaction of the forces of production, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the social relations of production. Marx theory of class stems from the premise that 'the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles'. The potential for class conflict is inherent in every differential society. Such a society is one in which surplus is generated. Marx devoted much attention to clarifying the nature of exploitation and demonstrated that exploitation involves the appropriation of 'surplus value' which is produced by labour (Bottomore, 1983). In order to survive therefore, humans must produce food and material objects. In doing so, they enter into social relationships with other people. Conflict is seen to exist when people and groups with different economic and other interests and roles interact in a society.

Every society contains elements of contradictions. These contradictions involve the exploitation of one social group by another. In feudal societies, lords exploit their

serfs; in capitalist societies, employers exploit their employees. The family is often a management of conflict between a man and his wife or his wives or his extended family relations depending on the society in question. Conflict theory, therefore, covers a wide range of sociological problems in most African societies each with its own diversities of social cultural systems. Conflict involves struggle between segments of society over valued resources. The Marxian approach to gender stratification centres on the extent to which women's access to the control of the forces of production determines their relative position in society. For this variant of Marxian theory, women's oppression is traceable to class domination and subjugation.

What is evident, therefore, is that in rural Nigeria, the relationship between men and women is based on gender inequality due to its patriarchal structure. Here, women are discriminated against in terms of land ownership because of their sex which ultimately affects women's agricultural production. The situation has also created a lack of equity and social justice in terms of access, ownership and control of land especially for agricultural purpose which is a reflection of the dictates of the culture to the neglect of the women who actually engage more in food crop production. In addition, how much access to land a woman enjoys depends on her relationship with the man, either as a wife, a relation, as a widow who has access to land due to the magnanimity of her in-laws or if she holds the land in trust for her male children, pending when they are old enough to take possession of their inheritance.

### **African Feminist Theory**

Feminism examines the position of women in society and tries to further their interests. In general terms, feminism asserts that sex is a fundamental and irreducible axis of social organization that, to date has subordinated women to men. This structural subordination of women has been described by feminists as patriarchy with its derivative meanings of the male-headed family, mastery and superiority (Barker, 2004).

Igenozah (2004) has also observed that the concern with the gender question is primarily on the secondary standing of women in society. Feminists see the secondary standing of women in the scheme of things as a form of victimization, especially the subordinate role women are made to play in relation to men. According to Heldke and O'Connor (2004), the emphasis of the feminist theory is on oppression, discrimination, injustice and exploitation. They stated that if oppression systematically and unfairly marginalizes some members of a society, then it must also grant other members of that society an unfair advantage. Culture is the place where inequality is reproduced, but it is within culture that gender is formed (Baldwin et al, 2004).

According to Haralambos and Holborn (2008), there are different versions of feminism, but most share some common features. Like Marxists, feminists tend to see society as divided into different social groups. Unlike Marxists, they see the major division as being between men and women rather than between different classes. Like Marxists, they tend to see society as characterized by exploitation. Unlike Marxists, they see the exploitation of women by men as the most important source of exploitation, rather than that of the working class by the ruling class. Many feminists characterize contemporary societies as patriarchal, that is they are dominated by men.

Some feminist writers, however, disagree that all women are equally oppressed and disadvantaged in contemporary societies. They believe that it is

important to recognize the different experiences and problems faced by various groups of women. For example, they do not believe that all husbands oppress their wives; that women are equally disadvantaged in all types of work, or that looking after children is necessarily oppressive to women. They emphasize the differences between women of different ages, class, backgrounds and ethnic groups.

Despite the varying reactions to feminism, many African women seem to agree that the way African women perceive their reality and the exigency that shape their consciousness and mobilization has to be different from the way Western women perceive and react to their situation. The average African woman is not a hater of men; nor does she seek to build a wall around her gender across which she throws ideological missiles. She desires self-respect, an active role, dynamic participation in all areas of social development, and dignity alongside the men.

African Feminism involves a critical examination of women in Africa based on the social and historical realities of their lives. Steady (1981) formulated a feminist theory for African women. She examines the socio-economic and class factors which contribute to African women's oppression (economic exploitation and marginalization) and her response to this oppression (self reliance). It is pertinent to therefore assert that women, though in subordinated position, are indeed indispensable. They have made significant contributions to agricultural production and food security despite the discrimination, subjugation and cultural constraints suffered by them.

### **What Should Be Done**

Access to resources is essential to improving agricultural productivity of both men and women farmers. Because women play crucial roles in agricultural production, improving productivity will depend to a great extent on ensuring that women farmers, as well as men farmers, have sufficient access to production inputs and support services. While both men and women smallholders lack sufficient access to agricultural resources, women generally have less access to resources than men. The causes of this are rooted, to a great extent, in: gender-blind development policies and research; discriminatory legislation, traditions and attitudes; and lack of access to decision-making. Worldwide, women have insufficient access to land, membership in rural organizations, credit, agricultural inputs and technology, training and extension, and marketing services.

Shortage of good quality agricultural land for smallholders is a problem in many regions of the world due to environmental degradation, conversion of land for nonagricultural purposes, population pressure and consolidation of land in the hands of fewer and fewer large landowners, including transnational corporations. Access to land through ownership or secure tenure is the sine qua non of improving agricultural productivity. Without secure land rights, farmers have little or no access to credit or the benefits of membership in rural organizations which are often conduits of agricultural inputs and services.

Membership of rural organizations such as cooperatives, agricultural producers' organizations and farmers' associations, is important for access to productive resources, credit, information, training and other support services. These organizations also represent the interests of their members in relation to governments, project management, and development policy makers and planners at different levels.

When women farmers' access to membership and leadership positions in these organizations is restricted, by law or custom, their access to resources and their ability to make their views known to policy makers and planners is also restricted. The obvious result is the inability of women farmers to carry out their roles in agriculture and food security to optimum potential.

A direct consequence of women's lack of access to land and membership in rural organizations is their lack of access to credit. Land is usually required as collateral for loans, on the one hand, and, on the other, credit schemes are often channeled through rural organizations to their members. This is a serious obstacle to improving women's agricultural productivity, as without credit women farmers are unable to buy inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and improved technologies, or to hire labor. Paradoxically, numerous studies have shown that women are more likely than men to repay loans. Because men and women farmers often have different responsibilities in agricultural production and food security, both need credit according to their needs. It is thus important for women to have not only access to credit but also control over the use of the credit so that it is not diverted to male-dominated production systems, at the expense of women's productive activities. A 1990 study of credit schemes in Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Zambia and Zimbabwe showed that women received less than 10 percent of credit directed to smallholders and only 1 percent on total credit to agriculture (FAO, 1990).

As those often primarily responsible for marketing, women farmers have to be adequately assisted especially in terms of investment in rural infrastructure, such as feeder roads that link rural areas to markets. In addition, lack of access to membership in marketing cooperatives must be addressed as this also limits women's ability to market their produce. These constraints act as a disincentive to women farmers to produce surplus food, since the difficulties of marketing it are too great if not insurmountable.

## Conclusion

In recent years there has been increased recognition of the crucial importance of women's contribution to food security. Efforts to alleviate rural poverty and improve food security will not be successful unless issues relating to women as producers and providers of food are taken into account. These issues include the contribution of women to household food supply and income, access to productive resources, and the impact of policy reforms on the economic and social roles of women and household food security.

Many agricultural development policies and programmes have yet to adequately address the needs of small farmers, particularly those of women. While initiatives have been made to include rural women in agricultural development activities, either through direct projects, a major impediment to incorporating gender issues into such activities has been the lack of comprehensive data on the nature and role of women's contributions to food and agricultural production.

Policy makers and planners should recognize that women need to participate in rural development on an equal basis with men and fully share in improved conditions of life in rural areas. They also should recognize that the integration of women's roles and needs in the development paradigm is a prerequisite for successful rural development planning and programme implementation. Governments should continue to facilitate and strengthen the contributions of women to agricultural growth and the

alleviation of rural poverty. This in turn will enhance the availability and stability of food supplies while ensuring access to food by all.

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