

The Cameroonian rural woman and agriculture

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Agriculture is the mainstay of Cameroon's economy, in which more than eighty percent of the population is involved. Cameroonian women not only constitute a greater proportion of the total population (53 %), but also make up the greatest percentage of persons involved in agriculture, performing about eighty percent of the agricultural tasks in rural areas. Thus, it is the Cameroonian woman who is the prime mover of Cameroon's economy. By virtue of this fact, farming is the rural woman's main occupation.

Cameroonian rural women are highly involved in the cultivation and processing of basic food crops both for subsistence and commercial purposes. They supply about ninety percent of the food needed for the subsistence of the population, while also participating in the cash crop economy. These marketable items include: cocoa, coffee, tea, banana, and many others.

During the peak growing season women devote six to eight hours a day to agriculture, in addition to doing their normal household work. Men work mainly in the production of cash crops while women

bear the entire responsibility for food production, harvesting and other cash crop related work. Men are primarily responsible for fishing and livestock, while women are in charge of fish processing and marketing. The women assume the responsibility of cleaning and smoking the fish locally. They get fuel wood from the bushes, set up the fire for smoking the fish, and finally package the smoked fish for market. This might take about two to three weeks of their time for good results.

Cameroonian rural women also raise poultry and small livestock, and share in the processing of milk production both for home consumption and for sale. They are also responsible for domestic tasks, which include food processing and the collection of fuel wood and water. In general, rural women work one and one half, to three times longer than men.

In our rural communities, the predominant picture that strikes the eyes of any first-time visitor is that of long lines of women walking in single file, carrying hoes, baskets and babies on their backs, trekking long distances to their "farms." The return scenario is



even more captivating! These same women are seen with loads of food crops on their heads, babies on their backs and sometimes also carrying bundles of fuel wood. It is striking imagery, but it is also real! This activity becomes very oppressive to these women to the extent that they face enormous problems:

First, the women are over-burdened and victimized by hard and crude labor at their farms because their tools are rudimentary and their form of agriculture is not mechanized.

Second, they don't have access to good quality seed and other raw materials, so their production is often not commensurate to their efforts.

Third, there is the chronic problem of land ownership. They don't own the land on which they work. They don't have rights of inheritance, and the weight of tradition often discriminates against women. Only

male heads-of-household have land ownership rights.

Fourth, access to credit facilities are very limited, as is the lack of labor saving technologies, and marketing tools so these women can hardly enter large scale production.

The much talked about Cameroon food self sufficiency and security is sustained primarily by rural women. That's probably why Cameroon continues to be an island of peace in Africa, and a good risk for investors. These women have been contributing to building a culture of peace in Cameroon through their work ethic for several decades.

Unfortunately, their contribution has never really been recognized or rewarded by politicians. Rather, during campaigns they continue to exploit these women by making false promises about improving conditions for them. These women continue to wait for the roads these politicians promised to grade

for them so they can transport their produce to the markets.

Finally and most importantly, there is the Anglophone, Francophone problem (which is a reference to aid distribution, since for politico-historical reasons the Francophone part of the population has much more control than the somewhat alienated Anglophone sector). Government officials are responsible for the uneven distribution of foreign aid to these farmers. Certain areas in the country do not and will never receive the benefits of numerous foreign assistance programs geared towards improving agriculture in the country due to this problem. They favor one section of the country over the other for political reasons. In summary, the following are problems faced by the Cameroonian rural woman in agriculture:

a) There is an unequal division of labor and heavy workload affecting women and girls. As a result, they have little or no time to innovate or take part in strategic community activities.

b) Women have limited control over resources or the benefit of their labor. This has a negative effect on their motivation to innovate and ensure food security at the family level.

c) Men control decision making at the family and community level. This generates socio-cultural barriers to women's participation in project activities and lack of women's authority to participate in the decision-making processes.

d) The position of women is subordinate. They are generally less mobile and confident than men, though perceived negatively by men.

e) There is a gender-based division of labor according to tasks and crops, which is

most obvious in agricultural systems. Women are limited to and solely responsible for basic food crops, while men, until recently were exclusively involved in cash crop production.

f) Subsistence farming, which is mainly carried out by women, is characterized by high labor input and low return.

g) The lack of good health facilities for women sometimes prevents them from involvement in strenuous labor.

h) There is growing poverty. The drastic decline of raw materials in world markets (as much as 60% for some products) has plunged the country into an economic and financial crisis, resulting in an increase in unemployment and decrease in incomes. Structural adjustment programs (for lower interest loans from the IMF and World Bank) have resulted in decreased state spending in health, agriculture, education, expansion and road maintenance. Price liberalization (policies that often bring about inflation in countries that are transitioning from command economies) and the devaluation of the currency have raised the prices of basic necessities. This has a particularly strong effect on rural woman because they bear the main responsibility for providing for the subsistence of their families.

i) There is a lack of good farm-to-market roads and a need for a cost-free scientific method of preservation and storage of agricultural produce, like vegetables, groundnuts, and tomatoes.

The role of the Cameroonian rural woman in agriculture cannot be over emphasized.