

Gender Classification of Farm Crops and Labour in Ikwerre: A Review of its Impact on Agricultural Development and Sustainability

Mbadiwe Jeremiah, Ph.D

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt | Email: mbadiwejeremiah@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper examines the structure and nature of gender classification of farm crops and labour in Ikwerre ethnic nationality of Rivers State. Since independence, the structure and methods of agricultural production in Nigeria have seemingly remained the same. The farming population is predominantly small scale subsistence peasants, farming on average, about two hectares of land on scattered holdings. This structural position of agriculture has led several scholars to submit that the known effects of limited capital, non-mechanisation and over dependence on crude oil are responsible for the lack of sustainable development in agriculture. While using Ikwerre agricultural practices, the paper argues that the existing gender organisation and classification of farm crops and labour in most Nigerian communities have had greater negative impacts on agricultural productivity. Both crops and farm labour are classified into masculine and feminine types in which each gender rigidly confines itself to the cultivation of its classified farm crops and performance of its labour type. The attendant result of this mode of production becomes low productivity, unexpanded market, low income and low savings. This paper therefore concludes that for a realisation of the full potentials of the agricultural sector, both crops and farm labour should be seen for whatever profit or wages accruable from them and not on gender consideration as this would enhance sustainable development.*

Key words: *Gender classification, Farm crops, Farm labour, Agricultural Development, Sustainability, Ikwerre, Nigeria.*

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INTRODUCTION

Before 1960 agriculture was the largest export earner and remained the largest single employer of labour in Nigeria. It was a major contributor to wealth creation and poverty alleviation (Afolabi, 2008: 169). However, from the early post-civil war years Nigeria began to experience food shortages as agricultural production could not meet the food demand of the rapidly increasing population. The agricultural sector which had hitherto been the backbone of the economy experienced little productivity growth. Thus, the National agricultural situation

revealed the stark reality of national food and nutritional problems. And since this period, food requirements have continued to increase faster than production. There has been shortage in the supply of yam, cassava, rice, palm oil, groundnuts and maize from domestic production (Falusi, 1981: 55; Gbosi, 1993:20). Worst still, is the abject poverty of the masses which have made the purchase of the relatively existing food items very difficult. This explains why the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation classified Nigeria under the hunger and poverty ridden Nations (FAO report, 1990, 2012).

However, in order to cushion the effects of hunger, the Nigerian government has at different times resorted to food importation from the United States of America, Holland, Asia, Norway and other European Nations. This action, no doubt, has steadily increased the weight of import bill on the government. Between 1970 and 1975 alone, the Nigerian import bill rose steeply from N 71 million to N1.5 billion (NTJ, 1981: 14). It is therefore, disheartening to note that Nigeria, which was known for decades ago as a food-secured Nation is today classified as a Hunger-ridden Nation.

In attempting to find a plausible explanation for this poor agricultural performance, several debates and controversies have been generated among the principal actors and operators of the economy, namely academics, researchers, the private sector, the entrepreneurs, policy makers and administrators, especially as Nigeria has surplus agricultural lands (Afolabi, 2008:174).

In all, they have attributed the problem to a variety of causes with the factors of lack of capital and the farmers' inability to mechanize ranking first (Ekundare, 1973; Agboola, 1979; Akinjogbin and Osoba, 1980; Nwosu, 1985; Isirimah, 1989).

The relative effect of these factors on the agricultural production stands clear, but this paper argues that the cause of Nigeria's low agricultural productivity is much more than that. This is because the agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Nigeria does not rest in the hand of a single individual or firm as in the case of the developed countries of Europe and America where an increase in capital and an application of mechanisation would have a corresponding increase in production (Odey, 2012:638).

Realizing the fact that Nigeria's total agricultural production is an aggregate of the various productions by several small scale farmers scattered all over the several farming communities and towns, the style of this paper is therefore, less general. It tends to focus on the specific; hence it focuses on gender classification of both farm crops and labour in Ikwerre. This is because it is my view that one cannot get much insight into the factors militating against agricultural food supply in Nigeria from aggregational facts unless one appreciate their components.

FARM PRACTICE IN IKWERRE ETHNIC NATIONALITY

Agriculture constitutes the major economic activity in Ikwerre society with over 55 percent of the people engaged in it. In pre-colonial times, however, the percentage was higher than this, as it was a predominant occupation which extensively engaged the services of men and women alike. The character of agricultural practice and the types of crops cultivated were largely dependent on the ecology of the area which had a favourable climatic conditions and fertile soil.

In pre-colonial Ikwerre society, almost every member of the society was a farmer and it was a yard-stick for measuring both men and women's social status. The chances of a man or woman to get married depended largely on his or her ability to perform farm work. Farm work attracted a high prestige that it became the people's staff of office (Uchendu, 1970:28).

Land tenure agreement hardly recognise individual proprietary rights. Individuals, more

often than not, had and still have only usufructuary rights. Proprietary and ownership rights on land were and are still vested in the family and community from where the individual farmers obtain their rights of use. The economic inadequacies of this tenurial pattern were what the substantivists considered as irrational in African economic thought (Havinden, 1982:102). This submission is simplistic and apologetic. Land in Africa is abundant and has been available for use by the farmers (Nduka, 2013:5). Farmland prospecting was determined by the fertility of the soil in relation to the species of the crops to be cultivated. In this situation, land was not scarce. However, exceptional cases, where there existed relative scarcity due to the facts above, an individual farmer could have access to the use of land other than that of his family or community through mortgage or lease arrangements (Jeremiah, 2000:74). Having foraged for land through usufructuary rights or lease arrangement in any given year, the farmer cultivates between two and five hectares of land which usually may be in different parcels of land that may not be adjacent to one another.

The predominant farming systems in Ikwerre communities have been rotational bush fallow and shifting cultivation. Before the 1980s, the bush fallow period spanned over seven to ten years depending on the land available to each family or community. But in recent years, rapid population growth has increased pressure on land, forcing fallow period to reduce to two or three years. This has resulted to systematic degradation of arable land and declining crop yields. Not only in Ikwerre, this system has been used to describe generally the farm practice in most part of West Africa (Hopkins, 1973:33, Allison-Oguru, 2010:366). The essence of fallowing is to allow the land to regenerate and regain its fertility before the next cultivation season (Wahua, 1993:131).

Following the relative scarcity of farm land in recent times, occasioned by both private and government acquisition of land in various Ikwerre communities, the predominant rotational bush fallow has gradually given way to continuous cropping. Given this situation, the practice of mixed cropping becomes prevalent in which one major crop such as yam or cassava is planted with one or more supplementary crops like maize, pepper, okro, melon and pumpkin added to it.

Although the current trend of sale of land has increased tremendously in Ikwerre, its effect on Agricultural productivity seem not to have been strongly felt as the clan is highly endowed with large expanse of farmlands. It is not possible here to undertake a detailed critique of the possible impact of this outright sale of land on Ikwerre agricultural productivity because of space and time. The main thrust of this paper is to highlight the nature and character of gender classification of crops and labour with emphasis on its effects on production.

GENDER CLASSIFICATION OF FARM CROPS

Evidence from Ikwerrefarm practices show that farmers cultivated varieties of cash crops and food crops. The major food crops cultivated include white yam (*Dioscorea alata*), yellow yam (*Dioscorea cayenensis*), water yam (*Dioscorea alata*), trifoliate yam commonly known as three-leave yam (*Dioscorea dumetorum*), Cocoyam (*Colocasia esculenta*), cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), pepper (*Capsicum* spp.), melon (*Colocynthis vulgaris*), fluted pumpkin (*Telfandia occidentalis*), maize (*Zea mays*), Okra and 'Ibaa' (a local specie of soup condiment). In addition to these food crops are plantain and Banana (*Musa* spp), Pawpaw (*Carica papaya*), etc. There are also Oil Palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) and cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*) which though grow by self-propagation, the farmers in Ikwerre also engage in their production (Allison-Oguru, 2010:365).

Interestingly to note here, is that these crops are rigidly classified along gender lines. Some crops are owned and planted by men while some are owned and cultivated by women. The

ownership and cultivation of food crops such as yam, plantain, and cash crops like Oil palm, cocoa and coconut is the exclusive preserve of men. And conversely, ownership and cultivation of crops such as cassava, cocoyam, trifoliate yam (three-leave yam), banana, orange, okra, pepper, melon, fluted pumpkins, “Ibaa” and “Adu”, etc, is reserved mainly for the women.

This issue of classifying crops along gender lines in Ikwerre assumes a greater economic concern when its implication on the productive capacity of the area is considered. More so, this classification has been identified in most communities of Ikwerre, Ogoni, Ahoada, Etche in Rivers State, and most societies in Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi and Edo States. Wokoma (1986:19) and Obuah (1989:25) have variously maintained that the people of Omerelu and Ishimbam clan classified their agricultural crops along sex line. The greatest threat of this gender classification of farm crops to our economy today is the food shortage syndrome which arose from the gross impact of gender classification of both crops and labour in our farm practice.

GENDER CLASSIFICATION OF FARM LABOUR

Like crops, specialization and division of farm labour along gender lines is common feature of the practice of agriculture in Ikwerre ethnic nationality. There is specialization in the performance of agronomic practices such as bush clearing, stumping, mound making, planting, staking, directing of tendrils, weeding and harvesting. Beginning from the precolonial period, farm work has been considered to be a very tedious task and the stages involved are many, time consuming and energy sapping. It is a production process that requires many hands (Onukwe, 2014: 97).

The gender classification of labour is determined by the labour required for the cultivation of a specific crop type. Men have the responsibility of foraging for and clearing of bush for cultivation. The men dig holes, stake and direct the tendrils of yams. They also harvest and take every necessary step to preserve the yams. In oil palm production, the men perform the task of planting and harvesting.

Women on their own part, collect all debris which arise from clearing process and burn same for use as organic fertilizer. It is also the duty of the women to make mounds and plant yams, cocoyam, cassava and other various species of crops. They are responsible to take rid of weeds in the farm throughout the duration of the farming season. Harvesting and carrying of food crops to the house is also their duty. Apart from these labour tasks, the processing of the food crops into a consumable stage is also done by the women. In most Nigerian societies, this pattern of gender classification of farm labour has been identified. Susan Martin (1984:411) noted that in the 19th and 20th centuries, the women in Ngwa land did most of the work in food farming and cash crop production. Like the Ngwa land, the amount of labour rendered by men in Ikwerre during a giving farming season is less than that performed by women. While men specialize in clearing, staking and harvesting of yams, the women specialize in virtually all farm labour practices.

IMPACT OF GENDER DIVISION AND CLASSIFICATION OF CROPS AND LABOUR ON AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

Given the fact that there exist enough agricultural farm land and that two-third of Nigeria’s population are farmers, one would expect that the Nigerian farmers even though they cannot produce enough for export, their subsistence production should be able to feed the teeming population. However, this is not so. The question then, is why have the farmers failed to produce enough food crops for domestic consumption and for export?

The answer simply lies in the rigid implementation of gender classification of farm crops and labour in our rural agricultural communities such as Ikwerre. The most adverse impact of gender classification and labour on agriculture is low production. As we have observed, in Ikwerre communities, women are more engaged in agricultural farming than men. Both crops and labour are classified along sex line with strict observance of such classification. Men own limited number of crops and as such also have limited aspect of labour to perform in agriculture. The women therefore, both in terms of ownership and farm labour performance become the pivot upon which subsistence farming revolves. The women are entrusted with heavier work-load in the rural economy (Otonti Nduka, 2003:120).

The implication of this situation is the fact that the major aspect of food production is left in the hands of women and as such only a very limited quantity of food crops could be produced. Thus, this low level of production cannot meet the food demand of the rapidly increasing population of the society. This is so because the feminine class which is entrusted with major part of agricultural work, combine these tasks with domestic work such as child care, cooking, fetching of firewood and water. All these extra farm labour, no doubt, limit farming strength and improvement. This over involvement of women in farming chores is also observed in yoande in which women not only plant most of the crops but also climb hills to dig furrows to prevent the rains from washing away the crops (Maathai, 2009:13).

To worsen this situation is the men's world view concerning this gender division and classification of both crops and farm labour. The men are never ready to engage themselves in the planting of female classified crops or in the performance of 'female' tasks. This is so because in traditional Ikwerre society, the men who in one way or the other, engage in the planting or performance of the female crops or labour type are usually despised and considered as women by their fellow men in the society. In this case despite the huge profit which may be accruable from such female classified crops and labour, the male gender never engage in them.

Closely related to the existence of low production is unexpanded market. It could be seen as a chain reaction of the first. The studies of A.G. Hopkins (1973), C. Meillassaux (1969) and B.W. Holdder and Roger Lee (1974) identified the existence of markets in West Africa since the earliest beginning of subsistence agriculture. In Nigeria, subsistence agriculture has been the mainstay of the economies of the different communities. This subsistence nature of the economy does not allow for market expansion. Even though a significant change was made in the area of moving from reciprocity to money economy, the volume of the market have still maintained its unexpanded nature. Briggs and Ndimele noted that before palm produce became a major article of trade in Port Harcourt and its environs, it was produced and consumed locally for several centuries by the indigenous people (Briggs Nimi and NdimeleOzo-Mecuri, 2013:93).

In Ikwerre, as we have observed, the amount of labour directed to agriculture is usually very small and this in turn, leads to yearly poor harvest. Most of the persons actually involved in farming chores are women and they provide regular farm labour. Even the yam which men exclusively own has been left for the women. Most men have abandoned farming for white-collar jobs in the urban cities of Port Harcourt, Lagos and Abuja. In Bayelsa state, the case is not different. Although farm holdings in the area are owned and operated mainly on farm household basis headed by men, farming is dominated by women (Allison-Oguru *et al*, 1999:284). In this situation where only necessary labour and necessary products exist in the economy at the expense of surplus labour and surplus products, the volume of the market economy would be very small. Due to the low productivity level, most farm products are consumed within the producing households and communities. Only about 30 percent of what is produced is usually

offered for sale at the local markets.

Another noticeable effect of gender classification of both crops and labour on the agricultural production of our focus area is the existence of low income and saving. It has already been said that only about 30 percent of the total produce is usually sent to the market for sale. This invariably means that the farmers earn little income yearly from their agricultural produce. It should be noted that it is only when there is surplus labour that surplus product could be produced, and that when surplus production occur in an economy, more of the surpluses are usually pushed into the market which in turn, would lead to increase in the incomes and savings of the farmers. When the farmers' income remain very small the desire to save is lost. A random sampling of the small-scale farmers in Ikwerre indicates that the average savings of twenty peasant farmers stood at about ten to fifteen thousand naira each per annum. This indicates that the farmers are usually unable to provide themselves with essential household items and good shelter.

CONCLUSION

This impact review has demonstrated that the existence of gender division and classification of both farm crops and labour in Ikwerre society constitute a great constraint on agricultural production and development. And since this rigid implementation of gender classification of both crops and labour is experienced in most Nigerian communities, low productivity, unexpanded market, low income and low savings become a threat to the realisation of Nigeria's pursuit for national food sufficiency. Indeed, Nigeria is a society that with a little more effort and complete removal of inhibitive factors can produce enough food for its population and for export, given its agricultural resources. For a manifest sustainable development to occur in Nigeria's agricultural sector, gender-based inhibitive factors must be removed. Agricultural production of crops and performance of its required labour should be determine by the amount of profits or wages accruing from them.

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