Research on Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN 2222-1719 (Paper) ISSN 2222-2863 (Online)
Vol.3, No.4, 2013

It is not all about Reproductive Labour: Excluded Traditional Ventures and Rural Livelihoods among Women in Northern Ghana

Alhassan Musah

**Department of Accountancy Studies, UDS School of Business and Law,
University for Development Studies, Wa Campus, P.O Box 520, Wa, Ghana**

* E-mail of the corresponding author: simbaakos@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the era of rapid corporatisation and obsession with market-led growth, not much attention has been paid to people who have not been able to fully tap into the new paradigm. Rural women face additional difficulties owing to societal constructs that further limit their participation in the mainstream economy. They also face real dangers that the traditional economic ventures, they have historically relied on, are on the verge of extinction. Rural women in Dagbon[i] are now caught in a web: on the one hand, they have not migrated fully into the mainstream capitalist or what is often termed the "modern" economy; and, on the other hand, they are also losing a grip on their traditional economic strategies, which have historically formed the bedrock of community welfare. In this paper, I explore some selected traditional economic ventures undertaken by women in rural Dagbon. I examine the appropriateness of these local economic ventures in enhancing welfare among rural households in Dagbon, and the relevance of these activities in responding to a variety of community needs, including cultural and religious purposes. It concludes with a call to pay more attention to understanding the deeper and underlying socio-cultural contexts in which women pursue livelihood activities in rural and traditional communities.

Key words: Rural women; Dagbon, Traditional Economics, Livelihoods

1. Introduction

Rural women have been credited with making substantial contributions to household and family incomes in Africa. Even in highly patriarchal societies, women have played, and continue to play key useful economic and social roles. They account for 52% of total population and produce up to 60 to 80% of total food, but only own just 1% of the continent's total assets (Abankwa and Abebe, 2011). In the Northern Region of Ghana, women constitute 51% of the population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2011). At the level of the household, and indeed across the three regions in northern Ghana, it is not uncommon to find categorisation of responsibility for household expenditure. Most of these categorisations tend to be determined largely by reference to socially rather than biologically determined constructs. (Warner, Al-Hassan and Kydd, 1997). These socially determined roles have contributed in defining what women and men do for both farm and non-farm activities in Northern Ghana. In terms of farm activities in Dagbon, women's roles tend to concentrate on planting and harvesting activities. They, thus, offer substantial support to their

male counterparts in generating farm output even though they normally have limited control over the proceeds. Typical reproductive labour roles assigned to women in Dagbon include maintaining the household, for example, fetching water, cooking, and taking care of children. Stated differently, many rural women spend significant amount of time on unpaid care work. In most cases also women have the responsibility of providing 'soup ingredients' for the family meal. These roles are not only heavy and demanding but also critical and important to well-being at the household and family level. Despite these contributions to the upkeep of the household and communities, women lack influence resulting in limited options for them. Indeed, they are the underdogs in the economic power relations.

Much of the discourse on livelihood activities for women in Northern Ghana has concentrated on only the types of small endeavours that seem to find favour with NGOs and civil society. These activities are well documented and include endeavours on shea butter extraction, dawadawa processing[ii] , and soap making. This approach implies that other useful livelihood endeavours that are outside the orthodox ventures are not accounted for. Most of these endeavours are becoming extinct partly owing to inadequate recognition and attention, and also due to the proliferation of so-called modern technologies and processes. In accounting for these ventures, we will define the traditional economic system as a system where traditions, customs and belief systems determine its operation and govern rules of behaviour, cooperation and exchange. In this paper, other livelihood activities undertaken by women in Dagbon that have not received much attention are explored

.

2.0 Methods

This paper is based on a study that used mainly in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, conducted in Tarikpaa and Zoosali, both rural communities in Northern Ghana between August and November 2011. The Northern Region is one of the poorest regions in Ghana. The villages selected for this work possess all the characteristics of a typical rural Dagomba community. Most rural Dagombas rely on agriculture and other subsistence activities. Traditional economic ventures are still prevalent in these villages and, therefore, provided opportunities and space in

understanding how women undertake these ventures. In each of the villages we interviewed Twenty (20) women who had specialist knowledge in indentified traditional economic ventures. We also conducted focus group discussions with 16 members of the Zoosali *Wumpini Ganji.* Again, interviews were conducted with the traditional rulers of Zoosali and Tarikpaa, who provided valuable insights into the socio-cultural and historical settings of the villages in particular, and Dagbon in general. Much of the analyses in this paper are thus based on the information collected from the aforementioned sample.

3.0 Discussions and Findings

3.1 A variety of Ventures

The ventures under discussion are undertaken by women on small scale basis, make use of local knowledge and expertise, and rely on intergenerational transfer of skills to sustain them. These ventures have largely been ignored by policy makers and indeed a large section of society, perhaps because the returns to women are considered marginal and 'backward' by contrast to the so-called 'modern' activities and processes. In a context where most women in households are required to assume responsibility for the basic cooking ingredients which includes salt, pepper, etc.), these small ventures are sources of income that assist women in Dagbon to meet this important household obligation. The man only provides the grain and it then becomes the duty of the woman to put food on the table. Many Dagomba women take this domestic arrangement seriously. There are consequences for failure. A woman who is unable to meet this obligation will most likely be given several labels by community members, including surprisingly, women. A young woman will normally be called "Pag Choggfu" (useless woman, literally). At the extreme end of the continuum where the woman is elderly, she is normally labeled a witch because failure is considered an act of wickedness. Dagomba women are not only keen in avoiding these labels, but also work even harder to mobilise funds regardless of how little that might be in supporting the household well-being and the upbringing of their children. The labels from communities are deep and pronounced in polygamous homes. Majority of marriages are polygamous in typical rural Dagomba communities. Women in polygamous marriages want to remain "competitive" and seen to be valued by the husband. In this competitive space - and some sort of effort to gain recognition from the man, and indeed family - comes the 'quantity' versus 'quality' debate. Ironically, this debate is largely among males. The debate is summarised by a popular Dagomba saying which loosely translates as "when a jealous woman takes

her turn to cook, the quantity of soup reduces for the household". Here, the jealous woman refers to the woman who makes all the sacrifices to ensure the family soup tastes better. In doing this, community members normally argue, so much effort is put on quality to appease the man in such a way that quantity suffers. This implies other members of the household might not get the soup. These negative labels and constructs tend to put more pressure on the rural dagomba woman. In a context where they do not also own the farm output and have limited access to paid employment, Dagomba women in rural communities rely on a variety of petty ventures to ensure house hold well-being, and it is to these ventures that I now turn. I will limit discussions to traditional cotton spinning and traditional pottery.

3.2 Traditional Cotton Spinning

Traditional cotton spinning is one of the oldest livelihood ventures undertaken by women in rural communities. It is done informally using simple tools like the spindle to make the yarn. Using the thigh or any convenient part of the body a whirling motion is given to the spindle. In most communities a calabash or any other suitable container is also used in conjunction with the spindle in this whirling motion to form the yarn. Whilst traditional cotton spinning is largely an activity undertaken by women, there appears to be some connection with age and physical ability. For instance, findings from the focus group discussions in the two villages suggest that, traditional cotton spinning is done by elderly women and the physically challenged who earn a living by spinning cotton into fibre for smock weavers. Cotton spinning also looks an attractive option for some rural women because of the heavy reproductive labour they undertake which leaves them with little options to undertake jobs that require mobility outside the household or jobs that require heavy investments of time. This seems consistent with the view espoused by Dejene who argues that most women undertake micro entrepreneurship because of economic necessity and the lack of options for employment (Dejene 2006). Most rural Dagomba women, thus, prefer income generating activities that enable them to manage from home.

There are significant economic stakes for rural women undertaking traditional cotton spinning. Before the advent of industrial cotton production and subsequent growth in the use of imported cloths, most rural dwellers depended on the traditional "*Binmangli*"[iii] for clothing. As one informant told me: "these were the days when it was common to

find a husband and wife sharing one cloth, rotating by day and night and using the same cloth". In all these, the local woman made some income from her traditional cotton spinning endeavour. This situation is changing with the growth of the modern textile industry. Employing the power of technology and automation, the industry produces high volume enabling it to enjoy competitive advantage over traditional weavers. There are obvious threats to the socio-economic lives of rural women. There are no immediate escape routes as some people, including policy players, view the traditional economy as a problem to be solved. There is no praise-singing here for the traditional approaches to livelihoods, but there is everything to be said for the views expressed by Regenvanu, who argues that rather than view the traditional economy or anything traditional as a problem, our thinking should shift to considering it as an enormous asset to be utilized (Regenvanu, 2009). To some extent, contextually, these traditional activities hold the potential as entry points into understanding rural livelihoods and, therefore, deserve serious policy consideration for sustaining traditional livelihood ventures. In most communities in the study area, there is a still a heavy reliance on traditional cotton spinning for burial clothes, implying the existence of some social stakes as well. Community members themselves lament that this important livelihood vocation for women is becoming extinct, further decimating the limited options available to rural women, especially the aged and physically challenged.

3.3 Local Pottery

The tradition of pottery craft in Northern Ghana has been practiced for several decades. Traditional pottery in Northern Ghana is undertaken by women, and employs simple processes using clay. The colour of the pot depends on the type of clay, while the type of clay in a particular community determines the prevalence of pot making in that community. Traditional pots are normally associated with multiple functions including usage for domestic, spiritual and ritual purposes. Some of these include cooking, storing water and food. In the study area, the traditional pot is important in marriage rites especially among rural dwellers. A very large pot for storing water is a major part of the

collections that a young woman needs to send to the matrimonial home. Demand for the local pot is thus still high in local communities providing opportunities for people who make them to rake in income. The use of the traditional pot appears to be dwindling in peri-urban and urban areas where the use of metal and plastic containers for water storage is gaining prominence. In typical rural communities such as Zoosali and Tarikpaa and indeed many other villages in the area, patronage for the traditional pot remains high. Majority of the people interviewed insists the traditional pot keeps water cool and hygienic. In the words of one informant "*the pot is made from clay which contains sand. Water is also from the ground. This limits the amount of contamination. For the metal containers, we have to use paint and other chemicals to prevent them from rusting. Even then this is still not safe*". Without getting into the scientific basis for such views, these and other explanations offered by rural dwellers reveal that the rural community in Dagbon is not about to abandon faith in the traditional pot. There are other uses. First, in traditional Dagomba communities, human placentas are normally disposed by putting them in broken pots before burying them. In recent times, some people have resorted to the use of polythene materials for such disposals. Most of the informants in this study disapprove of this method, insisting that it contravenes human ethics. The placenta is regarded as a human being, and according to Dagomba custom, you cannot bury a human being using polythene materials. Whilst this will bother on traditional beliefs, the connection with the relevance of the traditional pot, and by extension livelihood potential for women engaged in pottery, cannot be ignored. Second, traditional pottery also provided, and still does, Dagomba rural communities with several linkages including energy supply, and, as noted above spiritual connection. In addition, women engaged in pottery also manufacture the *Firla Laa*, also known variously as *waanbon gaasi*[iv] and *Atta nimmegu.* The *Firla laa* which literally translates as "Lantern bowl" is a plate-like container made from clay used for lighting purposes. Sheabuter oil is then put into this plate to provide the household with lighting. In the olden days it constituted a major component in the energy mix of rural Dagombas. The spread of modern energy sources including accelerated rural electrification projects by Government has diminished the reliance on this traditional energy source over time. It needs emphasis though that whilst reliance for energy supply purposes has diminished, the relevance and importance of the *Firla Laa* in certain traditional rites remains religiously intact. In most rural Dagomba communities, the *Firla Laa* provides the source of overnight light for the corpse pending burial the next day. The *Firla Laa* is normally lit and placed in the room where the corpse 'lies in state'. The belief is that the corpse needs to return to the maker in a pure form. The *Firla Laa* and its

contents are devoid of synthetic materials and the connection with clay also strikes a note with earth where the corpse will finally rest. In the case of a deceased traditional ruler, prince or princess, this practice has no variation in most of rural Dagbon creating demand on a continuing basis, for women who undertake traditional pottery.

The point to make here is the regard for the very fabric of human essence in these traditional economic activities undertaken by rural Dagomba women. Whilst providing sources of livelihood for rural women, there are linkages to beliefs and practices of the people in a way that places the human being above orthodox economic indicators and market forces. These processes underscore the need to give more attention to endogenous knowledge and traditional entrepreneurship as one effective way of addressing the real needs of local communities. Whilst not downgrading large scale and quantitative-based interventions in local communities, it makes sense to associate with what Schumacher[v] described as counteracting the 'idolatry of giantism' with the 'beauty of smallness'. Schumacher believes scale in economic life must not be separated from the overriding dignity of the human being. For people in the study area, the inextricable link between people to one another, and to their natural environment underpins their way of life.

4.0 Conclusion

Rural Dagomba women face significant challenges partly owing to lack of livelihood opportunities and exclusion from full participation in the main economic chain as a result of social and economic constructs that tend to define what women can and cannot do. In this paper, I have briefly explored some of the challenges facing rural Dagomba women and the coping mechanisms women have resorted to in order to improve livelihood options for themselves and households. The emphasis from the state and civil society when designing interventions targeted at rural women has been on activities that have been presented continuously as the escape route out of poverty for rural women. These activities have received considerable hype and have almost become "poverty reduction templates" much to the exclusion of other ventures that have provided significant lifelines to rural women. These excluded activities have largely been undertaken using local knowledge and basic tools and technologies. In pursuing these

ventures, local women also ensure that they uphold the human dignity in a way that maximises community welfare whilst earning some livelihood opportunities. These ventures have variously been described as "backward", "primitive" and "out of touch" with current realities. These descriptions are largely based on limited diagnosis of the unique characteristics of rural women and the communities in which they live. These critics fail to appreciate the failure of the state, markets and indeed the so-called "superior economic systems" in addressing the needs of rural women. Despite not being fully integrated into the so-called enhanced processes, women have over the years remained resilient in undertaking what can be called traditional economic ventures in addition to the huge familial and household duties they already undertake.

These findings have implications for policy; policy makers need to come to the realisation that brandishing 'templates' that seek to change the fortunes of rural women will most likely not be able to achieve the desired outcomes unless these interventions are rooted in a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural characteristics of specific communities. It will appear the so-called superior processes would have to be complemented with indigenous strategies to make maximum impact.

References

Abankwah V. and Abebe M (2011). Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Northern Ghana Through indigenous Rural Enterprises. Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa, Vol. 13 No. 2

Anquandoh, J, A (2011). The traditional Potters craft (Online.). Available: http://www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/index1.php?linkid=277&page=2&sectionid=525. Date Accessed: 23rd September 2011

Black, M (2009), No-Nonsense guide to International Development. New Internationalist, Canada

Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India. Impact of globalisation of textile industry on position of rural women in handloom sector in Orissa (online). Available:

http://ncw.nic.in/pdfreports/IMPACT%20OF%20GLOBALISATION%20OF%20TEXTILE%20INDUSTRY%20ON%20ORISSA.pdf. Date Accessed; 18th July 2011

Regenvau, R (2009). The traditional economy as a source of resilience in Vanuatu (online); available athttp://www.aidwatch.org.au/sites/aidwatch.org.au/files/Ralph%20Regenvanu.pdf. Accessed on 8th March 2011

Warner, Al-Hassan and Kydd (1997). Beyond Gender Roles; Conceptualizing the Social and Economic Lives of Rural Peoples in Sub-Saharan Africa. Available: http://www.landcoalition.org/pdf/08_beyond_gender_roles_Africa.pdf. Date Accessed 15th July 2011

Yeshiareg, D (2006). Promoting women's economic empowerment in Africa (online). Available at http://www.uneca.org/aec/documents/Yeshiareg%20Dejene.pdf . Date Accessed: 23rd September 2011

Eeckhout , J and Munshi, K (2002).Institutional Change in the Non-Market Economy: Endogenous Matching in Chennai's Chit Fund Auctions (online). Available: http://economics.sas.upenn.edu/~munshi/chit12.pdf

[i] Dagbon refers to the area inhabited by the Dagomba ethnic group of Northern Ghana

[ii] From locus bean used as vegetable condiment for meals

[iii] A traditional Cloth made from local cotton spinning and used for a variety of purposes including burials.

[iv] Name believed to be associated with the Dagomba Village "Waanbong" and "Gas" in apparent reference to its high patronage in the Waanbong village.

[v] As in the "No-nonsense guide to International Development" by Maggie Black, 2009.