ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE PLAYED BY FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN AGRICULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN NKWENE, SWAZILAND

Salam A.* and Dlamini M. M.

Department of Geography, Environmental Science and Planning, University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni (SWAZILAND)

Received October 23, 2010 Accepted February 15, 2011

ABSTRACT

Women’s unequal participation in farm organizations, restrictions on women’s ownership as well as control of resources and unjust legislation give female-headed households to face many problems that their male counterparts do not. The problems that plague Nkwene female headed households farmers have been identified as issues related to the economic system, declining rural communities and environmental degradation. Therefore, this study was design to examine the role played by female-headed households in agricultural performance in Nkwene area. To achieve this objectives fieldwork was conducted to collect data from all 61 farmers, of which 57 were female-headed households and 4 were male-headed households. The result show that the household heads contribute extensively in rural development especially in crop farming. However, it was found that the farmers lack resources and support for agricultural production from the non-governmental organization and Swazi government, which resulted in the slow agricultural development. The study concludes by observing that female-headed households are closely tied to the welfare of people in Nkwene area. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture should gather gender-disaggregated data on the access of female-headed households to resources and to extension and training. If the female-headed households do not benefit from the extension and training then constraint assessment should be conducted to see how female-headed households could be reached.

Key Words: Environmental degradation, Female-headed households, Farming, Role, Agriculture, Gender disaggregated data

INTRODUCTION

Women play an important role in sustaining and improving food security at global, national, community and household levels in two main ways. Firstly, they are majority of the agricultural producers in the developing world and are responsible for providing food for their families. Secondly, they are nearly universally responsible for food preparation for their families. However, these contributions often go unnoticed due to the fact that women mostly operate in the informal sector and their efforts are not adequately documented in national surveys.

Women's contribution to agricultural production

Rural women across Asia and the Pacific region play a critical role in supporting the three pillars of food security - food production, economic access to available food and nutritional security - for the members of their households, in normal times as well as during periods of stress. However, their roles generally are constrained and undervalued, and usually executed in the face of enormous social, cultural and economic constraints.

Women's access to resources for production

According to Gurumurthy, efforts should be made to collect sex-disaggregated data and gender-differentiated information for all aspects of agriculture and rural development in the region. According to Khin with the assistance of donors and international agencies in many countries in the region, living levels data, including sex-
disaggregated data on time use, have been collected. But these have not been analysed in depth to create sex-disaggregated information and a rural profile of the status of women. It would be helpful to mobilise external financial and technical assistance to analyse and utilize the existing data sets to create useful information for gender responsive planning and programme interventions to assist rural women.  

Women and food security  
In the twenty-first century the pursuit of food security remains a critical challenge for Asia and the Pacific region. In spite of considerable economic growth and improvements in human development across the region during recent decades, the lack of availability and stability of food supplies and access to them continue to be of key concern. Indeed, increased population pressures, environmental degradation and emerging regional trends beg the question: Can the world produce enough food at reasonable prices, provide access to food by the poor and not destroy the environment in the process?  

Over the last few years food security has been the focus of attention in China. Where the Government is taking painstaking efforts to improve and ensure the present and future food security through Poverty Alleviation Programme and by giving priority to the agricultural sector as the foundation of the national economy. However, these efforts are facing great challenges.  

Women as agricultural producers  
According to Masud et al. many countries in the region have focused on girls’ education as an important process to equalize the gender gap and make investments in women’s futures. Such educational interventions are beginning to pay off with incremental gains in female educational attainment. Still, poor access to schools and learning centres and the relatively high cost of education continue to be barriers for poor rural families to support girls’ education. In addition, unrelenting social prejudice against female education continues to cause the gender gap in rural education.  

According to Leeming the female share in the agricultural labour force in China grew steadily between 1982 and 1994. While in 1982 women constituted 46.2% of the agricultural labour force, this figure rose to 50% in 1987. In 1994 women performed 50-60% of all agricultural production. In some parts of commodity grain production areas this percentage is as high as 90%.  

Female-headed households face some problems that their male counterparts do not; such as Women’s unequal participation in farm organizations, Restrictions on women’s ownership and control of resources and unjust legislation. They also suffer more acutely from many of the problems that affect both female-headed households and male-headed households. None of these problems can be adequately addressed until the centralisation system is transformed to nature more feasible rural communities and secure the livelihood of female-headed household farmers. Commercial farmers are a small minority, 4–5%, of the Swazi population, and the proportion of women farmers is even lower. On their own, farmers (especially those who benefit least from the existing system, such as small family farmers and farm women) cannot exert enough political influence to ensure change.  

The problems that plague Nkwene female headed households farmers have been identified as issues related to the economic system, declining rural communities, environmental degradation. In addition, issues such as the feminisation of poverty, domestic violence and inadequate day-care programs, all negatively affect female-headed households more than they do male-headed households. A fundamental problem in the economic system is that farmers lack control over the costs of inputs and over the prices received for their products.  

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES  
This study was design to examine the role played by female-headed households in agricultural performance.  

METHODOLOGY  
Study area  
The study was conducted in Nkwene which is located in Shiselweni District of Swaziland. This is along the Manzini to Hlatikhulu route in the
southern part of Swaziland with a distance of 54 km from Manzini. This area lies between 26°45'E and 27°00'S in the Middleveld of Swaziland and alongside Mkhondo river. The Nkwene area was selected for the study because it is officially classified as poverty stricken and therefore receives food aid and other grants from The Disaster Task Force and private NGOs like World Vision.

Nkwene is the populous area compared to other areas with 446 homesteads and 2826 population with 612 households in a total area of 69.3 square kilometres. This is so because a good number of people migrate from different parts of the country to the Nkwene area with the intention to have access to water, fertile soil and conducive climatic conditions for agriculture. Average temperature of Nkwene area ranges from 16 degrees Celsius to 28 degrees Celsius in winter and in summer the average temperatures range from 18 degrees Celsius to 32 degrees Celsius. The rainfall pattern is seasonal and only occurs in summer with an average of 700ml per season while in winter average rainfall is 210ml per season. Most of the land is used for farming crops such maize, beans and cotton.

**Research design**

This study employed a case study approach of data collection. A case study is a strategy for conducting research which involves empirical investigation of a particular phenomenon within evidence. The study used multiple methods of data collection which were both qualitative and quantitative. The study required information on the contribution made by Nkwene female-headed households in agricultural production. This information was important to the study in order to assess female-headed household’s role in agricultural performance. Secondly, information on the challenges facing female-headed households in their attempts to contribute towards agricultural development in Nkwene area is vital to the study so as to evaluate the challenges in connection with agricultural development.

The study interviewed key informants mostly female-headed household farmers in order to establish the agricultural status of the women and crops grown were meeting the demand to the local community in the Nkwene area. Information was also gathered to see how much Nkwene female-headed households contributed to agricultural production in particular and to rural development in general.

To collect data the study employed the structured interview technique of data collection, whereby the researcher interviewed the respondents face to face using a questionnaire. This method was found to be suitable for this study because it gave the researcher an opportunity to clarify the questions to the respondents and to observe the physical surroundings of the households as a way of verifying the responses.

**Sampling techniques**

There was no sampling done in Nkwene area because all the 57 female-headed households and 4 male-headed households, were interviewed. The collected data was coded and analyzed using interpretational analysis. Interpretational analysis refers to examining data for constructs, themes and patterns that can be used to describe and explain phenomenon studied. This means that the study interpreted the meaning of the results with regard to the questions it raised. The data was presented using bar graphs and tables.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1 shows that 23.96% acquired high school level education, while 29.50% acquired secondary level education and majority of them, 47.54% acquired primary level education which is the junior certificate level education. Therefore it is important to note that the female-headed households who acquired only primary level education could hardly understand some of the technological advancements because of their low educational status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>47.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contribution of female-headed households in agricultural production

Fig. 1 are categorised according to their marital status to show yield received from 2000 to 2005 by female-headed households. This group composition included married, single, widowed and divorced headed households in the Nkwene area. The figure shows a decline in the production of maize and beans for the single headed households. According to the single, widowed and the divorced headed households, the decline in the crop production was due to the fact that, resources such as credit, capital, water and support services are inadequate, therefore their production performance declines and will continue to decline as long as they have no access to the already mentioned resources. For example, households headed by widowed persons received an average of 15.3 bags of maize from year 2000, 2001 and 2004. Also from 2003 and 2005 they received an average of 10.5 bags of beans. Finally, headed households by divorced females received an average of 13.7 bags in the year’s 2000, 2001 and 2004, while in 2003 and 2005 they received an average of 20 bags of beans. It is also important to note that in 2000 there were no yields received due to drought conditions prevailing them.

The Fig. 1 shows a decline in the production of maize and beans for the single headed households.
According to the single, widowed and the divorced headed households, the decline in the crop production was due to the fact that, resources such as credit, capital, water and support services are inadequate, therefore their production performance declines and will continue to decline as long as they have no access to the already mentioned resources. For example, households headed by widowed persons received an average of 15.3 bags of maize from year 2000, 2001 and 2004. Also from 2003 and 2005 they received an average of 10.5 bags of beans. Finally, headed households by divorced females received an average of 13.7 bags in the year’s 2000, 2001 and 2004, while in 2003 and 2005 they received an average of 20 bags of beans. It is also important to note that in 2000 there were no yields received due to drought conditions prevailing them.

**Fig. 2** shows the performance of male and female-headed household’s agricultural production. It has been noted that female-headed household’s performance from the year 2000 to 2005 was constantly above that of male-headed household’s performance. This is a fact because a majority of the farmers are female headed households who perform agricultural activities and male headed households perform other activities such as crafting, raising livestock and very few of them are growing crops and vegetables, some migrate from rural to urban areas for better employment.

**Land for farming**

Female-headed households stated that land is enough for them to grow their crops, except that they do not have enough access to resources, such as capital, credit and water supply for agricultural development. Out of the 20 hectares, only 7 hectares is under cultivation and the remaining 13 hectares is not cultivated due to the inaccessibility of resources for agricultural development.

**Perception of female-headed households regarding support levels**

Nkwene female-headed households would have made greater improvement in agricultural production if the government, non-governmental organisations and the chief provided them with the basic resources for production.

**Table 2** shows that the above-mentioned statements seem to be the opposite hence female-headed households lack the basic support from the Swazi Government, non-governmental organisations and also from the chief of the area. For example, the government does not provide workshops in the rural areas for agricultural
development training, but instead those workshops are held in urban places where agriculture is not in practise such as Lugogo sun, Sibayeni lodge, convention centre, to name but a few. Also there is lack of financial support to purchase inputs such as pesticides, fertilizer, seeds and farm implements, of which the farmers have to provide themselves in their attempt to contribute toward agricultural development in the Nkwene.

Sources of income

The main sources of income for the Nkwene female-headed households are crop farming, livestock farming and off-farm wage employments such as crafting. According to the research findings, out of the 61 farmers in Nkwene area a majority of 53 female-headed households generate their income through crop farming. The rest of the farmers generate income through livestock farming and off-farm wage employment, but mainly their focus is on crop farming. Table 3 shows the Nkwene female-headed households income generation.

Table 3: Income sources and household types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Female headed households</th>
<th>Male headed households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crop farming</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock farming</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-wage employment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION

Female-headed household farmers have been involved in clarifying the problems in agriculture and identifying solutions aimed at transforming the system. They have advocated growing as much food as possible on one’s own and have sought increased demand for locally grown and distributed food, rather than food produced primarily for export, both are initiatives that directly support urban agriculture. Female-headed households...
own analyses confirm that the well being of Nkwene area and female-headed households is closely tied to the welfare of people in both urban and rural settings and that a sustainable urban food system requires a sustainable rural one.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Considering the major contribution of female-headed households to agricultural performance in Nkwene area, some recommendations and suggestions can be made. Given the fact that gender-disaggregated data are hardly available, especially on access to resources and services, and benefits derived by men and women from Government Programmes, it is of utmost importance that the Ministry of Agriculture starts collecting gender-disaggregated data, through their surveys and census, as well as provide training to female headed households with some simple tools for gender-analysis and planning. Although the Nkwene female-headed households are rather active in promoting a greater access of female-headed households to production resources, through scouting for sponsors, their efforts still lag behind the demand. Attention should be paid to tools for the transfer of new technology to illiterate people or people with low educational attainment.

Therefore, it is strongly recommended that Ministry of Agriculture should establishment a Gender Unit within the Ministry, that would specialise in assisting the collection of gender-disaggregated data, monitoring of female headed households’ access to extension and training, researchers and policy-makers, could be of great help to the implementation of the above mentioned tasks and as such to Nkwene future food security.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors are grateful to the people of Nkwene area (Swaziland) and those who have helped to make this study a success.

**REFERENCES**

8. Coombs P., Meeting the needs for the rural poor, New York Paragon Press, 4-6, (1980).