SECURITY OF LAND TENURE FOR WOMEN: AN IMPERATIVE FOR FOOD SECURITY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This paper seeks to assess the impact of promoting security of land tenure for women and food security in developing countries. Food security, which is the ability to get constant access to food in order to enjoy a healthy life, has been a central issue in global discourse, particularly among developing nations. This is because, among other things, food security and access is not inconsequential to the standard of living for countries, households and individuals. Unhindered access to nutritious food is indeed a crucial indicator for assessing the quality of life due to the fact that it is intrinsically linked to health issues such as malnourishment and depletion of the body's immune system. Nonetheless, the availability of food in any given country depends on a number of factors which include the state of the agricultural sector; natural disasters (such as floods, droughts and monsoons); famine and security of land tenure, especially for women. Women all over the world - either in rural or urban settings - make up a large percentage of the agricultural workforce in developing countries. Their agricultural activities (as seed-planters or harvesters of crops) at subsistence and commercial levels ensure that, they provide adequate and nutritionally balanced food for their households first, and subsequently for commercial purposes. However, there exists a gender gap in their overall access to land, particularly in rural agrarian economies of developing countries. The justification for this study is that, eighty per cent (80%) of foods produced in developing nations are grown by women who do not own parcels of land while farms managed by female-headed households are disproportionate in size compared to their male counterparts. Apart from being denied rights to purchase land, others are deprived of access as a result of forceful evictions perpetrated by male relatives, landgrabbers or community leaders. This paper argues that, the challenges women encounter in enjoying land rights deters them from participating effectively and efficiently in the fight against food insecurity. It is therefore recommended that national legislations and cultural practices that discriminate against women be reformed and abolished respectively. There should also be a greater inclusion of women in decision-making at different levels. The study relies solely on secondary data derived from extant literature and employs textual analysis in discussing the subject.

Keywords: Food security, women's access to land, agriculture, women's rights

1 INTRODUCTION

Making food available and accessible to the world population has been a front-liner in the agenda of many international (non-governmental) organizations. The desire to be food secure has indeed led many national governments into adopting it as a second in the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite the unflinching commitment of international institutions to half the population of the world's hungry and malnourished by 2015, the number of people suffering from severe hunger and food insecurity 'still represents one of the biggest challenges' globally that requires urgent attention (Napoli, 2011). Combating food insecurity requires a set of strategies which includes among others, enhancing (rural) women's rights to land. This is because people's access to food depends to a large extent on the farming activities of rural women. It is estimated that 50 per cent of the food produced worldwide is done by women. As natural caregivers, they are prone to engaging in small-scale or subsistence farming for the purpose of providing for their family. On a larger scale, they trade surpluses in exchange for cash which further promotes the distribution of food to urban areas. For instance, in Latin America, women contribute 40 per cent of their farm produce to the 'internal market and women's gardens and agricultural plots often constitute the only means of diversifying the family's diet' (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). Given their invaluable role in food value chain, they are still faced with certain encumbrances in enjoying the full realization of their rights to valuable economic and financial assets like land and credits/loans. The need to enhance women's rights to land as a key approach in ensuring food security will be discussed subsequently.

1.1 The Concept of Food Security

The concept of food security is a multifarious and fundamental one that has evolved overtime (Sunner, 2000). Its complexity borders on the fact that it is characterised by multiple dimensions (availability, affordability, utility and stability) and defined at different levels ranging from national to local levels (Martinez, 2015). In the same vein, it is fundamental because it affects all aspects of human life. It is important to mention that given its crucial nature, there is no single acceptable definition of food security; what exist in literature are common indicators or determinants. However, several attempts have been made at conceptualizing the term at different levels and as Hoddinott (1999) puts it, there are aproximately 200 definitions and 450 indicators of food security.

Generally, food security is a condition in which people have access to quality food in the appropriate quantity at all times for a healthy and active life (Ojo and Adebayo, 2012; Nwachukwu, 2014). According to this definition, some of the indicators of food security are fluid access to nutritional food and adequate size of meals required for human development.

In the same vein, the World Food Summit held in 1996 described food security as a situation where 'all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet the dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (Martinez, 2015).

Conversely, food insecurity arises when people lack access to adequate or sufficient food necessary for survival or human development. Among other reasons, it could arise from a lack of requisite resources to produce or acquire food (Ojo and Adebayo, 2012). It should be noted that unhindered access to (quality and) sizable food is a fundamental right of everyone – this is enshrined in a number of international human rights' treaties and instruments.

Despite the provisions and protection of human rights' instruments, right to freedom from hunger and adequate food is yet to be globally enjoyed. As a matter of fact, in one study, it was reported that the global estimates of people experiencing severe hunger increased drastically between 1990 and 2007 (du Toit, 2011). In addition, Eide (1999) believes that about eight hundred million people suffer gross malnutrition globally (almost 12 per cent of the world's population) (cited in Ojo and Adebayo, 2012) while in 2010, the figure was put at about 925 million (Agada and Igbkowe, 2015). To address this global challenge, several international efforts culminated in the 1996 World Food Summit which aimed at cutting by half, the population of undernourished people in the world. The estimate of undernourished people at the point of the Summit was 824 million. Five years after the Summit, the slow pace of global improvement became apparent and thus became a source of concern to the world. In other words, despite the overwhelming acceptance and commitment to the goal of reducing world hunger, some countries – particularly in the developing world – could not meet the goal of the Summit (Oshaug, n.d.).

Up till now, the situation has not improved remarkably in the lower-middle-income nations as many die as a result of either extreme hunger or suffer health complications that arise from poor nutrition. Inadequate nutrients hamper growth and development especially in children and can be intrinsically linked to lack of food

security. Twenty years after the World Food Summit, the UN Food Agricultural Organisation (FAO) estimates that there are 11 million people in developed nations currently experiencing undernourishment. Furthermore, it establishes that almost all the hungry people in the world live in the global south (FAO, 2015).

In discussing the triggers of food security, Martinez (2015), asserts that global food security is constantly threatened by many interconnected drivers and variables such as population growth, change in patterns of food consumption, urbanisation, volatility of agricultural prices, proper management of scarce resources, concerns for environmental sustainability, biofuel production and climate change. Other pertinent factors include, global rise in oil price, political instability (du Toit, 2011), wars and, gender gaps in access to land for agricultural purposes.

Summarily, food security deals with the production, distribution and consumption (Napoli, 2011) of quality food and it is important because people who experience chronic hunger and malnourishment lack the necessary nutrients for growth and development and are prone to several health-related problems. This, ultimately, has the potential to prevent the level of productivity and efficiency required for societal or national development.

2 FOOD SECURITY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Drawing from the foregoing, food security can be described as a complex phenomenon that integrates three main dimensions: availability of food, accessibility and utilization. These dimensions are not essentially caused by inadequate food supply but can also be attributed to the lack of purchasing power at both national and household levels. Hence, as a result of higher demands for food and low crop productivity, a hike in price limits the chances of low-income countries (Ahmed, Ying, Bashir, Abid and Zulfiqar, 2017) to produce, purchase or provide the right quantity and quality of food. This is the exact situation in many developing and underdeveloped countries.

According to Cook and Brown (1996) and Poppendieck (1997), the idea of 'food security' was conceived with respect to the developing world. Thus, it was designed to adequately define the conditions facing developing countries and their food supplies and demands. The reasons for this are directly related to the characteristics of developing countries which include a fast growing populace and high rate of urban-rural migration. Besides undernourishment, a current concern based on deficiencies of micronutrients (zinc, iodine, vitamin A and iron), overweight and obesity has risen. It is often referred to as 'hidden hunger'. About two million people are affected by it in developing countries like India, Brazil and Rwanda (Thompson and Amoroso, 2014). According to Martinez (2015:9), despite the international efforts at combating hunger and ensuring food security, the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 'remains at a worrying scale (higher than 10) in the developing world'. He further avers that, the results vary among regions and countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa, South America and countries in South Asia having the highest GHI scores in 1995 and 2014. In fact, it is reported that over ninety million children, under the age of five, are severely underweight while, undernourishment and food insecurity are apparently on the increase in almost all the regions in South America and Africa (United Nations Development Program, 2019). For instance in Nigeria, Adubi (2005) explains that,

At the national level, the main food problems are food production instability and widespread malnutrition among population and income groups due largely to inadequate food supplies, poverty and uneven distribution of income. On the economic front, inadequate food supply has resulted in reduced export earnings, larger food imports, smaller revenue to the government, shortage of raw materials for processing industries and increased inflationary pressures (pp. 10).

In addition, Guerrero (2010) posits that issues of resource depletion, degradation of the environment (like the Ogoni land in Rivers State) and poor policies on sustainable development have further contributed to the issue of food insecurity. Ligmann-Zielinska and Rivers (2018) corroborate this by adding that toxic contaminants, loss of agricultural land and insufficient water threaten to intensify lack of access to sizable and quality diets can also challenge the food security of hitherto stable regions.

A study conducted by the FAO in 2018 reveals that the percentage of the undernourished population in the world grew for two years consecutively, reaching an estimated 10.9 per cent in 2017. Furthermore, the state of undernourishment (PoU) in Africa and Oceania has been on the rise for a period of time while Africa appears to be the worst hit with an average of 256 million of its population affected by undernourishment (FAO, 2018) and chronic food deprivation. In addition, a projected estimate for the year 2017, highlights a situation where 515 million of the population in Asia (11.4 per cent of its entire populace) are undernourished, thereby affirming the continent as the region with the most undernourished people globally (FAO, 2018).

3 AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO LAND IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Land rights generally refer to the ability of an individual to determine the allocation of rights in land, the demarcation of boundaries on parcels of land for which the rights are allocated and; the right to transfer land to another individual through lease, sale or inheritance (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, FAO, 2002). It is the bundle of rights that accompanies ownership of land.

Land has been considered as a fundamental base for economic development on which individuals (especially farmers) provide for their livelihoods (Odeny, 2013). Put differently, it is a productive resource that guarantees financial security and provides a source of capital for the poor (Lipton, 2009 cited in Akinola, 2018). In addition, it is a socio-cultural asset that provides a source of identity and cultural heritage for the owner. In fact, rights to land are occasioned by an individual's desire to provide for their survival. Hence, it is necessary for the socio-economic empowerment of all regardless of their gender, class or culture. To be more succinct, women's overall legal entitlement to land (either through outright purchase, lease or inheritance) is a crucial factor in establishing gender equality, the general well-being of women and determining the overall living conditions of women and their children in rural and developing economies. This is particularly true in agrarian economies where families have to depend on farming for feeding. Furthermore, Bhaumik, Dimova and Gang (2016) argue that the transition from subsistence farming into commercial farming promises a way out of poverty and ensuring the security of land tenure enhances the chances of a successful transition.

However, given the overall importance of land as a viable asset for farming and other agricultural activities, women fall victims of discrimination and violation vis-à-vis their rights to land in most developing countries (Olokoyo, George, Efobi, Beecroft, 2016). This in turn has grave consequences on their ability to combat poverty. Put differently, there is a direct connection between poverty and land ownership. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, it has been revealed that denying women's rights to land contributes immensely to the feminization of poverty and halted economic development (Richardson, 2004). To buttress this, a study conducted in Zambia found that widows controlled 35 per cent less land after their husbands' demise in households headed by widows (Chapoto, Jayne and Mason, 2007) while 44 per cent of orphans and widows lost substantial livestock (Save the Children, 2009) after the demise of their fathers or husbands respectively. This situation reduces their chances of living above the poverty line because of the inadequate access to land which provides a basic foundation for economic development and financial security.

In Mozambique, the organization of the family (which could be patrilineal or matrilineal) determines to a large extent how property is shared and how land in particular is controlled. Additionally, the residential patterns of couples (that is, either a woman joining her husband and his family in a patri-local community or vice versa in a matri-local community) influence the control and general administration of landed property in the country. Hence, shared or collective ownership is preferred above private control over property. As a matter of fact, some families prefer keeping a particular property within the lineage thereby excluding the women from exercising any right or control over such. In some parts of the country, it is the responsibility of older men to control assets that belong to the family. The reason for this is that women are viewed as temporary members of the family who will transfer inherited property to their husbands' family thereby, cutting off their natal family from such asset (Save the Children, 2009).

The situation is not quite different in Asia and other parts of Africa as women are steadily denied their entitlements to land – gotten either by purchase, lease/rent, or inheritance. Most women are financially incapable of buying land while those that can have to involve a male relative (husband, brothers or brothers in-law) or acquaintance before they can control or own assets. Hence, security of tenure depends to a large extent on good (marital) relations. It is crucial to mention that denying women rights to own or access tangible economic assets like land has been linked to female urbanization. This is because when harsh living conditions set in, women who do not own and cannot access arable land are forced to leave their rural communities for greener pastures in the cities. On getting to the cities, their living condition sometimes worsens as they either become homeless or join the population of those living in slums. In Kenya, for instance, 25 per cent of slum dwellers are women who migrated from rural areas due to land dispossession (Benschop, 2004).

In Namibia, it is not uncommon to find women discriminated in this regard because the country's historical past encouraged discrimination against women at all levels of the society. In some societies, they are viewed as the property of the men and are socialised at an early age to think that boys are more superior to girls and should therefore have the rights of control over property. In other cases, men's resistance to gender equality pose a serious threat to the actualization of women's rights to property in Namibia. In this scenario, the men feel intimidated and threatened by the rising socio-economic status of a woman as they view it as a direct

threat to their own social status and ego. This attitude towards Namibian women was deeply entrenched in cultural norms that reinforced a state-sanctioned system of gender inequality (Le Beau, Inpinge and Conteh, 2004). For South Africa, women were traditionally responsible for agricultural activities on lands which they did not own. Kalabamu (2000) expresses that land ownership was vested in respective tribes and administered by chiefs. In fact, in patrilineal societies like Swaziland and Sotho-Tswana, regardless of a woman's socio-economic status, she was excluded from land administration and ownership. Access to land could only be achieved through husbands, sons or paternal male relatives. However, this did not last for long as women were considered for land ownership through reforms. The land reforms which empowered women to own land independently brought a shift in the status quo. Nevertheless, it was not sufficient enough to encourage many women to own land. Most had only secondary rights (United Nations Department of Political Affairs, 2003).

It is important to mention that, there are several international, regional and national legislations that protect women's rights to land and property across the world but, there remains a major dissonance with what obtains in practice. This, according to Agarwal (1994) is largely as a result of informal institutions like customary laws that have a patriarchal base. In other words, it is either women do not have or enjoy customary rights to land or 'the laws that underpin the property rights of women may be difficult to enforce because they go against the grain of cultural practice' (Joireman, 2008 cited in Bhaumik, Dimova and Gang, 2016: 242).

4 SECURITY OF LAND TENURE FOR WOMEN AND FOOD SECURITY: THE NEXUS

Food is an essential determinant of life and without it, the human life is threatened. As discussed above, insufficient supply and inadequate access to food have far-reaching effects on the health of an individual, their quality of life and their ability to develop physically to the extent of contributing to societal development. A vast majority of the world's population, with majority in developing countries, are currently experiencing undernourishment/malnutrition and severe hunger. This situation can only be ameliorated if certain strategies are put in place to ensure that food security becomes a reality. One of such strategies is to enforce women's rights to land and property as contained in several human rights instruments. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) particularly makes provision for women to have equal treatment in land and agrarian reforms. The role of women in the actualization of food security will be discussed subsequently.

It is pertinent to mention that food security does not only entail the right to food but also the right to produce food. It underscores the role of family farming Pieters, Vandeplas, Guariso, Francken, Sarris and Swinnen (2012). In most developing nations, the agricultural sector constitutes over 30 per cent of the overall GDP and two thirds of the entire workforce. About 45% of the global population live in rural areas with majority depending on agriculture as their main source of livelihood. From this figure, an estimated number of 500 million rural women depend on agriculture and farm on lands they do not own (Garcia, 2013). The general supply of food to every society is determined to a large extent by the work of these rural women (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, SIDA, 2015). This is because they constitute about 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries (FAO, 2011), while they produce between 60 to 80 per cent of the food in developing countries and are responsible for 'half of the world's food production'. Yet not up to 2 per cent of land is owned by women in these regions while their access to technological facilities and credits is limited. In other words, while women are considered the pillar of subsistence or smallscale farming, they still encounter significant challenges in gaining access to economic and financial resources such as land and credits respectively and; even the skill to engage in mechanized farming to ease the burden of manual labor as well as to enhance their levels of productivity. Most of the challenges they experience stem from socio-cultural barriers like culture and customary laws. These informal institutions place a limit on their potentials including the likelihood for financial independence. Since landownership confers some form of socio-economic status on an individual, women are denied that opportunity by individuals who are resistant to gender equality. It is vital to mention that the national legislations of most developing countries give a general protection to individual rights to property however, culture limits its application effectively (FAO, 2011). Combating the problems that women encounter in accessing economic resources like land for subsistence and commercial farming is crucial in the fight against hunger and poverty in women headed households. In fact, it is argued that children whose mothers own land and other forms of tangible property are 33 per cent less likely to be grossly underweight (Landsea Rural Development Institute, 2015). Land ownership also reduces their vulnerability to hunger and poverty and boosts their chances for survival and freedom from domestic violence (Ajayi and Soyinka-Airewele, 2018). Finally, it is presumed that if women are granted the same rights over land like their male counterparts, they would increase total yields on their farms by 20-30 per cent – a percentage which is approximately 100-150 million people in developing

countries.

5 CONCLUSION

Given their role as pillars in the food value chain, women still remain hindered in their access to vital resources like land, credits and technical support in developing countries. For developing countries to fully achieve food security and zero hunger (SDG no. 2) (UNDP, 2019), due consideration should be given to women who are involved in food production, sale and distribution. Put differently, food security which is also defined in terms of distribution of resources to produce food cannot be fully achieved if women's limited access to productive resources is not addressed (Faroog and Azam, 2002).

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