

The Economic and Social Role of Married Women in the Agricultural Production System in the Region of Muea–Cameroon

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The Economic and Social Role of Married Women in the Agricultural Production System in the Region of Muea - Cameroon

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Keywords: economic role, social role, agricultural production system, married women,
gender relation, Cameroon.

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Abstract

Married women play a vital economic and social role in the agricultural production system in Cameroon. These women are mostly involved in food crop production. This research attempts to examine the economic and social roles of married women in the agricultural production system in Muea and the challenges they face which serve as limiting factors to their livelihood. Also, it looks at reasons why despite the contribution of married women, the society does not recognize their important role.

The study further addresses issues on how they can overcome these challenges. It further brings out the part the various institutions are playing such as the government, non-governmental organizations, common initiative groups and micro-finance institutions.

The major findings of this study are that married women in Muea are major actors in the economic and social development of Muea, through their contributions in agriculture and commerce. However they are hindered in performing these roles due to poverty and gender bias tendencies. Land is a vital resource for the amelioration of their livelihoods but it is controlled by the men due to repugnant beliefs that exclude women's right of ownership to this vital asset.

This study relies on the livelihood concept and the gender-based models for the analysis of empirical data and the findings of the study.

The qualitative methodology was used to collect primary and secondary data and techniques such as questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations were used.

Keywords: economic role, social role, agricultural production system, married women, gender relations, Cameroon.

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Abbreviations

AGROMARK	Agricultural Market
APS	Agricultural Production System
CDC	Cameroon Development Corporation
CIG	Common Initiative Group
ECAM	Cameroon Household Survey
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FCFA	Franc CFA
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
INS	National Institute of Statistics
ITF	International Trade Forum
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
PO	Participant Observation
SSA	Sub Saharan Africa
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USA	United States of America
WB	World Bank

Introduction

1.1 Background

Women in Cameroon play a fundamental role in the economic and social well-being of their families (Fonjong, 2004). They devote much of their time for activities that are hardly computed in the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the country. Past and current literature about Cameroon have consistently indicated the instrumental role of women in food crop production (Fonjong, 2004). Women comprised 88.6% of the active labour force in Cameroon's food crop sector, producing 90% of total production (Endeley, 1985). Women are mostly involved in the cultivation of food crops like coco-yams, groundnuts, yams, potatoes, cassava, maize, vegetables and other non-timber forest products known locally in Cameroon as njansang, eru, mushroom, bitter collar, just to name a few. Since the cultivation of food crop is very important for food security to the world at large, the contribution of women in agriculture became vital in improving on their livelihood (Fonjong, 2004). Even though most of the women are in the food crop sector, a small proportion of them are involved in rearing of livestock like goats, pigs and fowls. Furthermore, despite their efforts, the contribution of these women in the agricultural activities in Muea just like in most parts of Cameroon is not recognized by their male partners (Endeley, 1985). Muea is the study area located in the South West Region of Cameroon.

This study is carried out mostly with the married women since they constitute a large proportion of those doing agriculture. The unmarried women though involved in agriculture as well their contribution in agricultural development in the study area is less significant given that they are involved in agricultural production mostly for subsistence. The neglect of women and married women in particular to themselves, by their husbands, and the state has worsened the situation of these women and they face numerous challenges in the upbringing of their children. They look for farm inputs on their own and given that most of them are uneducated the income derived from the sale of some food stuff is wastefully spent since

they can hardly take stock of their own very activities. It is for this reason that I got interested into the plight of these women and intend to bring to the lime light the challenges of these women.

Women in Cameroon and married women in particular are major actors in the socio economic development of the country. However their role in the socio-economic development of the country has been oblivious given that they constitute an insignificant proportion in the decision making process of the country.

1.2 Problem Statement

Married women in Cameroon and in Muea in particular contribute to the GDP, of the country through the cultivation and sales of food items yet the government gives little or no assistance to these women. These women lack the basic skills that can enable them to produce more foodstuffs within a short time scale. Consequently, they spend a lot of energy using only rudimentary techniques of production and as such output per hectare remains low. The income realized from the sales of their farm produce permit them to provide the social needs of the house such as provision of health security for the family, the education of the children and for their livelihood. Despite this important role, traditional costumes and gender bias tendencies have hardly given the right to women to own some fundamental livelihood assets like land. Land rights are exclusive to men and women can have access to land but not to own it (Fonjong, 2004). This mentality has been transcended from generation to generation without due regard to the right to gender equality enunciated in the millennium development goals. To this effect, the Muea married woman, just like her peers in the rest of Cameroon, has been in a sort of social bondage wrapped by cultural norms in a society where gender balance is preached only on paper and in university institutions but where practice is far from reality. It is based on this observation that the research is centred on the social and economic contributions of married women.

1.3 Objective and Research Questions

■ Objective:

The objective of this project is to investigate how the married women in the Muea area cope in their agricultural production despite their limitations. It also highlights the reasons behind those limitations.

■ Research Questions:

The research questions are listed as follows:

- 1) What are the economic and social contributions of married women in the agricultural production system in Muea community?
- 2) What are the challenges faced by married women in the study area?
- 3) How do gender bias structures affect women's social and economic roles in the study area?

1.4 Definition of Gender and Gender Rules

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'gender' refers to the state of being a male or a female. This definition is limited to the physical differences that exist between men and women. Gender is a socially constructed view of feminine and masculine behaviour within individual cultural groups. Kabeer (1999) defined gender rules as formal and informal norms, customs, rights, responsibilities, claims and obligations that regulate how men and women should behave in a society. In line with this reasoning, gender rules as used in this study refer to the norms and obligations pertaining to both males and females. Furthermore, gender rules refer to the social and economic roles attributed to an individual based on the biological differences. This highlights the role of men as well as women in the socio-economic development of the study area even though cultural tendencies introduce bias against women in terms of the right to ownership of some resources like land.

1.5 Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical approach that will be used to analyze the collected data is rooted in the livelihood framework model earlier developed by Murray and Ferguson (2001) and gender bias model by Kabeer (1994). For example, the livelihood framework consists of five main livelihood asset blocks: **the Physical Asset Block, Financial Asset Block, Social Asset Block, Human Asset Block and Personal Asset Block**. The theoretical framework is shown here below.

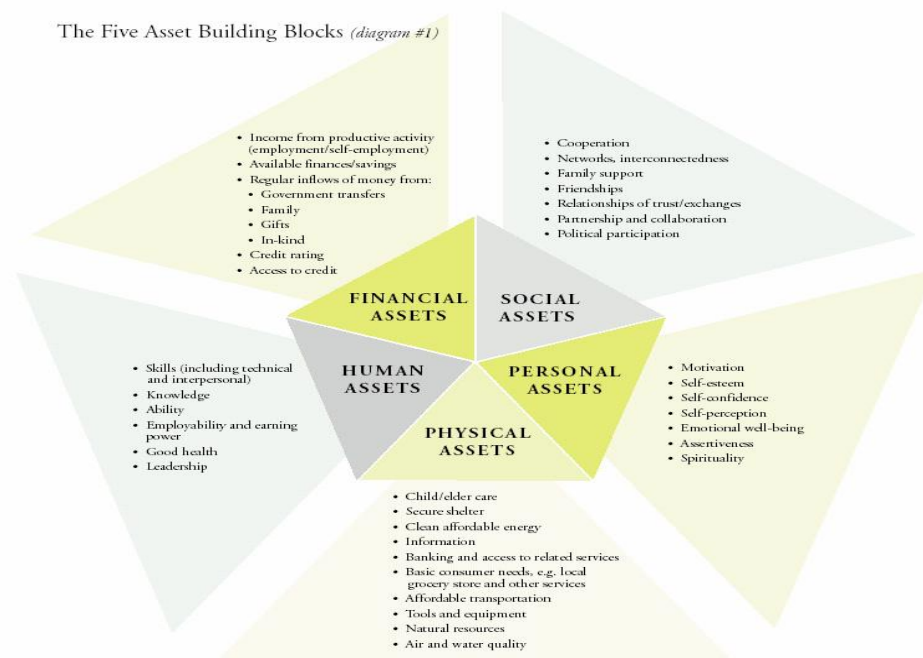


Figure 1. Women in transition out of poverty

(Source: Murray and Ferguson. (2001). *Women in Transition Out of Poverty*. Toronto: Women and Economic Development Consortium. Available at <http://www.cdnwomen.org/eng/3/3h.asp> [2012-11-09].

The Five Asset Building Blocks:

The Physical Asset Block will analyze the perceptions and views of the local authorities and the men folk as concerns the distribution of physical property, par-

ticularly land, which is a major asset on which the married women depend on for a living given that a majority of these women are farmers.

The Financial Asset block will briefly analyze the sources of income and expenditures of the married women and emphasis will be on whether or not they can survive adequately on the income derive from their resources.

The Social Asset block will analyze the sociological patterns of the society with emphasis on the implications of social relations for sustainable livelihood.

The Personal Asset Block will analyze the physical potentials in a woman that will permit her to carry out her activities in a male dominated world. To be more specific, this will center on the abilities of the woman that make her to be functional and in no way less than the men folks in terms of competence.

The collected data reveal that the concept of livelihood is increasingly becoming central in the debate of rural development, poverty reduction and natural resources management. It is well recognized, other factors and conditions which limit or improve people ability to make a living needs emphasis around social, economic and environmental aspects. In this regard a livelihood concept is comprehensive and central.

The Conceptual Framework for Gender Analysis, Kabeer (1994)

According to Kabeer (1994), gender analysis is a type of socio-economic framework that uncovers how gender relations affect development. The gender analytical framework provided by Kabeer (1994) classified gender development into gender awareness and gender blind which was adopted in this study for explaining the unequal rights between men and married women in the study area.

In many developing societies, although not in all, women have traditionally been disadvantaged compared to men. This study also made use of the gender analytical framework in analyzing empirical data. The framework is based on the idea that the aim of development is human well-being, consists of survival, security and

autonomy. Production is seen as oriented not just to the market, but also to human well-being, including the reproduction of human labour, subsistence activities, and care for the environment.

Poverty is seen to arise out of unequal social relations, which result in unequal distribution of resources, claims and responsibilities. Gender relations are one such type of social relations. Social relations are not fixed or immutable. They can change through factors such as macro changes or human agency. Social relations include the resources people have. The poor, especially poor women, are often excluded from access and ownership of resources, and depend upon relationships of patronage or dependency for resources. Development can support the poor by building solidarity, reciprocity and autonomy in access to resources.

Gender analysis therefore entails looking at how institutions create and reproduce inequalities. There are four key institutional sites: the state, the market, the community and family/kinship (Kabeer, 1994).

Table 1. *The Four Main Institutional Avenues for Gender Influence*

Institutional location	Organizational/structural form
State	legal, military, administrative organizations
Market	firms, financial corporations, farming enterprises, multi-nationals
Community	village tribunals, voluntary associations, informal networks, patron-client relationships, NGOs
Family/kinship	household, extended families, lineage groupings

Kabeer (1994) classifies gender development as follows:

Gender-blind:

- does not distinguish between men and women
- incorporates existing biases
- tends to exclude women

Gender-aware:

- recognizes differences among men and women's needs and priorities

Gender aware policies may be of three types as shown below:

Table 2. *Gender aware policies*

gender-neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in light of gender differences, target delivery to men and women's practical gender needs • work within existing gender division of resources and responsibilities
gender-specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in light of gender differences, respond to the practical needs of men or women specifically • work within existing gender division of resources and responsibilities
gender redistributive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intend to transform existing gender relations to create a more balanced relationship • may target both men and women, or one specifically • work on practical gender needs in a transformational way • work on strategic gender needs

The aspect of gender neutrality will be analyzed in the context of this study with respect to the roles attributed to men and women based on societal norms and tradition. The distribution of natural resource particularly land will be examined in the light of this concept.

Furthermore, gender specific roles with regards to the division of labour will also be analyzed based on the ideas of this concept.

Gender redistributive roles with respect to creating a more balanced society based on the equitable distribution of resource will also be analyzed based on this concept.

2 Methodology

Saunders et al. (2009:5) defined research as something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way, thereby increasing their knowledge. This definition catches two important phrases: “systematic way” and “to find out things”. The term “systematic” implies that research is based on logical relationships and not just beliefs (Saunders and Thornhill, 2009). The research is based mostly on qualitative data addressing the economic and social role of married women in the society.

Qualitative research takes an in-depth approach to the phenomenon it studies in order to have a better understanding of it, by so doing answering meaningful questions. The uses of opened and close ended questionnaires were being administered together with some elaborative interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), informants and Participant Observation (PO) to obtain information on the economic and social role of women in agriculture in the Muea area. Agricultural productivity was the basic criteria that guided me in choosing my key informants. All these methods were used to help answer the research questions. The various techniques will be discussed below.

2.1 Description of the Study Area (Muea)

Muea is a small town located in the Fako Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. It is bounded to the West by Molyko, North by Mount Cameroon, East by Ekona and Musaka and to the South by Bomaka. It is approximately having a land area of about 12,000 hectares and a population of about four thousand people

(Courade, 1970) of which about 2,183 are females and about 1,817 males. It has about 250 households. Muea has an excellent agricultural land with fertile soils around its environs (Balgah, 2005). With the rich natural nutrients, farmers in the area may not need additional acquisition of inorganic inputs.

Pidgin English is the dominant language of the area and Christianity is the major religion comprising about 80% of the total population, Muslim, and traditional beliefs constitute the rest. The main source of livelihood in the village is farming and mostly food crop farming. Dominant crops here include maize, cassava, coco-yams, ginger, potatoes, and vegetables, mostly cultivated by females while cash crops like cocoa, coffee, sugar cane and palm oil are mostly done by men. I decided to carry out the study there because Muea is locally called “the bread basket of Buea Subdivision” since it has fertile soils that accommodate all kinds of agricultural produce and mostly done by married women. People come from all other parts of the subdivision to buy their food crop from this place. Hence it became interesting for me to find out the challenges these married women face since they are the major food crop producers in the study area.



Figure 2. The Map of Cameroon Showing Buea and the Study Area
(Source: <http://www.infoplease.com/atlas/country/cameroon.html>, Accessed 2012)

2.2 Data Collection

For the purpose of this study and the constraint on time, I used interview and questionnaires to acquire primary source data. Interview was done with individual women, FGD, while questionnaires were administered to key informants. I was able to use and triangulate multiple sources of data. Triangulation refers to the use of different data collection techniques within one study in order to ensure that the data are telling you what you think they are telling you (Saunders et al., 2009). They helped in ensuring the credibility of this research. A total of 10 married women were selected and two focus group discussions were organized.

I went to the field twice in 2011 and 2013 respectively spending three months in the collection of data for the first time and a month in the last visit. The first field work was for observation and acquaintance with the study population and reliable data on the individual characteristics, like household size, age and marital status were obtained. During the study, married women of age 16 to 44 years were interviewed. Their household sizes varied from three to seven persons. The second visit was for actual data collection in which case, any additional data that was needed was collected in order to answer the research questions. Field investigation reveals that there is a slight increase in income of these women between 2011 and 2013. The reason being that, a solution to the disease which attacked the leaves of one of their main crops in 2011 has being provided. Also, the recently opened agricultural market “AGRO MARK” in the study area has facilitated the sales of their crops, educate and make them to be aware of being exploited by the “buyam-Sellams” (wholesalers). The CIG gives to the farmers subsidies like treated seedlings (maize and beans) and fertilizers to boost their output.

2.2.1 The Informants

Individual women farmers were used as back-ups to fill in the gap created during Participant Observation and FGD. The individuals were selected on the bases of their agricultural output. The ten married women selected for the study were interviewed to obtain information about women’s associations that were active in their

neighbourhood. I made a visit to them and talked with one of the presidents and she gave me the days the association was holding their meeting. On Sunday the 21st of February 2011, I attended the women's 'neighbour-neighbour' association and explained to them the objective of the study. I selected ten women whom I made separate appointments with them on how to go about the interview. These informants helped me in delimiting the area and to gather different perspectives and categories such as groups, position and functions with respect to the project activities. They were married women who were involved in large scale agriculture. The information obtained from the informants helped to compare the roles they carried out if they were the same for both married and unmarried women and if they have the same challenges. They helped me collect quality data that was needed within the limited period of time.

2.2.2 Questionnaires

I collected data using questionnaires through a face to face interview directly with the women who were farmers. Before administering the questionnaires, a cover letter was obtained from the local council head who explained to the people the importance of the study to me and the women in general. Otherwise things could have been very difficult. I used opened and closed ended questions so that these women were given the opportunities to explain in full what they have in mind concerning a question. To ensure the quality of the data, I made intended visits to the field during the work. I also made some visits even after the data was collected. This was to ensure that the data collected reflected a true picture of the women's activities. The data collected include: household characteristics, types of food crops, gender division of labour, diversification of income and usage, Constraints with regards to agriculture and ownership of assets. I proceeded with interviews, FGD alongside the participant observation. Questionnaires were administered to all the ten women representing the ten villages of the study area, while interviews were conducted during focus group discussions.

2.2.3 Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Focus Group Discussion is a structured participatory group process usually applicable to exploring attitudes. Chrzanowska (2002) noted that a focus group usually consists of six to ten subjects led by a moderator. It is characterized by a non-directive style of interview, where the prime concern is to encourage a variety of viewpoints on the topic in focus for the group. But in this case, the two focus groups involved me and four interviewees. It created a permissive atmosphere for the expression of personal and conflicting viewpoints on the topics of discussion. As such, different viewpoints on the topic were brought out. Each group in the focus groups interviewed had a characteristic, feeling, and perspective and value orientation. That is, each focus group members had a common sense of interest and purpose when they were interacting which was the desire to obtain equal rights as men in decision making and in the ownership of property, particularly land. The advantage of this qualitative research method is that participants interact and give their views in groups which they can be built upon each other views. The flexible format allows exploring unforeseen issues and it highly encourages interaction among participants.

Yin (2009) noted that, interviews may remain open ended and assume a conversational manner, but I was likely to be following a particular set of questions obtained from the project goals. The major purpose of such an interview is simply to validate certain facts I already think already exist. These women cooperate by working together and rotating from farm to farm.

The focus groups that were selected for this study were the “Iron ladies” and “the Bamileke” women groups. The former was made up of only married women and the latter was made up of singles, widows, married and divorced women. I followed them to their farms, participated with them in their activities of that day while asking them some questions concerning the agricultural roles they carry out and the challenges they face in carrying out these roles. It was done in a homogeneous manner in order to ensure that there is no dominance and conflict caused by

power struggle among participants. Such a homogenously structured group has a common background, position or experience (Robson 2002:286). During the interview, I realized that it was mostly the heads of the groups who were answering questions. Through my interaction with these women, I realized that some of them were afraid it is a way of identifying them by the government so that taxes will be levied on them. I made a further clarification before these women could answer freely. They felt more interactive when we had a common meal and farming together. They knew I was part of them and were willing to give me whatever information I needed. I realized differences in the way the women discussed common issues in their households. The married women from time to time mostly converse about their families and how their husbands used to help them in clearing their farms while the other group work for themselves or pay for labour. At the end of the interview, I welcomed questions from the women and created room for suggestions. As such I did the FGD alongside participant observation which helped me to have an in-depth knowledge of the situation.



Figure 3.FGD and PO in a Ginger Farm in Muea (Photo: own picture)

2.2.4 Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were used for two main reasons; there were some women who do not belong to a group and were not married and involved in agriculture. Their opinions were very important in the research since it helped me to do a kind

of comparison to know if these women whether married or not are performing the same roles or having the same problems.

Even though, it was not easy at the beginning to meet some of these women, I made phone calls to some of them to arrange for a concrete time we could meet and conduct the interview. I did the interview manually through face-to-face without any audiotape recorder. I took field notes summary after explaining the use to them. I created room at the end of the interview for questions and suggestions from the interviewees, whenever the need arises in the course of the work. The individual interviews lasted for two hours thirty minutes since they were somehow interrupted with other household activities. The FGD and PO for both cases took about nine hours since I had to follow these women to their farms in the morning at eight o'clock and finish late in the evening at five. The Key informants took one hour each to conduct the interview. I noted the main points obtained during my interaction with the married women in a block notebook. The main ideas were then analyzed later in this write up.



Figure 4. Individual interview (Photo: own picture)

2.2.5 Analyzing Process

Data collected through the primary and secondary sources were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Empirical data collected through interviews and FGD were analyzed qualitatively because information gathered from such sources was difficult to measure. However, information, from questionnaires were quantified and presented with the use of tables.

Primary data collection began with field observation. This gave me the opportunity to get acquainted with the study area and to familiarize myself with the various stakeholders such as married women association found in the study area. This was followed by the administration of questionnaires and the conduction of interviews as well as the organization of focus group discussions. Primary data collected were complemented with secondary data from internet sources, text books and journals. Secondary data also permitted me to review information related to various aspects of the study.

The study population is married women involved in agriculture. A total of 10 married women were selected. The table below explains in detail the age group of the respondents who were involved in agriculture.

Table 3. *Age Group of Respondents*

Locality	Age group	No. of Respondents
Muea	15-29	2
	30-44	5
	45-59	2
	60+	1
Total		10

Table 3 indicates that the views of different age groups were taken into consideration. Married women of all age brackets play important roles in the social and

economic development of the Muea area. It reveals that most of the married women interviewed fall between the age groups 30-44 and 45-59. This is because at this age most women have completed their primary and secondary school education and the next desire is to get married. The young adult girls who fall within the age group 15- 29 are still unmarried because most of them prefer to continue with their studies and become bread winners before thinking of marriage. However, it must be underscored here that some of the unmarried at least maintain relationship with their boyfriends while waiting for an appropriate time for these relationships to concretize into marriage. Also, the field observations and the responses gotten from these married women indicate that the average number of persons per household is six. This is so because, the African family is an extended family and a home is only considered complete when it contains relations from other family members. It was observed that relations in a household included grandchildren, brother in-law, sister in-law, cousins, grand-mothers and grand-fathers. The various family relations are a source of family labour.

In my selection of cases, all the married women admitted they are involved in agricultural activities. They are involved in mostly subsistence and commercial agriculture where food crops are produced both for family consumption and for sales. Among the type of food crops produce, ginger, maize, yams, coco-yams, vegetables, beans, egusi and potatoes are the most prominent. These married women put in much time in the preparation of the land, fertilizer application, weeding, harvesting and storage of the crops. Through interviews it was realized that output is greater and very much effective when handled by these married women. As such, women in Muea devote about 8 to 12 hours a day to agriculture in addition to household work. Out of 10 persons interviewed to find out if they are involved in any other type of activities, 6 of them confirmed that they undertake other activities like petty trading in order to supplement their income obtained from agriculture and family members in the Diasporas sent in an estimated income of 290,000 FRS annually to augment the family income.

A case in point was that of one farmer, Mrs. Anastasia, a 43-year old woman who is married and staying with her four kids, four grandchildren and her mother. She admitted that “her agricultural activities have helped her lot to bring up the family.” More than half of the food for the household is from her farm. Notwithstanding, she also carries out petty trading to supplement the income from the farm. She buys unripe bananas from other farmers, preserves them to ripe and resells. She also sells palm oil in the community market in order to meet up with some basic needs of the household like school fees, clothing and ill -health members of the household. It is not easy for her because she over works herself and does not have enough time to rest or take care of her domestic activities. The husband who is supposed to help take care of the household needs was sick the whole of last year and she said if she does not work like that, the needs of the household will not be met taking into consideration the size of the family. The evaluated level of annual income for the year 2011 by the respondents depicts a slight difference in the distribution among respective households interviewed. More than half of the respondents from the study population earn an estimated amount ranging between 600,000fcfa and 900,000fcfa. Also important is the fact that about 9% of the households interviewed had an annual income of about 1,000,000fcfa and above. It was also realized that these married women in addition to their food crops production and household activities; bear the entire responsibility of helping their husbands with land preparation, harvesting and others work in the cash crops production done by these men.

Table 4. *Summary of the quantity of crops harvested last year with total number of respondents*

No. of Respondents	Maize Quantity (kg)	Coco-yam Quantity (basins)	Cassava Quantity (trucks)	Ginger Quantity (trucks)	% of Respondents
5	700	20	15	15	40
2	400	30	12	14	20
2	4 00	20	10	11	20
1	200	10	11	9	10
Total	1,700	80	48	49	100

From Table 4, maize is the main crop cultivated by the interviewed women in the study area. This crop yields highest quantity per unit hectare of land. This is because the soil is of the fertile volcanic type and therefore very favourable for maize cultivation. The second high yielding crop in terms of quantity is cassava. It should be noted here that cassavas are high moisture demanding tubers, the high rainfall of about 2,500 mm a year and high temperatures are just suitable for the cultivation of tubers of this type, the quantity of cassava produced could not be estimated by the local inhabitants rather they preferred to present information about their produce in terms of number of trucks. It is for this reason that the annual production of cassava is given not in tons but in terms of number of trucks produced annually. It was also noticed that coco-yams was the least produced crop last year. This is because an illness attacked the crop and most of them got bad and people were forbidden not to eat. These married women usually produce both for home consumption and for sales in order to augment the income of the family which goes a long way to sustain the family. Another interesting case in my field material is that of a 44-yearold woman, Mrs. Moses, living with five of her children. She is one of the biggest cultivators in the study area and does not only depend on family labour but also hires labourers. She is called ‘mamicorn’ by the people of the area signifies that she produces a high quantity of maize. She also plants cassava in large quantities and transforms it to “garri” and “water-fufu,” a

locally consumed food. By so doing, she can raise enough money to support the household needs.

It is worth mentioning here that the farmers cultivate using primitive tools like hoes and cutlasses. This partly contributes to their low yields in addition to the fact that they usually do not have enough capital to acquire adequate farm inputs like fertilizers or machines for higher yields. Field study reveals that even though a majority of the married women are farmers, very few of them own farm land.

The crops cultivated are not solely for home consumption as part is sold and the money used to subsidize the family income. This falls in line with the financial asset block which relates to the sources of financial capital which will be derived from (gift, income from productive activity, past savings and credit transfer). From these sources, the annual income of the Muea married women was obtained. Table 5 will help illustrate this.

Table 5. Empirical Data on Financial Asset Block for Muea

Item	Quantity of each crop produced yearly	No of Respondents	Unit price per year in FCFA	Total price yearly FCFA
Maize	235 tins	10	5,000	1,175,000
Beans	46 tins	10	10,000	460,000
Cassava	38 trucks	10	14,000	532,000
Ginger	105 basins	10	3,500	367,500
Vegetable	600 bundles	10	200	120,000
Groundnut	17 bags	10	10,000	170,000
Total	1,041	10	42,700	2,824,500

Data from Table 5 reveals that the quantity of crops produced vary from one crop to another and the incomes derived from these crops equally vary. However maize

stand out as the most rewarding of all the crops in terms of annual income. Out of the 10 women sampled for this study it was evident that the annual productivity of maize yields 1,175,000 FRS compared with beans with 46 tins and a yearly income of 460,000 FRS. The yearly income for each of these crops is insufficient to sustain the need of an average family size of five to six persons. Based on the livelihood concept, a household in Muea cannot depend solely on one commodity for survival. The diversification of different food crops with an accumulated yearly income of 2,824,500 FRS as shown on the table has helped improve the livelihood of these women. Out of the 10 women interviewed, 6 of them did not have access to credit. This is because the women do not possess any collateral for obtaining such credit. This is a hindrance as they are unable to purchase basic farm inputs like fertilizers and improved seed. To this effect, crop productivity remains low as the women farmers depend essentially on their indigenous traditional techniques of cultivation.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

To ensure the smooth functioning of the research, certain ethical principles and considerations were followed as laid out in the social research association (Ceridwen, 2003). These are obligations to subject, colleagues and society. With respect to subject, I did everything possible to protect the confidentiality of these women, performance data and personal information, whether verbal or written. I respected their personality and kept the information confidential by not disclosing their identities and informing them also about the research. I also as well tried not to influence the tradition of these women. Since Muea is a locality made up of multicultural groups (a cosmopolitan society), I respected this and allowed them to speak in their local language, “pidgin English,” that they feel more comfortable to work with. It was easier for me because I could also speak and understand them well. With the obligations to society, I considered varied opinions that were relevant to the study. While with obligations to colleagues, maintaining confidence in research, exposing and reviewing their methods and findings, communicating ethical principles, ensuring safety and minimizing risk of harm to field.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Agricultural Production System (APS)

Agriculture refers to activities which foster biological processes involving growth and reproduction to provide resources of value. Notably the resources provided are plants and animals to be used for food and fiber, although agricultural products are used for many other purposes (Lehman, Weise and Clark, 1993). It is the backbone of many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and a source of livelihood to many families. In Cameroon, agriculture accounted for 27% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1991, employed 59.3% of the labour force in 1992 according to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), (Fonjong, 2004). This rate increased drastically to 41% in 2011 and married women bring most of the input to this sector (Fonjong, 2004).

3.2 Women and Livelihood in Sub-Saharan Africa

3.2.1 Married Women and Agricultural Production:

Married women in Muea play significant roles in agricultural production; they often lack control of productive resources, especially land. Women are key actors in farming enterprises, making significant contributions albeit often as unpaid family labourers. For example, the International Trade Forum (ITF) did a 15 country study comparing women's participation in coffee farming and (co-) ownership of the chain, which although significant variation was found as to both between and within countries, women's contributions were marked: women typically un-

undertake 70% of the fieldwork and harvest and 75% of the sorting, and 10-20% of in-country trading (Scholer, 2008).

Ellis (2000) highlighted the fact that though women may have access to land for agriculture, they have no control over land as an economic resource. Endeley (2001) further strengthens this view when she noted that the lack of women's control over assets, participation in decision making are due to factors like, low literacy, skills, financial security and level of awareness of their rights.

Boserup (1970) posited that, women are food producers in SSA and that this contrasts with what obtains in Latin America and Asia, where food crop producers are mostly males. This conclusion is an exaggeration because in SSA, males are also into food crop production and in some cases; males are even the dominant producers of food crops. However, Boserup's conclusion, matches with what obtains in the Muea area of Cameroon, given that in most cases women are the major cultivators of food crops. She further noted that women's lack of access to land, capital, credit or cash are stumbling blocks to small holder farmers given that they do not have the means to buy inputs like fertilizers, improved seed and other farm inputs.

Endeley (2001) highlighted the fact that since the implementation of the structural adjustment program in Cameroon, following the mid-1980s economic meltdown, Cameroon women have put in place a multiplicity of strategies to reverse some of the adverse effects of this program. They have done so, through extending the hours they spend working, starting up micro businesses within the informal sector, adjusting the ways in which domestic chores are done, and providing health-care for their dependents.

Gender disparity in access to and control of resources, market information and gender biases in market access translate into outcomes that are both "inefficient" in terms of overall productivity and "inequitable" in terms of the distribution of revenues within the household. Weak controls of production factors, unreliable,

unstable and low incomes for women act as a barrier for women to invest and diversify and reduce agricultural productivity. Likewise, where women's control over assets is weak and incomes are unreliable, unstable and low, their bargaining power within the household is reduced and in consequence resource distribution within the household may be less favourable to their own and children's well-being and food security.

3.2.2 Women's Output and Distribution

Women smallholder farmers generally produce for more localized spot markets and in lower volumes than men. Where women are active in trading in agricultural markets, they tend to be concentrated at lower levels of the supply chain or value chain, in perishable or low value products (Baden, 1998; IBRD, 2009). As agricultural activities become more commercialized, the relative position of women often weakens such that they are under-represented in or excluded from more profitable markets in the sub-sector (Rhiannon et al., 2010). An additional challenge is that, where collective action appears to provide women with clear economic benefits, these can often be a target of male encroachment.

Gender disparity in access to and control of resources, market information and gender biases in market access translate into outcomes that are both "inefficient" in terms of overall productivity and "inequitable" in terms of the distribution of revenues within the household. Weak controls of production factors, unreliable, unstable and low incomes for women act as a barrier for women to invest and diversify and reduce agricultural productivity. Likewise, where women's control over assets is weak and incomes are unreliable, unstable and low, their bargaining power within the household is reduced and in consequence resource distribution within the household may be less favourable to their own and children's well-being and food security.

3.2.3 Women and Rural Poverty

There are many causes of rural poverty in Cameroon. Going deep to it, makes it complex and multidimensional. Many scholars have written about the causes of

rural poverty in Cameroon among which is the report on the Cameroon Household Survey (ECAM 111) carried out by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD 2007). The report revealed that poverty affected an estimated 39.9% of the population as compared with 40.2% in 2001 and about 55% of the poor lives in rural areas. It brought out three main causes of rural poverty which include household size, educational level and socio-economic grouping and access to productive assets. It is surprising to know that about 52% of the poor households are made up of women and children. To most rural poor, better living conditions would come from job creation, better communication networks and transportation, improved access to education and information, better prices for staple foods and improved healthcare, water and credit facilities. According to the National Institute of Statistics (INS 2010), an estimated seven out of ten of the country's young people are under-employed. Khan (2001) also argued that poverty in most parts of developing countries is related to factors such as culture, climate, gender, market and public policy.

A household in the Cameroon context is never limited to a nuclear family. In reality, it is an extended family made up of cousins, nephews, nieces, uncles, aunts and other relations. Extended family systems, strong kin, and lineage relations remain important in most regions of Cameroon since they provide a sense of belonging, solidarity and protection. However, they also involve expectations, obligations and responsibilities (Tiemoko, 2004).

A characteristic of the Cameroonian family system is the high importance that marriage plays, although conjugal union is increasingly postponed and premarital births are becoming more common (Calvès, 1999). Despite urbanization, economic crisis and increasing international migration, marriage remains one of the major key life events (Bledsoe and Cohen, 1993) mainly because the conjugal union secures the socio-economic status of both women and men.

Gender division of labour plays a great role in conceptualizing the household. Guyer (1980, pp.356) argues that division of Labour in any society is an essential part of the ideological system which is like in all institutions multifaceted. It can be in an economic organization or in a daily family life or even in a political structure. It however plays a fundamental role in agricultural societies since it integrates with the national and international economic structure in the local community. In the bargaining approach, intra-household interaction is characterized by elements of both cooperation and conflict. However, many different cooperative outcomes are possible in relation to who does what, who gets what goods and services, and how each member is treated (Agarwal, 1997:4). In line with this reasoning, the present study illustrates the idea that though some form of cooperation exists among household members in the study area, conflicts arise when it comes to the allocation of resources because the male gender is favoured to the disadvantage of the female.

The neoclassical model of the household assumes that household members do not have conflicting interests over the allocation of time and income (or if they do, conflicts are resolved by the imposition of one member's utility function). This assumption implies that joint rationality will always prevail when the household is presented with new economic opportunities (Jones, 1983, pp.1053). The assumptions made in this theory sharply contradict the reality in our study area because household members have very conflicting interests particularly in relation to resource allocation and in the decision-making process. This stems from the dominant control men have over their wives and in many situations, men do not even consult their wives to take a decision over their assets.

Similarly, Shiva (1988) looks at women to be closer to nature at an abstract level than men, which implies that women intuitively understand the sustainable level of utilization of natural resources and the need to conserve diversity.

3.2.4 Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment

In an analytical study on two tribes in Cameroon, the Moghamos and the Bafaws, Endeley (2001) in her findings, revealed that according to the women, empowerment is a western concept that has no place in their culture. The principle that women can have authority and autonomy on the same basis as men was seen as worrying, and many people thought that the concept was a contradiction in their culture. In the Bafaw culture on the other hand, though men and women believe that women need some economic independence, they do not, however, think that the women have a right to control strategic resources like land (Endeley,2001). In a similar way, they do not think that women have a right to political autonomy. This explains why in local councils and in decision making positions, women are hardly represented. According to Endeley (2001), a good Moghamo woman is expected to be submissive and quiet in public places, especially among men, to speak only when asked to do so, and to be obedient, caring, receptive to visitors, and tolerant. The subordination of women in this society is not surprising since it is situated in a region of Cameroon where trade in women was a common phenomenon.

4 Data Analysis and Presentation

This section of the study is focused on the analysis of empirical data with emphasis on the conceptual frameworks which had been highlighted on the earlier part of this study. The livelihood theory developed by Murray and Ferguson (2001) and the gender model developed by Kabeer (1994) will be applied in this analysis.

The Livelihood framework by Murray and Ferguson (2001): The livelihood framework consists of five asset building blocks: Financial, Physical, Social, Personal and Human Asset Blocks.

4.1 The Financial Asset Block

This part of the work deals critically on the economic role married women play in agriculture in the Muea area in an attempt to reduce poverty in their lives and their households. Married women make important contributions to agriculture which helps to a greater extent in the economic development of the Muea area

4.2 The Role of External Parties like Micro Finance and NGOs

Microfinance institutions give out short-term loans at very low interest rates to people especially women to help them develop themselves and pay back in their best convenience. In Muea, these institutions give out loans only to women who are their members so that the micro finance institutions can retrieve the loans easily. This loan will be used for the purchase of farming materials like cutlasses, hoes, fertilizers, and to pay for labour thereby reducing some of the constraints

they face. It was realized that the conditions for eligibility of the loan set by the institutions are most often difficult to be fulfilled by the women. For example, to be eligible for a loan, membership is not a sufficient condition but one needs a collateral like land, which is often difficult to provide, thus making the majority of them ineligible. In an interview, with some of the workers from these institutions, the researcher was told most of the women who took the loans were unable to pay. The reasons advanced for the delay in loan payment was due to a number of factors such as poor yield resulting from a disease called *Phytophthora colocasiae* that attacked one of the main crops grown in the area and also due to unforeseen family commitment. Some of the former members on their part expressed lack of confidence in these institutions given that some of them operate for very short durations due to mismanagement and corrupt practices. With this, all the micro finance institutions had closed down except the one that was met, and this one was almost at the point of closing down. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in some parts of Cameroon have been of help to women associations. It is, however, regrettable that none of these NGOs exists in Muea, making the situation of the Muea woman to have access to assistance of any kind, financial or material, very difficult.

4.3 Social Asset Block

Married women in Muea have a spirit of solidarity. This is seen in their commitment to help one another in their agricultural activities and they believe in sharing, particularly when they belong to social groups like cultural meetings or in cooperatives. In this connection, they do cross-subsidize their members or friends who might have suffered from a poor harvest in the previous year. This explains why even in their state of poverty they always feel contented. However the fraction of women who depend on others for gifts each year is insignificant. These married women help themselves by creating small farming groups of four to five persons whereby they go to one person's farm once a week until the turn of everybody is met. By so doing, they discuss their problems together and obtain possible solutions from others in the group thereby releasing them from stress and also encour-

aging those who are weak and lazy to be strong and hardworking. It also creates room for some who don't have some basic techniques in farming certain crops to learn from others.

These elements conform to the social asset block, which explains the mutual interaction that exists among the married women for the betterment of their livelihoods. The dynamism of the Muea woman in her social network system makes this aspect of the model very relevant to this study. Included in this block are aspects such as partnership and collaboration, political participation, network interconnectedness, and relationships of trust exchanges. Here, field data is gathered on women's social or cultural groups and networks particularly groups that have social and economic motives aimed at improving living standards. The social asset block demonstrates the extent to which the Muea women rely on others for help in order to make their farming activity a success. All the women confirmed that they obtained assistance from others mostly from their children, husbands, grandchildren, in-laws, other extended family relations living with them and friends. These people helped them mostly in the clearing of the land for cultivation, making of ridges, spraying of the land for farming, weeding, harvesting and transportation of the crops to their homes. These services were hired or paid for financially or in kind. The researcher realized that the networks these women maintain for mutual assistance was very instrumental. Carsten (2000) termed this "live relatedness" that was constructed in practice through numerous acts of daily life. Other source of help is received in the form of exchange services where members of a group receive and reciprocate the help they had received by working on each other's farmland. The researcher realized that these women take their young girls to the farms with the intention of causing them to learn by practical experience. The selected 10 women also reach out to other persons mostly those working with them in their farms, their sisters and brothers who do not live with them. They also reach out to others through giving them some of the crops they harvested in the form of gifts. All of the women belong to their local cultural association and it was only recently that a Common Initiative Group (CIG), "AGRO MARK," came to the study area,

few of them are members but some are still planning to be affiliated with this CIG. This makes the social asset block very vital and applicable in the conceptual framework.

Field data reveal that, many women who belong to religious groups have gone a long way increasing agricultural productivity. Mrs. Mekang, a lady from a Christian Church group (Full Gospel) when interviewed attested that in the area she was one of the biggest suppliers of coco-yams locally called Ibo coco. Because of the recent pandemic disease known as Taro leaf blight caused by the fungus, *Phytophthora colocasiae*, which attacked the leaves of the crop. It came abruptly to the area and the geographical spread was large across the Buea municipality and even far beyond the neighbouring towns. Her produce was reduced to almost zero output and it was the Church that contributed money for her to buy seedlings for other crops for the preceding year. It was due to this that she started diversifying her agricultural products. More than 5 out of the 10 married women confirmed that they pay for the health needs and welfare of their households. Most at times, money that they obtained from the sales of agricultural products are used to cater for the health needs in such a way that even if in situation where a member of the household is sick and their husbands say there is no money, these women go an extra mile to borrow money to pay for the medications. It was realized that the case is even more severe when a household member is hospitalized. These women are assumed by their husbands to take care of that individual in the hospital thereby suspending their farming activities.

Field data revealed that not all the children go to school. The reason for this is that when families are large and incomes low, families cannot afford to send all their children to school. The fate of these less privileged children is that they become street children. Sometimes some of these children are just unwilling to study and in situations where there is money for their education they still prefer to stay at home or to engage in some informal activities like “house helps” for those who

need their services. Most of these children usually gather in a particular street in the study area called “idle park” where they chat and have fun together.

4.4 Physical Asset Block

The physical asset block relates to the natural element that can be transformed to improve peoples’ living standards. Worthy of note here is natural resources such as land, clean and affordable energy, air and clean water, information secured shelter, basic consumer goods, childcare and affordable transportation. Empirical data was collected for the physical asset like land. Furthermore, land is the most relevant physical asset because it is an asset that can be used to reduce poverty but in the Muea context, most women have access to land but not ownership unlike other physical assets which are easily affordable like water and rudimentary farming tools and equipments, which could have been considered in the conceptual framework.

According to Agarwal (1994), property rights are claims that are legally and socially recognized and enforceable by an external legitimized authority—be it at village level, institution or some higher level body of the State. In line with this view, married women have due rights to ownership of properties even though in practice these claims are not respected. In the study area, married women only have access to small fractions of land that can barely permit them to cultivate crops for subsistence. For instance, the total land surface used for food crop farming by the 10 selected women was 34 hectares of land. Field survey also showed that the farm sizes are small averaging about 2 hectares. This land sizes are too small for the production of food adequate enough to meet the food needs of an average household of five to six persons. Majority of the women are working on rented land, so part of their harvest is either used to pay the land owners or it is sold and the income used to pay their landlords. However with a lot of sensitization about the negative outcomes of gender bias, it is becoming clearer to Cameroonians that men have to work in synergy with their wives or other women for the development of their communities because women, as it has been observed else-

where in the developed world, cannot be bypassed when it comes to development especially at grassroots level.

The nature of gender relations – relations of power between women and men – is not easy to grasp in its full complexity. But these relations impinge on economic outcomes in multiple ways. The complexity arises not least from the fact that gender relations (like all social relations) embody both the material and the ideological. They are revealed not only in the division of labour and resources between women and men, but also in ideas and representations. The ascribing to women and men of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, and behaviour patterns (Agarwal, 1997). These views fall in line with the realities of my study given that gender bias are not limited to material well-being but it also affects the ways of reasoning of the local population. In decision making process, for example, the views of men are considered first before those of women. In terms of education, the boy child is given priority compared to the girl child. This has created an unbalanced society where female children and women in general continue to be less skillful than the men.

Field observations revealed that due to the small size of their farms, the use of tractors will cost them more than the cost of acquiring the farm. Consequently, outputs are bound to be low. Moreover, those women who are working on their personal parcels of land actually bought such land from the Bakwerians who are the indigenes of this area. Some of these women obtained the land simply by begging to work on such farm land for a year or two before leaving and others inherited from their parents. This has been possible due to sensitization and the intervention of the government through policies that penalize actions that disfavour the girl child and through pressure from the international community.

These women most at times used fertilizers to improve their output. The distance of the land was averaging about 2km from where they stay due to the rapid growth of urban development and different land use pattern. Head loads and trucks are the

most common available modes of transportation. These modes of transport are inadequate as much food is lost given that much of the food crops produced are perishable.

4.5 Human Asset Block

The human asset block refers to the qualities that an individual should possess to ensure better living standards or a sustainable livelihood. Among these are good health, leadership quality, Knowledge, ability and skills. Educational attainment, professional training and health care facilities have a great role to play as far as their livelihood is concerned. These elements represented in this block of the model are of particular importance to this study given that the contribution of the Muea Woman for a sustainable livelihood in the study area relies on all of these. In my selection of cases, most of the women interviewed had only the First School Leaving Certification (F.S.L.C). This means that their ability to learn new and modern techniques of agriculture is low and less than 3 of the married women had professional training. This has affected their lives negatively since they are not able to learn modern farming techniques and mechanization to improve their livelihood. Most of these women interviewed confirmed that they have poor medical care. As a result, the medical condition of the family is poor. They are considered as the primary health care attendants improving on their skills through education will impact positively on their livelihood.

4.6 Personal Asset Block

The personal asset block relates to women's characteristic traits. Women in this context refer to the married women chosen for this study. These characteristics include self-esteem, self-confidence, self-perception and emotional well-being. Based on the observations that the women's cultural associations in the study area are succeeding in most of their activities like putting their resources together and assisting in the selling of agricultural outputs, these women possess the elements embedded in the personal asset block, which are linked to leadership characteristics of self-esteem and self-confidence.

4.7 Analysis of Findings Using Kabeer Gender Analysis Model

Ownership of Landed Resource

According to Kabeer (1994), gender bias can be analyzed using the gender blind and gender awareness concepts. Based on these views gender biases exist in the study area with respect to the ownership of resources, particularly land. In terms of the gender blind concept, married women in the study area are highly discriminated against when it comes to ownership of physical properties like land. It is for this reason that despite the significant contribution of married women in the economic and social development of Muea, the married women continue to be poor compared to the men. This is evident in the study area based on the fact that customs as revealed by data obtained from questionnaires and field interviews show that women's role in the economic and agricultural development of Muea is fundamental yet they only have access to land and not ownership to land. Other sources of gender biases exist in terms of gender division of labour where the girl child is allowed to do all domestic chores while the male children enjoy the freedom of relaxation playing with their friends and are given the privilege to study while the young girls are sent in for early marriages. However, with the recent sensitization on women's right in Cameroon, married women in Muea, as well as men, have been given the opportunity through AGRO MARK to be sensitized on the basic agricultural techniques and also to give them small loans to buy input like fertilizers and improved seeds. As such, this helps to transform existing gender relations to create a more balanced relationship. This falls within the gender awareness concept.

Based on the conceptual framework, I realized that development in Muea is gender blind as women are discriminated against. For instance, to consider the administrative organization in Cameroon in general before transcending down to Muea, one will recognize that women are highly discriminated against in terms of their involvement in the decision making process in the country. For example, up till today there has never been a female governor in Cameroon, and key positions in the government and local administration such as in local councils have until now been

the reserve of the men. One has to acknowledge the fact that some progress has been made but it is still not enough. It is for these reasons that this gender model developed by Kabeer becomes a useful tool for analysis of empirical data obtained during the field study.

4.8 Limitation of the Study

One of the major limitations of the study was the problem of insecurity. Most of the quarters are having idle people who are neither schooling nor working and hence making the place to be insecure for the smooth functioning of the study. It was difficult to stay after certain hours in the night because I was afraid not to be attacked. Most of the interviewees gave me appointment only during the evenings, which was comfortable for them. It was rather difficult for me, but I had to make out extra time to meet them at their convenience. This was not only costly to me in terms of time and material resources spent, but it also delayed the research process. A selection of ten married women, due to time and finance was too small to represent a true picture of the whole village hence limiting the study.

Also, I intended to interview some government officials to know if they are helping these women in any way since the women declared they receive no help from them and I realized there was no such facility functioning in the area. It served as a limiting factor.

5 Challenges

The contribution of the Muea women to the socio-economic well-being of their families cannot be overemphasized. They are however limited in playing this role by a number of challenges among which are inadequate access to land, poor infrastructure and inadequate information, inadequate access to credit facilities, transportation problems, processing and packaging problems. These challenges have earlier been highlighted in Kabeer's conceptual analytical framework of gender awareness and gender blind. These two concepts have been employed in this study to illustrate how issues of gender bias have affected the development process in Muea.

5.1 Inadequate Access of the Physical Asset Block (land)

Land is arguably the most important asset in Muea. Over 7 out of the 10 married women chosen for this study depend on subsistence agriculture for a living. Paradoxically, these women hardly own land. Field investigations revealed that 8 out of 10 females sampled carry out farming operations on borrowed or rented land. The duration of their occupancy on such land depends on their ability to produce as much food, which is shared with the owners of such land who are the males. This means that due to poor harvest or ill health, the Muea woman is tantamount to lose her farming land to other women who can satisfy the terms of the contract. Land ownership is a male dominated affair and field investigations showed that cultural constraints and poverty are the limiting factors of women's ownership to land. This in itself reduces the incentive to hard work and to participate fully in

development along the same lines as the men. This has been responsible for the slow rate of development in the study area and the general low living standard experience by the married women.

Agriculture is largely carried out under increasing pressure of scarce land resource, which is managed under insecure customary land ownership. The insecure tenure system such as communal land tenure system constrains the farmers from producing enough food to improve their livelihood.

Land, which is certainly the most valuable asset to all women in Muea whether married or unmarried, is not at the reach of everyone. Land as a resource remains the fundamental right reserved for the males who do everything to maintain their hegemony over the women by refusing the latter the right to landownership. An attempt to contact the Muea council legal authorities so as to obtain their opinion on this issue was unsuccessful. According to the provisions of the Cameroon law, everyone has a right to land ownership regardless of their sex. However, this is not the reality on the ground. This relates to one of the main questions that was posited for this research. That is, what are the challenges of the married women in Muea? From the data obtained through field observations and through focus group discussion, the issue of land access remains one of the main fundamental challenges facing the Muea Woman today.

5.2 Inadequate Access to the Social Asset Resource

The married women in Muea are also limited in their socio-economic contribution to agricultural development by inadequate storage and marketing facilities, inadequate extension services and substandard rural infrastructure. The Muea married women have no contacts with agricultural extension agents and, consequently, receive no information on improved production technologies and practices. They depend on their indigenous knowledge for their agricultural practices.

Most food crops produced by the Muea women take place in the rural areas, which are far off from the centres of consumption and marketing. The absence of ade-

quate means of transport infrastructure hampers the movement of food to marketing centres. The transportation of food by head loads, trucks and unsuitable vehicles aggravates food spoilage and increases losses to the farmers. The situation cannot be improved due to the lack of financial credits, low farmer incomes, and inadequate information.

A few roads link up the urban areas but farm to market roads are both unpaved and poorly maintained. In the rainy season particularly, regular market connections are hard to establish between most parts of the country due to poor road infrastructures. Also, the means of transportation such as vehicles is inadequate and unreliable. Consequently, in most cases, transportation is a major marketing cost component. Transport constraints also aggravate post-harvest losses with a great deal of repercussions on the supply and demand balances due to the resulting limitations on the flow of food commodities. The perishable nature of most food crops makes it difficult to expand their market areas. Consequently, their distribution channels are short and concentrated within specific locations. Seasonality of food crops also raises the problem of distribution between regions. The food crop market is dominated by a large number of small agents who handle very small quantities of the commodities. Generally, because of the low volume of trade among the marketing agents, large scale advantages in the handling and transportation of food commodities originating from remote areas are very limited. As a result of this situation, marketing margins and consumer prices are higher than they would have been under a more efficient system.

The Muea women farmers also face pre-harvest problems. Field investigations showed that over 40% of the produce is lost in the farms due to the poor transportation system. Head load and truck transport constitute the major means of transportation, given that roads are very narrow and rough. Post-harvest losses also result from disease and pest attacks. Existing practices in Cameroon have largely remained rudimentary mainly because of limited resources, lack of credit facilities,

and inadequate institutional support and information to farmers. Improved storage technologies and infrastructure are also lacking mostly due to insufficient capital. The married women who depend on agriculture as a means of subsistence have been abandoned to their own efforts as they carry out their farming activities. They receive little or no help from the agricultural extension workers. They receive little or no assistance from their husbands and extended families. This has directly affected their output as many of them continue to rely on indigenous means of cultivation. As a result, the output keeps declining.

During data collection, the researcher found out through focus group discussions that the government-trained agricultural technicians concentrate only on organizing theoretical seminars with the farmers who have had little education and require even more practical training than theoretical. This will certainly improve the productivity and livelihood of these women.

Another striking difficulty facing the married women sampled for this study is the fact that they do not have access to road infrastructure which could have enabled them transport their crops from farms to their homes or to the markets easily. To this effect, food crops are transported by head loads and a lot of food crops get lost or damaged in the course of transportation. The post-harvest losses are equally enormous given the fact that the farms are sometimes too distant from their homes. It is the humble opinion of this researcher that the local council and administrative authorities of the Muea area assist the farmers by providing them not only with farm inputs but construct farm-to-market roads. In this way, the livelihood of the women will be improved as their farm produce will reach their homes and markets in good state.

5.3 Inadequate Access to Credit Facilities

Short and long-term credit facilities for food marketing activities are very limited. Government policy had directed the bulk of financial credits to the production and marketing of export crops. Since the volume of transaction by participants in the

food market is relatively small, they can hardly afford enough capital for investment in the system and this constitutes a major handicap in the development of the food marketing system. Married women face obstacles such as lack of finance to purchase farming tools and fertilizers. These women are generally less able to participate in economic opportunities than men because they carry a work burden that men do not. They shoulder most of the household and child-rearing activities in addition to their agricultural activities. This additional work burden is unpaid and limits women's capacity to engage fully in their agricultural work, which often requires a minimum fixed time before being profitable. More so, the nature of tasks, such as caring for children and elderly household members, demands these women to stay near the home, hence limiting options to work for a wage. As household chores in this study area are considered as female tasks, the current opportunity cost of girls' schooling time is high compared to that of boys, provided that boys do not help out on the farm like girls.

During the data collection, it was observed that much of the work carried out by married women is never computed when calculating the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). This is because many Cameroonians believe that only government-related jobs are considered as an employment. In line with this study, it is difficult for the married women to have access to credit facilities since initially they had not been given the same opportunities like men to study. Comparatively, therefore, it is much more difficult for females to have a better living standard than males.

5.4 Food Processing Problems

Technologies that exist for the transformation of cereals, grain legumes, tubers, and leafy vegetables into a broad variety of local products include drying, milling and fermentation. However, in Muea these technologies are rudimentary and the women rely on local and inefficient techniques which yield inconsistent and unhygienic products. Such products have precarious stability and eating qualities.

The technological advancement in Cameroon just like in most African countries is still at an infant stage. This explains why transforming raw materials into finished goods or simply processing food crops is still a major difficulty. One reason for this backwardness in food crop technology is the lack of interest in technical education generally by the youths in preference for government-paid jobs. This makes things more difficult for the married women as their purchasing power is very low.

5.5 Packaging Problems

The married women in Muea are limited in their contribution to economic development through low technical know-how particularly as concerns food packaging. Packaging is still depended on traditional technologies and materials such as leaves. Even so, only a small portion of the food intended for the market is so packaged. A greater bulk is marketed in open utensils with the obvious attendant health, environmental and regulatory problems. Improvements through the use of metal, plastic and improved wood packaging materials has been timid and limited to private concerns, public corporations and others who have both the information and capital.

The difficulty faced in packaging food stuff is understood from the point of view that the levels of technologies are equally very low. This means that the income received from the sale of some food crops is low because the local farmers lack the know-how to present these food stuffs through attractive packages to their potential consumers. What they receive as income from their activity is indirectly reduced by poorly designed packages, which affects their livelihood. For example, food stuff like maize, beans, and groundnuts are sold even with peelings making the potential buyer to reduce the amount of money he or she would have been willing to pay if the product was well packaged. It is in the light of this that the researcher strongly recommends that the local women should be trained on simple packaging techniques in order to improve on their incomes and livelihoods. This should be the responsibility of the state, CIGs and NGOs to do so and to reduce

the poverty levels that are currently affecting the women and the population in general

5.6 Summary of Challenges

The discussion in this section is based on the three categories of gender development by Kabeer (1994) - gender blind, gender awareness and gender neutral.

In the study area, gender discrimination arises from the fact that males and females are not given equal opportunities when it comes to education and decision making. The male folks are favoured to the disadvantage of the females. This greatly accounts for the inadequate and unbalanced development in the socio-economic development of Muea. This finding contrasts with Kabeer's conclusion on gender blind. This highlights the rules attributed to males or females irrespective of the biological status of the individual.

In the study area many women are still unaware about their rights to decision making in both formal and informal gatherings. For instance, in Cameroon, less than 20% of women hold positions of responsibility. Of all the ten governors in Cameroon, none is a female and there are less than ten female ministers out of over fifty ministers in Cameroon. In the Muea area, all the local councils are headed by men and women occupy only positions like councillors. This finding contradicts Kabeer's conclusions about gender awareness. Information gathered during the empirical survey revealed that gender awareness is not yet a reality in the study area.

The roles of males and females are defined based on customary laws where position of responsibility or decision making is not based on merit but depends on the sex of an individual. It is based on this that even though some women may be qualified, they cannot hold such position. For example, becoming a traditional leader is the sole prerogative of the male sex in Muea. Based on this finding, gen-

der neutrality as proposed by Kebeer in his conceptual framework is not applicable in Muea

6 Conclusions

This study focused on the economic and social role of married women in the agricultural production system in Muea. The study also examined the fundamental challenge, the inability of these women to have total control of one of the most crucial resources that is fundamental for their sustenance and for their livelihood. The study answered questions relating to gender bias structures that affect women's social and economic roles. This has been discussed and analyzed in the livelihood framework under the physical asset block. Data from the field revealed that women are biased against by their male partners when it comes to ownership of productive assets like land. In my selection of cases, I came to understand that women, according to the laws of the land, do not have any right of ownership to landed asset; the best they can have is access to land and not ownership of the land. This means that women are denied the right to contribute in the development of the study area even though they have the potentials to do so.

Field findings also reveal that married women have low incomes from their activities particularly farming activities. Worst still, the domestic activities of women are never computed in the calculation of the gross domestic product of the country. This effectively means that the contribution of mar-

ried women to the overall development of Muea and the country at large is not given due recognition.

The thesis on the social and economic role of married women in Muea falls within the framework of social research and contributes to the advancement of rural development and natural resource management through the findings of the study. I systematically worked with rural women involved in agriculture to gather data about their role in the development of the study area. This was not an easy task given that as rural women they are not well informed about the importance of data for economic development. For this reason, the findings of this study will constitute an invaluable source of information for development and the reduction of gender bias tendencies that have been prevalent in the study area, promoted through cultural practices. It is worth mentioning that despite the absence of financial assistance from the government or any financial institutions, the women have continued to struggle to make ends meet through their meagre resources. Perhaps it is necessary through this study to say that there is an urgent need for the state and local governments to assist the married women involved in the socio-economic development of the study area financially so that this can accelerate the development process in the study area.

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