Women Organisation’s Traditional and Contemporary Roles in Kenema District, Eastern Sierra Leone.

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly obvious that women organisations and/or self help groups are establish and use as key channels to liberate women from their traditional interdependence. This study is skewed towards examining Women Organisation’s Traditional and Contemporary Roles in the Kenema District, Sierra Leone. It is a case study where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed using tools including: semi-structured questionnaire, personal observations and reviewed of relevant documents related to this topic. In this study, data was captured from sixty (60) respondents from among five different women organisations in the study area. This study conspicuously revealed that their contributions at home and community levels are insurmountable, ranging from food production and processing through to income generation activities including: care giving, petty trading, brick-making, hairdressing, soap-making, gara-tie dyeing, and waving and others. Although they play these roles, they still face lots of constraint-limited accesses to productive resources such as land, labour, capital, and credit facilities. This study shows that men have greater access and control of land and other production resources in the study area, than women. This hinges around the preconceived idea of considering only men as farmers in Sierra Leone; meaning that the importance of women in food production and other development programs has largely been ignored. It is only when labour (especially household labour) becomes a problem that women’s roles become eminent in our society. This had pushed them into group work and various income generating organizations. It is therefore an uncontested debate that women play significant roles in the development process of any social system especially the study area.

Key Words: Women organisations, livelihood, Development, land, labour, capital, credit facilities, women’s traditional and contemporary roles.

Introduction

Like many other developing countries, women constitute 51 percent of Sierra Leones’ population (Statistics Sierra Leone, census report, 2004)\(^1\). Those women contribute in numerous ways to the national development of every country. They are responsible for nearly all household duties, ranging from food production through to it processing and household exercises. Women in the rural regions of Sierra Leone are the mainstay of agricultural production and socio-economic development. Majority of these women are disadvantaged on account of their social status and are therefore especially affected by the changes in the economic and political crisis of recent decades. They face a confusing array of socio-economic and political participation. This places women productivity squarely within the household decision-making context. They produce up to 80 percent of the staple food, yet they are the poor groups of the population with limited access to land, credit or education. The growing number of their self-help groups and organizations over the years is a sign that women want to advance their socio-economic status to become independent (UNDP (1996)\(^2\)). That notwithstanding, development efforts in the past geared towards economic activities with much bias to their male counterparts, disregarding the importance of women. This is why men in most cases are considered to be the stronger sex, sole decision-makers and controllers of productive resources. This stems from the traditional concept that women, particularly rural women are traditionally housewives, child bearers

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and housekeepers. Sierra Leone has been experiencing a situation where women were less considered. This has had a responding effect on their standard of living. The idea of mutual support in a specific situation is still considered to many as the starting point for many women’s groups nowadays.

In Sierra Leone, several institutions have been established to support rural development with emphasis on women and their organisations. These include, the government operated programmes through National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), National Action for Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT), Social Action for Poverty Alleviation (SAPA) to name a few. This work is geared towards examining the roles played by women organisations to identify and suggest solutions for combating their constraints. The need to examine this, despite their constraints in their communities cannot be over emphasize.

Women’s Traditional and Contemporary Roles in Development
Elizabeth Hartwig (2000) mentioned that women in rural regions in Africa are the main stay of agricultural production. They produce up to 80 percent of staple foods, yet they are among the poorest groups of the population. The growing number of women’s self-help groups is a sign that women want to improve their socio-economic status. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report (2004), it was established that during the war in Sierra Leone, women were not only victims and perpetuators, but also acted as peacemakers. At the beginning of 1994, rural and urban women of all classes and ethnic affiliations organized themselves into groups in many parts of the country. They organize peace marches and peace rallies in the country. From 1994 onwards, pioneering women and women’s groups such as the Mano River Women’s Peace Network (MAWOPNET), Women’s Movement for Peace, Forum for African Women Educationist (FAWE), the Women’s Forum, Sierra Leone Women’s Movement for Peace, Moawoma Women’s Development Organization and many others took the lead in rallying societies in a bid to stop hostilities during the war (TRC report, 2004). Migrations of men, high separation and divorce rates, wars, etc are also increasing the number of female headed household worldwide (FAO report, 1995). For this reasons the international community over the years have taken the bold step to addressing the role of women in order to improve their socio-economic conditions. The formation of United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW), the United Nations International Women declaration 1976-1985 and the fourth world Women’s Conference in Beijing China (1985) are a few significant steps that lucid for all-inclusive appreciation of women (FAO, 1995). According to Sticher and Parpart (1990), women play important role in the development process, but very little has been learnt about their activities. Until very recently, their roles have never been pleasing. In Sierra Leone, women play important roles in rice and vegetable production and marketing of these produce. It was estimated in 1974 by the Ministry of Labour that 60-80 percent of all agricultural work done in this country are carried out by women. Women work throughout and beyond the day light hours with an average of 10-16 hours per day (World Bank,1990). Comprehensive studies in the past decades show that women now constitute the majority of small-holders (through women organizations). They provide most of the agricultural labour, and are also household heads. The gender-based division of labour according to task is also breaking down and

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women are all the time more undertaking tasks formerly performed by men. For instance, women run most of the farm operations themselves, with supplementary help from family members or hired labour; land clearing is a task in which women are now deeply occupy with (Saito; 1992). Women play significant role in decision-making as far as home management is concerned. In many household classed as male-headed, women perform most of the responsibilities and make day-to-day decisions. Generally, they have virtual autonomy in decision-making about cultivation of legumes, vegetables and other root crops for home consumption or for sale in domestic markets. Moreover, decision about family food consumption and nutrition lie solely within their domain. Oppong. C., (1980) in his survey reported that women are food producers, processors, and marketers. He revealed that women perform potential role behaviour which focuses attention on women’s activities as bearers, nurses and socialisers of the future generation. They also perform occupational role which focuses on productive activities and this varies according to the formal and informal sector. Women carryout conjugal role which is positional role arising from positions as partners to male for collection of purposes, which may include; procreation, domestic services, financial support, economic cooperation, kinship community and individual roles.

Factors Affecting the Well Being of Women
Women in Sierra Leone constitute about 51 percent of the total population (GOSL/EU , 2004). They like men are involved in productive tasks where they lag behind men in all aspect of development. About 90 percent of rural women are engaged in agricultural activities yet; they lack access to credit facilities. They provide over 80 percent of the labour that produces about 70 percent of the nation’s food supply (UNDP, 2004). In West Africa, especially Sierra Leone, a lot of constrains are imposed on women. These constraints either limit their participation or result in them working under inferior conditions with low productivity. Despite these strategies, most of the programmes intended to benefit the poor with more emphasis on women do not meet the intended target, but are directed elsewhere. This is usually due to several constraints ranging from institutional policy, programmes direction, governance, legal issues and access to factors of production most of these obstacles arise from the cultural and social constraint that perpetuates women’s marginalized situation. The major constraints faced by women can be listed among many others Meer et al (1997).

- Limited access to financial services and access to land
- Lack of technology suitable for women farmers’
- Inadequate education;
- Lack of incentives, and
- Limited role in decision-making at different levels.

The contributions that women make to the socio-economic and political lives of their nations, communities, families and the next generations make them key actors in effective development. More than 800 million women are economically active worldwide in agriculture, micro-enterprises and increasingly in the processing industries. Over 70 percent of these women live in developing countries (United Nations, 1995). Despite these contributions, most women are unpaid family labourers in

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subsistence agriculture and household enterprises. Limitations on women’s legal rights and participation in civil societies are widespread. For instance, during conflict and crisis, women are frequent target of rape and other sexual violence, branding, maiming and displacement. Not only does such violence impedes women’s ability to live full and productive lives, but it also restricts their contribution to family, society and economic development. These often lead to starvation, trafficking, diseases, the disintegration of families and ultimately to socio-economic consequences of untold proportion.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, evidence from the field showed that the continued neglect of women’s productivity was a costly mistake that planners could no longer afford. Development needed and still need women. The 1985 Nairobi Conference adopts “A forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women”. According to United Nations (1995)\(^\text{16}\), these strategies recognize women as intellectuals, policy makers, planners and contributors of development. The full integration of women into a country’s general and sectional planning undeniably fosters unity and sustainable development. Conversely, ignoring women and consigning them can lead to imbalances which may have negative impact on the process of social change.

**Methodology**

The study was conducted in the Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, Eastern Sierra Leone. In order to obtain apt and unswerving data, both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection techniques were employed for this research. Basically, tools and/or techniques such as semi-structured questionnaire, informal interviews and discussions, desk research, coupled with personal observations were used to collect data from both primary and secondary sources. Data were collected from a sample of sixty (60) women who were members and/or leaders of five (5) key women’s organizations or self-help groups in the study area namely: Moawoma Women’s Development Association, Muloma Women’s in Development, Kargbado Kamboi Women’s Association, Tegloma Women’s Development Association and Kingsway Corner Market Women Development Association. For sample selection, a multi-stage sampling method was used. The first stage involved the determination of the five (5) women’s organizations. This was done by using the marble model of simple random sample where names of all women’s organizations within Kenema town (study area) were written on papers folded, placed in a plastic bag and shaken thoroughly. Five (5) papers were removed from the bag without replacement. The second stage was the determination of respondents (i.e. leaders and members of the selected organizations) to be administered questionnaires. Here twelve (12) questionnaires (i.e. ten members and two leaders) per organisation were administered using simple random sampling method. Additionally, Data generated were analyzed using descriptive and non-parametric statistical techniques.

**Findings and Discussions**

**Profile of Women Organisations in the Study Area**

It was also revealed that the maximum years of experience gathered by members of these organizations was seventeen (17) years, and minimum of one (1) year. This had spill over effect on the increase in their level of income. Those who have spent more years in these organisations earn better than the less experience ones which cumulates to their increasing income in terms of earning. This study reveals that a very high proportion of the sample women (80.0%) depended on their husbands or other male relatives or counterparts and only (20.0%) were household heads. A small proportion (18.0%) of the respondents were completely illiterate while the remaining had some form of education including; primary (30.0%), secondary (38.0%), Tech/Voc (12.0%) and tertiary level (2.0%). Slightly below two-fifth, (37.0%) of the respondents were farmers. The remaining was shared amongst petty trading (30.0%), gara tie-dying (20.0%), hair dressing (10.0%), and only (3.0%) were mainly housewives. Slightly more than one-third of the sample respondents (37.0%) received

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agricultural support while (31.0%) received micro-credit facilities, (22.0%) received skill training and only (.7.0%) received support by means of osusu and adult education.

In terms of educational status, this study reveals that only (18.0%) of the respondents did not go to school and the remaining was shared amongst the following level of education; primary, (30.0%), secondary level (38.0%), Tech/Voc level (12.0%) and tertiary (2.0%).

**Key Roles Perform by Women and Their Organisations in the Study Area**

This study conspicuously found out that Women organizations and/or self-help groups in the study area engage themselves in agricultural production, soap making, tailoring, gara-tie-dyeing, and petty trading in order to meet their total domestic responsibilities of earning living, feeding and educating their children. From personal discussions with respondents especially leaders of sampled organisations, it was revealed that in the formal sector, women make valuable contributions to economic and social development which is in agreement with UN, 1996 report that “Women account for over 20 percent of Africa’s Gross Domestic Product” (UN report, 1996)17. Many of these women are predominantly involved in group work as a source of improving their livelihood. It was also established that these organisations does the following in their communities of operations: Embarking on community cleaning exercises which consequently improves health and sanitation situations and minimizes the outbreak of diseases. They also help to maintain the norms, values of their societies culturally through socialisation.

At the household level, majority if not all of the women are unpaid family labourers in subsistence agriculture, trading and household enterprises. Over 60% of respondents across the five sampled organisations engaged in farming are largely responsible for planting, ploughing, weeding, harvesting, as well as the preparation of these products for home consumption. This implies that women’s groups appear to be an ideal way of translating into practices the concepts of development concerning self-help groups, thus contributing to their independence. Hence, the establishment of many women organizations as also justified by Elizabeth Hart wig, (2000)18.

Foubert (1987)19 in his study in Sierra Leone revealed that although the main occupation of the respondents was farming, some were government employees, petty traders and craftsmen. Findings from this research shows that a high proportion of women who belongs to different women’s organizations were farmers (45.0%), and the remaining constitute petty trading (30.0%), gara tie-dying (15.0%), and (10.0%) were hair dressers. This implies that Women’s organizations in the study area (Kenema District) have broadened their mandate for agricultural sector to include support for income-generating activities, mainly through skills training and micro-credit.

According to Tinker M. (1981)20, women produce 35 to 45 percent of the gross national product of African countries and more than (50.0%) of staple foods. Result from this study reveals that women’s organizations in the study area made both social and economic contributions towards their community. These contributions include; Reconstruction and rehabilitation in their study area; Community sensitizations on human right, education and health issues; and Increase the income generating ability of the individual members of those organizations. Most of the women’s organizations had positive impact on the socio-economic development of the communities in which they operated. They took part in community sensitization, health and sanitation, community reintegration, reconstruction after the war and their income generating activities are beneficial to the society.

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18 Elizabeth Hart Wig, (2000) : “A Comparison Of Rural Women’s Time Use And Nutritional Consequences In Two Villages In Malawi “In Poats Et Al.


Factors that Militates Against Women in the Study Area

Despite their severally positive contributions of women and their organisations in the study area, this research reveals that their efforts are often overshadowed by those of their male counterparts who are in most cases the sole decision-makers and controllers of productive resources. Through personal discussions, it was generally indicated that though rural women are home managers, community organizers and care givers for children, the sick and elderly, yet their voices are seldom heard in national policy making and planning.

Notwithstanding the above context, women are frequently relegated to the status of second class citizens in that; their rights are dependent on their husbands or other male relatives under customary law where women have limited access to land. This is because they are not accepted as beneficiaries in terms of inheriting land. Although customs dictate that they are permitted users of land, their ability to do so is constrained. Findings from semi-structured questionnaire regarding key factors that limit women’s productivity are presented below:

- **a) Acquisition of Land**

  Land is an important factor considered in any production exercise. Therefore, women were asked how they acquire land for their organizations. The study results are analysed and presented in figure 1 below.

- **b) Sources of Labour.**

  For women whose main occupation is farming, their sources of labour since they needed external labour force to carry out their production exercises are presented in Table 2 below.

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**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Labour Employed and their Organizations.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour Employed</th>
<th>SAMPLE WOMEN BY RGANIZATION</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moawoma</td>
<td>Tegloma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No%</td>
<td>No%</td>
<td>No%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>9 75</td>
<td>8 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hired labour</td>
<td>2 17</td>
<td>2 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal labour</td>
<td>1 8</td>
<td>2 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange labour</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>12 100</td>
<td>12 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey 2015.
From the above table nearly half of the respondents 48% employed hired labour in their production exercises. More of this is shown in Kargbado kamboi women development organization; 83%, Kingsway corner market women development organization; 67%, muloma women’s development organization; 58% moawoma and tegloma women’s development organization 17% each. The remaining 52% which is slightly above half of the respondent are shared among individual or members labour force. More of this is found in moawoma women’s organizations 75%, tegloma 67%, muloma and Kingsway corner women’s organization 17% each, and kargbado kamboi women did not employ individual member in any of their work. It implies that over all, majority of the organization (48%) employed hired labour, followed by members of the organizations (35%), Small proportion (12%) of the sample women employed exchanged labour and very small (05%) of the respondent used communal labour in their production exercise.

c) Acquisition of Productive Resources.
Bottle necks encountered by women’s Organizations were investigated and the findings are presented in figure 3 below.

![Figure 3: Distribution of Respondents by Constraints in Acquiring Productive Resources](image)

Figure 3: Distribution of Respondents by Constraints in Acquiring Productive Resources
From the figure 3 above, findings revealed that women’s organisations were faced with a lot of constrains. Findings indicate that two-fifth of the respondents (40%) reported that they are faced with a high cost of labour. Above one-fourth of the respondents (28%) reported lack of capital to start productive activity. One-tenth (10%) mentioned serious cultural barriers and difficulty in land acquisition each, (08%) reported high interest rate charged on credit facilities while very small (04%) respondents were faced with inadequate tools and equipments problems. This implies also that the major problems women’s organizations are facing in the study area included; high cost of labour, lack of capital, cultural barriers, difficulty in land acquisition, high interest rate on credits and inadequate tools and equipments.

d) Sources of Funding
The idea of mutual and financial support serves as a starting point for many women’s organizations (Kishindo P.A.K (1990)). Respondent were asked to identify their source(s) of funding. It was revealed that (100%) of the organizations get funds from both Internal and External Sources. External sources of funding as revealed in this study include: Governmental and Non-Governmental organizations. Result shows that 100% of the respondents received organizational support from both governmental and non-governmental institutions
- Forum for African Women Educationist (FAWE).
- Action Aid Sierra Leone

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Findings from this study reveal that all the organizations depended mainly on external funding (i.e. funds from NGOs and governmental institutions). The internal funds are basically acquired through the following sources: membership registrations, monthly dues, donations and from the sales of proceeds. Studies by Kishindo P.A.K (1990)²², reported that women play significant role in development process and therefore, if allowed to work in groups they would create serious impact in the development arena. Similarly, this study reveals that women’s organizations play pivotal roles in the development process. But they are faced with a lot of bottle necks that limit, or prevent their participation in the development process including but not limited to: high cost of labour; lack of capital; lack of access to land; cultural barriers; high interest rate on credits; and above all inadequate tools and equipment. This is because most of the equipments are not developed in their favour.

**Conclusion**

Many women in Sierra Leone are predominantly involved in agriculture through cooperative societies as a source of livelihood. They are also largely involved in the marketing and distribution of basic food stuffs and other household goods. This leaves women with the total responsibility of earning living, raising, feeding and education of their children and other relatives. It is thus establish that women’s participation in the socio-economic development cannot be over-ruled. They should be encouraged and given the same facilities as their male counterparts. The growing number of self-help groups and women’s organizations over the years is a sign that women want to improve their social and economic status. This idea of mutual support in a specific situation is the starting point for many women’s groups nowadays to mobilize their own physical and intellectual resources to improve their situations.

Fundamental amongst the findings are the fact that women naturally have a major interest in boosting their small income directly or indirectly by working together within the group. It is therefore, essential to acknowledge the importance of women as integral force in sustainable development.

**Recommendation**

Base on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Capacity building for rural women through workshops, trainings, sensitization and information activities on gender issues, focusing on both men and women, as a basis for promoting shared responsibilities.
- Attention should be paid to the economic dimension of women’s work in rural areas, entrepreneurial factors and to those sectors (such as the informal sector) which are directly related to rural employment and their social, economic and legal implications.
- The government should increase investment in education, training and literacy programme for girls and young women, and incorporate a gender perspective in the educational curriculum.

**References**


Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report (2004