

Women and the challenges of Cassava Farming and Garri Processing in Sagbama, Bayelsa State

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Abstract: *Agriculture remains germane to the economic development of any nation. This paper looks at women in agriculture in Sagbama and the challenges they face in cassava farming and garri processing. Sagbama being an agrarian society with subsistence economy, the traditional sex-specific task on farm such as bush clearing by men, felling of trees and cultivation of farmland have all been eroded with the women doing virtually all the tasks on the farm in a bid to survive. Apart from being confined to small plots of land which have been intensively used, thus having diminishing returns to increased labour output, the processed cassava products are not really commiserate with the energy dissipated by the women. For their efforts to transit from purely subsistence to commercial agriculture, the government both state and local government needs to put the basic agricultural facilities in place to ameliorate the condition of the women.*

Keywords: *Cassava, Farm, Garri, Sagbama, Women.*

I. Introduction

Sagbama local government is organized on a subsistence economy with agriculture as the main pre-occupation. It is a known fact that men and women are involved in traditional agricultural activities. However, the amount of involvement and role by both men and women is expected to be gender-specific. Roles such as clearing of bush, felling of trees, planting of certain crops, hunting, and fishing are supposed to be exclusively for men, while women are expected to hoe, weed harvest and process and preserve the farm produce for marketing. Unfortunately, maybe as a result of the rural setting and cultural background, the task exclusive for men are now being undertaken by women. In short, the whole essence of productive aspects or activities of agriculture has been abandoned for women. This is why Dumont 1969:105 referred to rural women as ‘the hidden productive force in the country side.’[1] This is exactly the lots of most women in Sagbama local government Area. The question now is what could be responsible for the preponderance of women in agriculture in this area? The answers for this question could not be far-fetched. Few variables could be adduced for this reason. These variables range from cultural and background setting, widowhood, politics and discovery of petroleum products in the Niger Delta region. Looking at these variables, the cultural and background setting of the Ijaw people is such that they are predominantly into fishing and farming. Their fishing activities are borne out of their affinity with water. Be that as it may, it can be inferred that farming activities is equally important for food supply and survival which involves both men and women playing a specific vital role. For instance, it is assumed that after the necessary clearing of bush, felling of trees and planting exercise, the men would embark on fishing expedition leaving the woman to tend the farm. An action deemed complimentary, symbiotic and supportive. However, the tide seems to have turned against the women. From personal observation on the field, about 95 percent of farming activities are performed by women. Besides, women are seen on the water with their canoes drawing fishing nets either while returning from farms across the river or basically on the river for fishing purposes.

Widowhood could also be assumed to account for the high number of women in farming activities. At least, for survival purpose and in the face of individualism that pervades the society nowadays, no one wants to be his or her brothers' keeper. Although, no one can be blamed for this, the rate of poverty in the society is so alarming that families are subsisting, thus making it difficult to extend helping hands to others.

Moreover, Bayelsa State possesses one of the largest crude oil and natural gas deposit in the country. This made petroleum production to be extensive, hence, oil well and gas marked the onset of the shift of the economic base of the entire Bayelsa state from agriculture to oil and gas. The implication until recently was that bunkering despite its concomitant hazard became the order of the day; attractive, appealing and profitable than farming activities.

Lastly, politics in Bayelsa State has more or less become a profession. Large number of productive class of the population wants to become a politician, either through elective or selective process. Politics is seen as the easiest means of making money. The patience of waiting for the duration of harvesting farm produce coupled with the low income derivable compared with the energy dissipated on the farm; farming activities no longer seems appealing.

II. Women and Cassava Farming

Cassava (*manihot esculenta*) is an important root and major food crop grown throughout Nigeria. Cassava is said to have its origin in tropical South America and through the activities of the Portuguese explorers and traders, it was introduced into the southern part of Nigeria, specifically Warri, in the then Mid-Western Nigeria. Perhaps, that could be responsible for the exportation of cassava products to Sagbama environs in not too distant time from the area. Agboola (1976) asserted that through the slave returnees from West Indies and Sierra Leone, the spread of cassava got to Lagos, Badagry, Ijebu and Abeokuta at the onset of the 19th century [2]. According to him, these returnees processed cassava into food products such as garri and lafun. He further claimed that traders from western Nigeria introduced cassava and cassava products into Eastern Nigeria along coast towns of Calabar and Yenagoa [3]. An indication that it has been long that cassava was introduced to different regions of Nigeria. Its production has become well developed dominating the southern part of Nigeria. Cassava appears more preferable to seasonal crops for the fact that it could be grown throughout the year. Cassava has the advantage of adaptability to climate change, ability to resist pests and diseases, drought and with limited use of fertilizer to boost its yield.

Although, traditionally women grow certain crops, however, with their active involvement in cassava farming and even other crops, constituting almost about ninety percent, the sex-specific task on the farm with respect to men clearing the bush, felling trees and tilling the ground appears to have been eroded. This tend to be accentuated by male absence through migration to the urban centres especially Yenagoa, involvement in politics for the belief that it is an easy way to acquire wealth, oil bunkering, though this seems to have been reduced and the monthly allowance accruing from the Presidential Amnesty Programme which has made most of the able bodied-men to become lazy. The women do virtually all the works on the farm, from clearing of the bush, cultivation, planting, weeding and finally harvesting. Except in cases, where few children offer some assistance, at times done grudgingly. The lots of the women with respect to access to farmland fit into the words of Michael and Smith [4] that subsistence farming on small plots of land is the way of life for majority of African people living in agriculture-based economies. They aver that farm family and village labour remain the basic variable input in African traditional agriculture, hence, African agriculture systems are dominated by three major characteristics. The women in cassava farming can be viewed from two of the characteristics: (i) the importance of subsistence farming in village community.[5] Sagbama, being a society that is organised on subsistence economy, whose main pre-occupation is agriculture, the people were concerned with production for consumption. Such pattern of production, which was primarily subsistence in nature, provided little or no room for specialization as each household had to practically produce all its needs. Thus, this system of subsistence production of the people fits into the claim of Clifford [6] that, the vast majority of the indigenous population is still independent of the outside world for all their essential supplies. They can and do spin their own thread,

weave their own garments, provide their own food stuffs and even when necessity arises, forge their own tools and make their own pottery. Like the Igbo women according to Smock and Smock, who when compared to men, have more responsibility and spend more time on farm work [7] the women in Sagbama area equally appeared to have more responsibility which as with Igbo women is depicted by Green [8] thus; the wife is looked upon as being responsible for feeding the household though the husband helps now and then.... With little exception, most of the women observed in the course of this study are widow who must at all cost fend for their household, while few have husbands incapacitated by old age. Those women with able bodied husbands are not better off than those in the other categories. This is borne out of the fact that those husbands hardly join their wives on the farm. Hence, the basic survival tendency in the face of poverty-stricken environment remains strong to make subsistence farming an important phenomenon. Now to the second major characteristic (ii) the existence of some (though rapidly diminishing) land in excess of requirements which permits a general practice of shifting cultivation and reduces the value of land ownership as an instrument of economic and political power.[9] Although with respect to cassava farming by the women, they did not really have that luxury of excess land for shifting cultivation. The Niger Delta terrain has remained a limiting factor with regard to excess land for farming activities and cultivation.

Besides, the women like others in patrilineal societies, traditionally have no direct access to land. Access to land is through their male relatives. In some instances, they are subjected to lease scattered plots of land from other people during planting season, which in most cases they share the proceed of the farm with the owners of such lands for their inability to monetize it. In the yearly cultivation of cassava, the women are confined to the same large farm plot shared among themselves in the ratio of about ten feet by thirty feet per each person as shown by the photograph below.



Fig 1. Large farmland used by several women for planting cassava

This small plot allocation only allows a minimal space for cultivation and planting opportunity. Each woman maintains her portion for yearly cassava farming. Considering the limited amount of the land cultivated every year by the women, the small areas tend to be intensively cultivated. As such, the areas are subjected to diminishing returns to increased labour input. Though, the good thing about cassava is its tolerance to low fertile land and ability to survive on fallow land. After planting, the root could be harvested after six months to three

years. The specie of cassava planted here takes six months for harvesting. This could be attributed to two reasons; first, the women could not afford to wait for three years before harvesting the cassava simply because their survival depends on it as food. Secondly, every year, the farmland is always flooded which greatly affected the cassava root. As a result, the cassava roots are untimely harvested in order to prevent total loss. The photograph below shows the extent of the yearly flood.



Fig. 2. A woman paddling her canoe on flood water to harvest her cassava

This photograph shows the extent of the flood as it poses challenge that militates against the six months duration not to talk about three years duration. This flooded area is the same cultivated farmland in the previous chapter. However, this is what it turns to by the yearly flood, forcing the women to quickly harvest whatever they could salvage on the farmland which often times, are not fully matured. The woman seen here was paddling her canoe into the inner part of the farmland where she had her allocated plot. Though, probably with her husband and son, but it can be seen that it was the woman that was actually piloting the canoe with the man sitting at ease with one hand holding paddle. This is an evidence of the condition women are subjected. Most times, after loading the canoes with the harvested cassava, the women would go back to load the canoe with dry wood for frying processed cassava and for cooking.

III. Women and Garri Processing

Though Sagbama women have always been responsible for the bulk of work on cassava farm, they are equally saddled with the responsibility of processing the harvested cassava into food products. The women peel the cassava and most times had to take it to any nearby flood water to wash. Though, they hardly have problem with water during raining season, because the flood extends down to the entrance of most homes, so the problem of searching for water or going to a long distance to get water is solved. In some cases, the harvested cassava roots are discharged at the water bank, peeled and washed immediately. However, one major challenge for the women is the inadequacy of grinding mill. Since cassava processing is mechanized, few men with capital take up the ownership and use of the grinders. Meanwhile, there are just few of such grinders in Sagbama, probably three or four points. At the peak period of cassava harvest, the women have to wait endlessly till late in the night to take their turn after much rigorous farm work. Unfortunately, after much use, the grinders breakdown thereby

subjecting the women to untold hardship and thus delaying cassava processing. The picture below is a grinding mill.



Fig. 3. Grinding Mill

This grinding mill is the most patronized and probably the biggest mill in Sagbama. Normally, this is the pick period of cassava harvest and this mill has always been a beehive of activities with women queuing and waiting patiently to grind their cassava. Of course, they hardly have any choice but to wait irrespective of time frame. However, as seen in the picture, the place is empty, an evidence of breakdown grinder. The picture below shows another mill.



Fig 4. Grinding machine with a woman holding red oil to make yellow garri.

This was quickly arranged to meet the dire need of the women. As can be seen from the picture, it was not a well established mill, but necessitated by the desire to make quick money by the owner. The areas seen covered by the water in both pictures in Figures (3) and (4) were parts of the farmland cultivated which the flood has taken over forcing the women to harvest their cassava prematurely. As earlier mentioned, the peeled cassava roots are washed in such water and at times, most women while returning from the farm preferred to discharge their harvested cassava directly near the grinding mill. This is done so that while peeling the cassava, they could simultaneously wash the cassava in the flood water that extended to the mill and at the same time have them ground. Cassava has multiple uses, rich in starch in the form of carbohydrate and consumed in various processed forms. Sagbama people's major staple food is cassava processed in different manner. Cassava flours are of two different types; the yellow garri and white garri. The yellow garri is mostly consumed than the white garri. The woman in figure (4) is seen holding a bottle of palm oil. While grinding the cassava, red oil is added to it so as to have a well mixed yellow output. Frying the garri is another tedious task for the women. It is the same women who cultivated the cassava farm, planted the cassava, weed the farm, harvested, peeled and still have to fry the garri exposing themselves to scorching heat. Combining all these with home responsibility in no small measure could reduce their lifespan. One is not surprised at the rate some of the women look so old and worn out. The unfortunate thing is that virtually all the household have more than enough garri, hence, there is no adequate monetary compensation for the labour input. The markets during the season become flooded with garri and cassava products. Good storage facilities are non-existent and this often times made the garri loose its taste and good smell having being bagged and kept in the house for a long time.

Conclusion

The question now is, what does it cost the local government authority to provide a modern mechanized grinding mill? Why is it difficult to provide a modern fryer and equally provide a longer lasting storage facility? Resources to provide these to alleviate the suffering of the women cannot be said to be a problem. It is imperative for the women to have access to resources that could ameliorate the challenges faced in cassava farming and processing of cassava products. The state and local government should be able to provide the

necessary agricultural facilities or alternatively, encourage them to form a group to make it easier for them to secure credit facilities. Without this, it will be practically impossible for their farming efforts from transiting from subsistence to commercial agriculture.

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