



Full Length Research Paper

Are we married into poverty? Denied women landownership in Nigeria

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Abstract

A cross sectional survey was used to determine the rights of women to own land for forestry development. Data were derived from a combination of questionnaire interviews and informal group discussions on land rights of rural women. Results of data analyses indicated that: (i) gender inequality was entrenched into the traditional land tenure; (ii) women enjoyed the same types of land use rights as men except that they were denied access to land ownership; (iii) land ownership by women was not closed. They had the right to own land through purchase; and (iv) lands at the disposal of women were marginal: small and unproductive holdings for agricultural production. The lands were however useful for *EX SITU* conservation of forest species of plants. It is important to encourage women to own lands in order to escape from poverty traps through empowerment and stable income streams. The ministries and agencies responsible for women affairs and environment should encourage rural women through trainings and farm/forestry inputs to improve their economic status.

Keywords: Gender inequality, poverty traps, land tenure, empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Land ownership is mainly patriarchy in most countries of the world. Married or widowed women in Nigeria enjoyed abstract rights of access to land and biodiversity but they are denied real substantive land rights. These women do not own and inherit land. They gain access to land through men: husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, uncles and cousins. In several countries, attempts to reverse this trend have failed. For example, in China, women loose rights to land at marriage (Agarwal, 2002; Judd, 2007). The property a woman acquired before marriage comes under the absolute control of the husband and at divorce she loses the property to the husband (Liaw, 2008). Various reforms to entrench gender equality in land laws in African countries (the 1999 legislation in Tanzania; the land law of 2004 in Mozambique; the communal land rights act of 2004; and other land right laws in Zimbabwe, Zambia; and Kenya) have all ended up in papers (Kameri-Mbote, 2005; Ikdahl *et al*, 2005; Kachika, 2009). Land laws that entrenched equality were not implemented because of structural and cultural constraints. For example, the implementations were supposed to be carried out by men or traditional councils who in their hearts did not support such reforms. In Ghana, Bounye and Joseph (2007) gave reasons to justify the discrimi-

nation of women on land rights. First was the fear that wealthy women might undermine the positions of their husbands. Second, it is believed that women were no permanent members of any family in fathers' or husbands' homes. Third, priority on land matters was given to men who were heads of households amidst land scarcity.

Women in rural areas are agrarian and gatherers in character. They are involved in all forms and levels in agricultural production. For example, they are fully engaged in crop production and carry out the following operations: planting, weeding, harvesting, food processing, food storage and marketing (Quisumbing *et al*, 1999). In livestock farming, they are involved in extraction and processing of dairy products and marketing. Processing, smoking and marketing of fish are also the duty of women. In cash crop production, women plant, harvest, process, store and market the products. Women are known to be involved in *ex situ* and *in situ* conservation of genetic and species diversity in agroforestry (Sahai, 2004). Thus women engage in between 40 and 45% of agricultural activities in most developing countries including Nigeria. Apart from direct agricultural production, women also collect firewood for

processing agricultural products such as fish and meat. Most rural women in Nigerians virtually live on land which they inherited or acquired and their survival is anchored on access to biodiversity in natural forests (Osemeobo, 2001 a).

Exclusion of women from land inheritance has caused perpetual poverty in rural areas. They are rendered powerless and neglected in decisions on land matters at community level. Lack of access to land inheritance has made women the most marginalized group in the world (Patel, *et al*, 2000). According to Howard (2003), women are bread-winners of one-thirds of all households in the world. As families are displaced because of wars and natural disasters, the roles and burdens of women are increasing (Osemeobo, 2001b). Moreover, it has been said that women produce 80% of the food in Africa, 60% of food in Asia and 40% of food in Latin America (Howard, 2003). From these trend analyses, it is clear that the denial of women to own land has planted poverty in many rural homes in the country (Onuoha, 2008).

Women play important roles in forestry development in Nigeria. They improve food/health security through gathering of non timber forest products: medicinal plants, leaves, fruits, nuts, seeds, mushrooms, honey, snails, worms and spices (Osemeobo, 2005a). Women use these resources to provide income to sustain household in hunger periods. Minor forest product economy and social forestry works such as small scale industries are dominated by women (Osemeobo, 2005b). It is claimed that with women ownership of lands, they will be empowered, their morale will be boosted and thereby increase household incomes and security. The women may feel socially accepted and hence motivated to produce more than when they did not own land. In areas of post conflicts, families headed by women are many but because they fear going to the forests to gather nontimber products, they are enveloped in poverty traps (Kandiyo, 2002 and Guivant, 2003).

Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate women land rights in forestry development in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the various land rights women enjoyed in the country;
2. Examine the main constraints to land ownership by women; and
3. Evaluate how land ownership by women can promote forestry development.

Data were derived by a stratified sampling technique through a face to face questionnaire interviews and informal open-ended group discussions held with key informants. The interview sought the opinions of

stakeholders composed of women farmers/foresters and male farmers on women land rights and forestry development. The discussion groups involved women leaders, policy and decision-makers at community level and ordinary members of the communities visited. Data were subjected to Chi square (X^2) statistical analyses to establish sound basis for inferences drawn from them. The X^2 statistics was used to test for homogeneity of samples derived from the survey data. Tables were used to present the results.

RESULTS

Gender issues in traditional land tenure

Based on the data on which this study was based, land ownership in the study was dominated by men. It was not gender sensitive. Land ownership had some historical perspectives. Lands were acquired by conquest and through first settlement in a given place. The groups of people that studded together owned the land as a community. Lands were shared into families for farming, hunting and biodiversity harvest. Within the community were various households made up of families comprised of a man, wife/wives and children/relations. Each family was made up of people of different professions like farmers, hunters, fishermen and traditional healers. The principle of land ownership was based on ability to cultivate virgin forests. It was claimed by respondents that the first person that cultivated the land owned it and the size of land owned depended on the size of virgin forest cleared. Thus, the family members that were not farmers almost lost out in the individual land ownership within the family circles. Most women could not cultivate virgin forests and had little or no land compared with men in other professions. The difference between the men in other professions was that they owned some land because they combined their professions with farming. From historical views it was not the intention to deprive women right to own land. Few women struggled with men to own land by clearing. When they died their children inherited the lands and the people lost the linkages of the land to the women because of patriarchal lineage.

Constraints of denied access to land ownership

Women were deprived land ownership through inheritance in the study area. Most of the lands were held by men. Table 1 explained the reasons for gender inequality on land ownership as historical (19%), dual families of women (18 %), land shortages (18 %) and avoidance of women dominance in the communities (17 %). Other reasons were to reduce land disputes (16 %) and to ensure cultural homogeneity (12 %).

Table 1. Reasons for gender inequality in land ownership

Failure of land equality	% of respondents
Historical perspective	19
Dual families in women	18
Land shortages	18
Avoidance of women dominance	17
Reduction in land disputes	16
Ensure homogeneity of culture over lands	12
Total	100

Calculated $X^2 = 1.89$ and tabulated $X^2_{0.05,5} = 11.1$. It means there is no difference between observed and expected frequencies

Table 2. Land rights enjoyed by women

Land rights	% of respondents
Cultivation of food crops	15
Harvest minor forest products	14
Harvest timber	14
Fish in inland waters	13
Rights of way in forest lands	13
Rights of worship	12
Rights to build houses	11
Rights to buy land/farmlands	8
Total	100

Calculated $X^2 = 2.78$ and tabulated $X^2_{0.05,7} = 14.10$. It means there is no difference between observed and expected frequencies

Women land rights

Land right in this study is the power to have *legal claims to properties* on land while land ownership is the *legal rights to possess* land. Land rights may be inferior in case of acquired lands by loan or lease. The inferior rights on land were not permanent; it was time framed. Nevertheless, these inferior rights on the land were offshoots of absolute rights exercised by the *owner* of the land. The inferior land rights expired when the person using the land vacated it. Migrant farmers and women in the study area enjoyed some land rights on leased and borrowed land. Table 2 gave the land rights enjoyed by women and these were rights to: cultivate food crops (15%), harvest non timber (14%) and timber products (14%). Other rights enjoyed by women were of passage in the forests (13%), to fish in inland waters (13 %), worship (11 %), and build houses or purchase farmlands (8%).

Land ownership by women

This study showed that contrary to general believe that women were denied land ownership some women in the study area owned lands. Table 3 revealed that women owned/possessed land through: (i) buying of tree crop plantations (32 %); (ii) buying abandoned or marginal farmlands (25 %), (iii) building of houses (22 %); and (iv) cases won by women in courts (21 %). How did these women managed to own these lands?

Reasons for land disposal

Women possessed lands through disposal rights outside family circles. In Table 4 lands were disposed for six major reasons. These were due to the death of the last owner of the land (26%), lack of male child in the family to inherit the land (22 %) and lack of continued interest on the land (16 %). Other reasons were to resolve land

Table 3. Access to own land by women

Access to land by women	% of respondents
Buying tree crop plantations-cocoa, rubber, cola nuts	32
Buying abandoned farmlands	25
Building of houses	22
Law courts	21
Total	100

Calculated $X^2 = 2.96$ and tabulated $X^2_{0.05,3} = 7.81$. It means there is no difference between observed and expected frequencies

Table 4. Reasons for land sale

Land disposal	% of respondents
Death of last owner	26
No male child in a family	22
Lack of continued interest on land	16
To resolve land conflicts	14
Unproductive land for crops	12
Relocation of families	10
Total	100

Calculated $X^2 = 11.39$ and tabulated $X^2_{0.05,5} = 11.1$. It means there is a difference between observed and expected frequencies. The observed and expected frequencies are not independent.

disputes arising from farm boundary conflicts (14 %), unproductive nature of the land due to low soil fertility or infestation of crops by pests (12 %) and relocation of owners of the land to distance towns or outside the county (10 %). The X^2 test indicated that the frequencies respondents were not independent (Table 4), perhaps because the issues of land disposal in the study area was not fully resolved. Land disposal was a reform on the traditional land tenure to enable women and landless to own land.

Benefits of land ownership by women

The question raised and answered by key informants in this study was how can land ownership by women be of benefit for forestry development? The responses of stakeholders during data collection are presented in Table 5. The informants claimed that land ownership by women would help in conserving rare food species (18%), and medicinal plants (17%). It would also help in transferring ecological knowledge of forest products to younger generations (16%) and reduce the burden of long distance treks to harvest biodiversity in natural forests (15%). More importantly, it would serve as avenue of improved income to women (12%), mainstreaming

biotechnology to forest plants (12%) and make forest products readily available in the markets (10%).

Women in forestry development

The various group discussions held with key informants revealed that most women (the aged and widowed) relied almost entirely on the forests for income and sustenance. They were actively engaged in gathering of leafy vegetables (*Genetun africana*, *Ceiba pentandra*, *Moringa oleifera*, *Vernonia amygdalis* and *Pterocarpus aerenasious*), spices (*Xylopi aethiopica*), medicinal plants (*Combretum racemosun*, *Acanthospermum hispidum*, *Vernonia amygdalina*, *Byrsocarpus coccineus*, *Phyllantus muellerianus*, *Sansevieria liberica*, *Cissus aralioides*, *Acanthus montanus*, *Desmodium Scopiusurus*, *Nauclea latifolia*, *Sida urens*, *Triclisia patens*, *Desmodium velutium*), fruits (*Parkia biglobosa*; *Irvingia gabonensis*; *Irvingia gradifolia*; *Afzelia africana*), and seeds/nuts (*Elaeis guineensis*; *Baillonella toxisperma* and *Ricinus communis*). Others were firewood, mushrooms, tortoise and snails.

The women were only harvesting biodiversity without any input to rehabilitate the natural forests. Most aged women could no longer trek long distances into natural

Table 5. Benefits of landownership by women for forestry

Benefits of land ownership	% of respondents
Conservation of rare food species	18
Conservation of medicinal plants	17
Transfer of ecological knowledge	16
Reduced burden of trekking to forests	15
Improved income to women	12
Avenue for introducing biotechnology into forestry	12
Availability of forest products in markets	10
Total	100

Calculated $X^2 = 3.74$ and tabulated $X^2_{0.05,6} = 12.6$. It means there is no difference between observed and expected frequencies

forests to harvest forest products. These groups of women were willing to introduce some of the forest plants such as herbs, forbs and vines with short gestation periods into the farming system (*Afromomum melagueta*, *Hypoestes rosea*, *Canarium schweinfurthii*). This could only be done if they had security on the land which is attained by owning the land. A major setback for women participation in forestry development was the long gestation periods of forest products and small sizes of fruits and seeds that failed to attract good prices. This was the area of biotechnological concern for the forest products to be competitive with agricultural products and increase household incomes.

DISCUSSIONS

Land use rights

Table 1 revealed that land ownership by women through inheritance was a closed issue. Gender inequality was entrenched into the traditional land tenure system. It was a general belief that married women owed their allegiance to where they were married and not their natal families. Because their children can inherit lands from their fathers the women were denied land ownership rights. The people wanted the dictum in land ownership to be maintained, that is people of the same belief and culture to manage community lands. Moreover, the children of married women have no tenure rights of access to lands in their mothers' families. Table 2 showed that women enjoyed equal land rights as men except the right to inherit land. Many men in the communities were landless as well as some of the women. Beyond these, there were no vacant lands anymore. All lands had been owned and shared among communities, families and individuals. Therefore the only available options for women to own lands were presented in Table 3; and these were mainly through purchase of farmlands and erection of buildings on the land. There were various

reasons for land disposal (Table 4) but these did not discriminate against women. It was the opinion of women that access to land would help to introduce forest biotechnology, increase income and ensure the traditional ecological knowledge of the forest was transferred to younger generations (Table 5) under *ex situ* regenerations on lands owned by women.

Women attitudes to land ownership

The women in the study area were bitter for denying them land inheritance. The following question was posed to women during data collection: why do women want to own land? The unedited voices of some of the women were:

- Are we not created equally with men?
- Are we married to suffer?
- Are we married into poverty?
- Are we not heading families as the men?
- Are we not bread winners in our homes?

However, the behaviour of women in the study area towards land ownership was dubious. Three further questions were posed to the women and these were: do you want to inherit your husband's land? Will you allow your sons' wives to inherit their husbands' lands? What would be the relationship between children of your first marriage and second marriage if widowed women were allowed to inherit their first husbands land? When the responses were analysed it was found that some women wanted to: (i) inherit late husbands land but did not want their sons' wives to inherit their husbands lands (27%); (ii) inherit late husbands lands when they were separated and lived in their fathers houses (25%); and (iii) inherit late husbands land when they had remarried (21%). Moreover some remarried women wanted to transfer the wealth of their late husbands to their new husbands or their relations (15%) and some remarried women wanted to use their late husband's wealth for children of their new husbands (12%). These behaviours were grossly

unaccepted in the rural communities and these contributed to the denial of women land inheritance.

Access of women to own land

Access of women to land has not been an easy issue. There were suspensions on women's interest on land. The questions of disloyalty of women to their natal families over land issues abound in the study area. The poverty level among women has caused them to be marginalised in the purchase of land or address land issues in courts of justice. Most of the widowed women were eager to participate in agroforestry but lack of financial motivation had denied them access to land. Some aged women that feared going to distant forests to harvest biodiversity products were enveloped in poverty traps. The lands available to poor women in the study area were abandoned marginal lands that were unproductive for agricultural production. Yet the land areas in their possession were small sometimes less than one hectare per woman. Under good management these lands can sustain household incomes for the aged.

CONCLUSION

It has been established in this study that: (i) the traditional land tenure system in vogue in the study area did not support land inheritance by women; (ii) women were not denied land use rights. They enjoyed equal land use rights with men. (iii) The only avenues for women to own land were by purchase and building of houses; and (iv) land purchased by women were marginal in terms of agricultural production but useful for forestry development. Based on the findings of this study the conclusion is reached that all agencies responsible for environment, agriculture, poverty reduction at federal and state levels should support women to develop lands at their disposal whether owned or borrowed. This could be achieved through training programmes (land conservation, silviculture, sustainable harvesting techniques, storage of biodiversity and marketing strategies), supply of inputs for agroforestry development (farm tools and equipments, seeds, seedlings, cuttings, manure/fertilizers and other nursery items) and mainstreaming biotechnology into the smallholder farming systems.

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