



Emerging Role of Women in Household Food Access in Nyamira North Sub County, Kenya

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Abstract

Food insecurity is a contemporary challenge afflicting a number of households in developing countries. In Kenya for instance, households that have traditionally relied on their farms for food are currently experiencing reduced food production occasioned by reduced land sizes due to successive land sub-division and application of traditional farming methods. With reduced household food production and subsequent household food insecurity, the traditional cultural belief that men are the sole breadwinners in households' food requirements might not hold water. This is due to the concerted efforts by family members to work towards the realization of household food needs. Therefore, this study investigated the role of women in enhancing household food access in Nyamira North Sub County. Specifically, the study examined the emerging role of women in household food access and how the emerging role has influenced social life in households. Anchored on social role theory, the study employed focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to gather data that was analyzed by qualitative techniques. The study revealed that land-use decision-making, involvement in food production on farms, and engagement in manual work to generate income for household food provision are the emerging roles of women in household food access in the study area. On how the emerging role has influenced social life in households, the study established that women's role in household food access in the study area has led to the breakdown of families, diminished respect for husbands, and change in household power relations. The study concludes that women have taken an active role in household food provision although this has fueled social change in household social life. The study recommends that policy formulation by relevant authorities is paramount to help upscale and strengthen women's participation in household food access and foster synergy within households with regard to household food access.

Keywords: Household food security, women and food access, women roles, Household

INTRODUCTION

Household food provision is a fundamental aspect that is culturally defined and in some situations gender-specific in the African context. Household food provision forms part of items that influence gender relations in households and in identity formation (Olum, et al, 2017). According to African culture, men derive their social identity and status from providing food for their families (Mbevi, 2015; Izugbara, 2015). By providing for their families, men have historically been held in high esteem and respect in society.

The role of provision of food for households encompasses men engaging in food production on households' farms or purchase from neighbors or markets during some difficult situations. Since most African societies are patriarchal, men have the right to own land and make decisions on land use (Mbevi, 2015; Silberschmidt, 2001). Men can decide what crops to plant, how to plant them, and how to manage the crops until harvest. However, in some

situations like during prolonged drought or invasion of pests and diseases on farms, the poor harvest may be a reality compelling household heads to source food for households from the market or borrow from the social networks to return in the next harvest season (Silberschmidt, 2001). Although men have a responsibility of providing food for their households, they sometimes get help from their wives and children. The men could get help in land preparation, planting, weeding, and harvesting from household members (Sherman and Without, 2005).

With the profound social change in land tenure systems, available land held by households in most parts of the country has tremendously declined due to generational land sub-division and inheritance (Auya, Barasa and Sambu, 2021). Currently, the average land size in Kenya stands at less than an acre. The diminishing land sizes have led to reduced household food production indicating that there is a need for synergy between men and women in household food access. With reduced household food production, the traditional cultural belief that men are the sole breadwinners in households' food requirements might not hold water. This is due to the possibility of concerted efforts by family members to work towards the realization of household food needs.

Literature has provided diverse ideas on women and household food access. A study by Nyamwanji (2016) established that the responsibility for providing for the family lies in the domain of men but it is imperative for women to participate in food management as well as income planning if a household is to be food secure. Similarly, a study by Ishengoma (1998) revealed that women play a big role in household food production but cannot make decisions on different production activities, a phenomenon that contributes to household food insecurity. Furthermore, the findings agree with FAO (2011) assertion that within households, men are considered as principal decision-makers while women hold a subordinate position in negotiation about managing family resources including those related to ensuring household food access. In addition, as pointed out by FAO (1996), in many African societies, the role of the husband is to manage the granary of the household whereas the wife oversees the kitchen. This implies that decisions on food production and storage are a task for a man.

Conversely, a study conducted by Ene-Obong, Onuoha, & Eme (2017) established that women in Ohafia society had a responsibility of feeding the family. Similarly, for Thomas (1990) women are very critical in ensuring household food access. They devote much of the resources under their control towards improving issues related to household food access compared to men. The findings of this study suggest that household food access tasks are best performed by women and that men are not responsible for providing for their families. The finding contradicts the social role theory and African culture in which men have a duty of ensuring that food is available to their families (Olum et al, 2017).

In a nutshell, available literature has not conclusively agreed on the role that women and men play in fostering household food access especially in the contemporary society where land sizes have drastically reduced because of intergenerational land subdivision and inheritance. Studies by Nyamwanji's (2016), Ishengoma (1998) and FAO (2011, 1996) suggest that men are instrumental in decision-making on the food production process and this contradicts findings of Ene-Obong, Onuoha, and Eme (2017) who have argued that women play a bigger role in the food production process because they are the majority in the agricultural field but men make decisions on what type of crops to be planted, how and when, since they control resources. However, with diminishing land acreage due to land sub-division and resultant reduced household food production; it is not clear how gender roles with regard to household food access have changed: has the food provision matrix changed women and men's role in household food access? What is the emerging role of women in household food access? How has the emerging role of women in household food

access influenced social life in households? These are the issues this study sought to investigate.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was qualitative in nature and was undertaken between July and November 2019. The unit of analysis was household heads. The study used focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews as data collection methods. To begin with focus group discussions, the study held ten focus group discussions, two in every ward in the sub-county. Each FGD had six to ten participants purposively selected by a researcher. The criteria for selecting participants in FGDs were as follows. First, the age of the participants. The researcher selected participants aged above 18 years to provide varied insights on the issue investigated. Second, regional balance. The researcher ensured that participants in FGDs hail from various parts of the wards for purposes of inclusivity. Lastly, length of stay in the sub-county where the researcher selected the indigenous people because of their knowledge on various aspects of culture, gender, and household food provision in the study area.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted on sixteen purposively selected persons to crosscheck information obtained from FGDs. The in-depth interviewees included village elders (eight), chiefs (three), agricultural extension officers (three), and gender experts (two). The researcher used a research assistant with a bias in social sciences to take notes and recordings during FGD sessions as the researcher moderated the sessions. The FGDs proceedings were recorded with the verbal consent of the participants.

The data obtained was coded and analyzed using salient and recurrent themes that emerged in the data, but which related to the emerging roles of women in household food access in Nyamira North Sub County. The data then became a source of interpretations of meanings, experiences, and perceptions on emerging women's roles in household food access in the study area. The data analyzed was presented by the use of quotes and narratives. Before data analysis, responses from focus group discussions were transcribed and translated from vernacular (Ekegusii) to English by the researcher and a research assistant. After data analysis, results and discussions were arranged in accordance with research themes. Conclusion and recommendations were made based on analyzed data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Dimension in Household Food Provision: Historical Perspective

Before focusing on the study objectives, the study began by investigating the gender dimensions in household food provision in the study area to form the basis for understanding the gender roles in household food provision from a cultural dimension. Participants in focus group discussions were asked to comment on who between man and woman was responsible for providing food in households in the study area because Ene-Obong, Onuoha, and Eme (2017) established that women in Ohafia society in Nigeria had a responsibility of feeding the family while Mbevi (2015) and Izugbara (2015) established it is the duty of men to provide for their families.

The findings were that historically, men have provided food in households in the study area. The culture of the community where the study was undertaken (Abagusii community) provides that men are heads of households and that the task of providing for their families squarely lies in their domain. During a focus group discussion, participants agreed that a man in the Abagusii community derived his respect and honor from taking good care of his family in terms of food provision and meeting other necessities in the household. This was the source of social status and respect for men in households. During such discussions, one participant stood out of the rest by saying the following:

“It is the household head (man) to ensure his family has food and other necessities. A man who didn’t provide for his family was not respected as a man”. (Male, 72 years)

The sentiments of the seventy-two-year-old focus group participant show that provision for the family was the duty of a man and this determined gender relations in the households. Thus, it was critical for men to provide for their families for respect and honour. This is in agreement with Mbevi (2015) that in most African cultures it is the duty of men to provide for their households. In addition, this finding agrees with Izugbara (2015) that in African culture men derive their social identity and status by providing food for their families which in turn drives gender relations in households.

Although traditionally men in the study area had a bigger role to play as household food provision is concerned, according to the study, women too had a very fundamental role, especially in food production process. However, land-use decisions were undertaken by households’ heads. Women could join their husbands in land preparation, planting, and harvesting of food crops. This was eloquently put across by a focus group discussion participant that:

“In the past, in this area, women and children to some extent helped their husbands in food production process. Women and children helped household heads in land preparation, planting and harvesting of crops but provision of farm inputs and land-use decisions were made by household heads”. (Male, 65 years)

The sentiments of the sixty-five year old focus group participant indicates that household food provision was a process involving decisions making on land use and farm operations and although there was a form of division of labour, a bigger role in the food production process was played by household heads. This finding agrees with FAO (2011) that within households, men are considered as principal decision-makers while women hold a subordinate position in negotiation about managing family resources including those related to ensuring household food security. This finding is also echoed by Ishengoma (1998) who observes that women play a big role in household food production but cannot make the decision on different production activities.

The Emerging Role of Women in Household Food Access

The main focus of this study was to investigate the emerging role of women in household food access. The study established three major women roles in household food access in the study area. First, it emerged that women are nowadays increasingly involved in land use decision-making. That women make a decision on what to plant on family farms and decisions on how farm operations are conducted. Women’s emerging role in land-use decisions has been occasioned by a drastic reduction of land as a result of generational land subdivision and inheritance, making men move to towns to seek employment to fend for their families. In addition, the increasing role of women in land use decision making has been fostered by “less concerned” men with regard to household food access because of alcoholism or other reasons compelling women to take a centre stage in planning and undertaking farming to produce food for the family since the husbands are less concerned with household welfare. During a focus group discussion, a participant said:

“In most households, women are nowadays involved in making major land-use decisions a task previously done by men. This has been attributed to the moving of men in search of employment in town because of reduced land sizes occasioned by continuous land subdivision and inheritance or because men are generally unwilling to enhance household food security due to alcoholism or other factors.

*This has resulted in women's active involvement in land use decision-making".
(Male, 65 years)*

From the sentiments of the sixty-five year old focus group participant, it is clear that women have nowadays taken a centre stage in household land-use decisions which is contrary to the Abagusii traditions where men are custodians of land and land-use decision making. This is a significant alteration of structures and functions in society over time.

Secondly, the study revealed that women are nowadays actively involved in household food production. The focus group discussions held revealed that women are engaged in household food production in farms where they undertake all farm operations. This was too attributed to their absent men work-related issues and absent men due to alcoholism among other factors. This finding emerged during one of the in-depth interviews. This finding is in line with Nyamwanji (2016) that women are critical in ensuring household food security through food management, production, and making major decisions on household food security.

Lastly, the findings of the study revealed that women are increasingly involved in manual wages to provide food for their families. The study established that women engage in manual wages in construction sites, tea estates, and farms to generate income for the purposes of providing food for their families. During an in-depth interview, an interviewee argued that:

"A good number of women in this area engage themselves in providing labour in construction sites, farms, and tea estates for pay. They utilize the earnings to provide food for their families among other household needs".(Male, 49 years)

It is clear from the above focus group participant that women are increasingly going out to undertake daily wages for payment and the amount received is utilized to provide food for their families, a new trend showing the extent of social change in households as food access is concerned. The findings concur with Nyamwanji (2016) and Ishengoma (1998) that women play a big role in household food provision.

How the Emerging Role Has Influenced Social Life in Households

After investigating the emerging roles that women are playing in household food access, the study sought to examine how the roles have influenced social life in households in the study area. Based on focus group discussions, the study established that the entry of women into the sphere of household food access has led breakdown of families. The breakdown of families is contributed by two major factors. First, some men have become reluctant in providing for their families since they are aware that their wives are currently playing the same role. The data suggested that men deeply entrenched in alcoholism are the major culprits. They engage their wives in fights upon their return home in case their women fail to give them food. The fights may result in injuries on women who might decide to move out of marriage to their parents or any other place to eke out a living. This was eloquently put across by a focus group participant:

"Some men have become a burden to society. They are only engaged in alcoholism and the task of providing for their families has been left for women. If they fail to get food after day-long drinking, they resort to fights and this has forced some women to leave their marriage for their parents or any other place to undertake livelihood ventures. The irresponsible behavior of some men is hurting". (Female, 43 years)

The narration of the above focus group participant is an indication of how women's engagement in household food provision has resulted in reluctance among some men to provide for their families and food-related conflicts that has led to the breakdown of

families. Secondly, women's involvement in household food provision has compelled women to look for employment activities far away from home either in tea estates in Kericho or nearby towns so as to fend for their families. It has emerged that some end up remarrying or engagement in other relationships that contribute to the breakdown of their families.

The study also established that entry of women in the household food provision matrix has resulted in reduced respect for men. It alludes to men not being accorded respect like in traditional Abagusii society. This is because, in the traditional society, men got respect from being a family breadwinner. During a focus group discussion, a participant argued that:

“A man who fails to provide for his family commands limited respect from his wife. Men have traditionally gained respect from providing for their families but since women are slowly taking charge of household food provision, respect previously accorded to men is diminishing since most of them are being fed by their wives. How can a woman respect a husband who doesn't participate in any way in household food provision?” (Male, 52 years)

The sentiments of the fifty-two years old focus group participant show that the respect for men is slowly declining since they are no longer sole breadwinners in households. That feeding men in households has led to declining respect because men have traditionally accorded respect by their wives on account of providing for their families. Thus, the involvement of women in household food provision has resulted in a decline in respect previously accorded to men who depend on their wives for food.

The study established that women's involvement in household food provision is slowly fostering women's role in decision-making in households. In some situations, women are making the decision on how to use land and management of food in the household. During a focus group discussion, a participant averred that:

“The emerging issue of women participation in household food provision in this area is slowly changing power dynamics in households. Power is slowly shifting to women who are nowadays making some major decisions in households including household food security, child education, and even land management decisions especially in households where men are perpetual drunkards. This is adversely eroding patriarchal power men have enjoyed over time”. (Female, 46 years)

From the narration above it is evident that the involvement of women in household food access has resulted in a power shift in households. Men are slowly losing grip as chief decision-makers in households in spheres of child education, food production, and even on land management. This is a clear indication of a social change in society that has been occasioned by a change in household food provision.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The practice of land sub-division and inheritance has greatly contributed to decline of land sizes held by households which in return has resulted in reduced food production and household food insecurity. The situation has seen women take an active role in land-use decision-making, involvement in food production in farms, and engagement in manual work to generate income for household food provision. The participation of women in household food access has resulted in profound social change in household social life in terms of household integration, respect for household heads and in household power relations. Therefore, there is need for policy formulation by relevant authorities to help upscale and strengthen women participation in household food access and foster synergy within

households with regard to household food access for posterity of households and achievement of Kenya's Big Four Agenda and Vision 2030, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the African Union Agenda 2063.

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