Improving Rural Women's Access to Productive Resources: Are the Low Hanging Fruits Too Low to Make a Difference?

Faustina Obeng Adomaa

Introduction

The percentage contribution of rural deprivation to national poverty is high. In Ghana, it is above 70%, and rises to about 90% in the northern parts of the country (FAO and ECOWAS, 2018). Poverty is a rural phenomenon and women in rural areas are the face of poverty, especially less resource-endowed women. In rural communities, land-based livelihood is dominant (Jarawura and Smith, 2015) and access to land and associated resources for agriculture is crucial. Family or household production dominates in such areas, amidst strict gender and household hierarchical divisions of labour (FAO and ECOWAS, 2018). Rural women live and work in contexts where poverty and deprivation are rife, livelihood options are limited (De La O Campos *et al*., 2018), and gender norms and their associated differential access to resources are entrenched (Ajadi *et al*., 2015; Cheteni *et al*., 2019). Lifting rural women, especially the poorest of the poor, out of poverty to the level where they can live and thrive, demands placing special emphasis on areas that have the strongest potential to improve their livelihoods.

The ability of all persons to live and thrive has been at the core of research, activism, and interventions around empowerment and inclusion for many decades. Globally, rural women have been a target group in the empowerment and inclusion discourse due to the many constraints they face in accessing productive resources. Rural women live and work in specific social and economic contexts. The conditions prevailing in these contexts influence their access to productive resources. Therefore, questions examining rural women's social and economic contexts, finding their sources of deprivation, and unravelling constraints to their access to, use of, and control over productive

resources, have been at the heart of development studies. From the Women in Development (WID) era to the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), scholars and activists have dedicated attention to unearthing the dynamics of the constraints that rural women face, and designing and implementing interventions to improve their livelihoods.

Research and interventions to improve rural women's livelihoods have proliferated over the decades. Influenced by an economic outlook, researchers have examined challenges that rural women face, and have recommended areas of intervention to improve their access to income as a means of securing basic necessities. Donor organisations and implementing partners have taken up some of these interventions. Many of these have focused on "women's crops" and have introduced new crops, especially vegetables and legumes, and improved access to extension services and inputs for women cultivating these crops. Some interventions have also trained women on income generation activities (IGAs), established women's groups to mobilise labour and capital for these activities, and connected these groups to value chains where applicable. Many decades and several interventions later, the persistent deprivation and discrimination that rural women meet in accessing productive resources is a recurring finding of recent studies on rural livelihoods and gendered access to productive resources (see Ajadi *et al*., 2015; De La O Campos *et al*., 2018; FAO and ECOWAS, 2018). Are the many interventions targeting low hanging fruits only, and are these low hanging fruits too low to make a difference?

In September 2018, I met a 54-year-old widow called Hawa during field research in a cocoa farming hamlet in the Bia West District of Ghana's Western North Region. I had a discussion with her concerning a women's empowerment intervention in her community. In the course of our discussion, the complexities of Hawa's life and, by extension, the lives of rural women, became manifest. In this Standpoint, I take a dive into Hawa's life and use it to situate the dynamics of the constraints that rural women face in accessing productive resources, and how they experience livelihood interventions differently at distinct phases of their lives.

The lived experience of Hawa, a rural woman.

Hawa is a native of a farming community in the Sissala East District of Ghana's Upper West Region. She got married at 22 to 34-year-old Adamu in 1986 and subsequently moved into Adamu's family house. Adamu did not have his own land for farming; he worked on the household yam farm. Hawa joined the household labour for the yam cultivation, and joined two other daughters-in-law in the household and their mother-in-law to cultivate groundnuts (peanuts) on the family's fallow land. Hawa indicated that, because the household did not have large parcels of land, sons could not have individual farms. Thus, it was impossible for daughters-in-law to even dream of accessing separate fallow lands to cultivate their own groundnuts. Although Hawa worked on the household yam and groundnut farms, she did not receive any part of the income from the sale of farm produce, not even groundnuts, the income from which was supposed to accrue to women in the household. Her mother-in-law controlled the sale of groundnuts and the resulting income.

In the early 1990s, the three daughters-in-law, together with their mother-in-law, joined an intervention that mobilised women for shea butter processing and connected them to buyers in the southern regions of the country. Hawa indicated that women in one household usually registered as a group in the intervention, and that it was common for daughters-in-law to work under their mother-in-law in the processing activities. The daughters-in-law primarily picked the shea fruits in the wild and processed them into butter. However, their mother-in-law fronted transactions with the buyers, and thus, controlled the income from the shea processing. According to Hawa, her mother-in-law considered this income, and the income from the groundnut sales, as household income and used it to buy household consumables.

In 1997, Hawa, her husband, and their four young children migrated to the Bia West District, where I met her in 2018. The couple settled to work as "*abusa*" sharecroppers, popularly called caretakers. They took care of a five-acre farm. Prior to receiving their first payment, they had taken a loan from the farm owner, and thus their net income after loan repayment was low. They had to take another loan to survive for that crop season. Hawa said, "The income after the loan payment was so small that I did not even expect

my husband to give me some of the money" (Personal Interview, September 2018). After four seasons of taking care of the five-acre farm, and living in a cycle of loans and repayments, Hawa's husband took on another seven-acre farm. Hawa was a crucial source of labour for activities in the 12 acres of cocoa farms. She weeded, fetched water for pesticide spraying, gathered and carried cocoa pods, cooked for pod breakers, carried fermented beans from the farms to the hamlet, and dried the cocoa beans. For nine years, Hawa and Adamu worked solely as caretakers, and Hawa was as much involved in the farm activities as she was in taking care of their five children by then. Hawa indicated, "I worked in the farms every day except on market days... I never held some of cocoa money in my hand. I could not complain. Cocoa money is a man's money" (Personal Interview, September 2018).

In 2006, the family obtained land to cultivate cocoa under an "*abunu*" sharecropping arrangement. Adamu passed away three years afterwards, and Hawa decided to continue both the *abusa* and *abunu* arrangements on her own account. Hawa said, "The farm owners said I was a woman and could not work as a caretaker. The owner of the land we had for *abunu* also said the same" (Personal Interview, September 2018). Hawa was, therefore, about to lose both sharecropping arrangements. Other male caretakers intervened, and the owners accepted to continue the sharecropping arrangements, but with Hawa's then 22-year-old son instead. "Thank God I had a son; all our arduous work would have been in vain," (Personal Interview, September 2018) was what Hawa said, relieved that her household kept the sharecropping arrangements. Hawa continues to work on the household's farms, now under the control of her son.

Hawa has been an active participant of trainings on IGAs in her community. From soap and detergent making, to beekeeping, and vegetable cultivation, she has joined them all. Nevertheless, she has been unable to start any of the activities by herself because she does not have enough capital. Instead, on one occasion, she joined other women to mobilise their resources for a group soap-making venture. She, however, said that their capital was low and thus they could only afford to buy low-quality materials. The quality of the soap was, therefore, low, and could not compete with other bar soaps at similar market prices; this led to the collapse of the venture after seven months.

Hawa indicated that the same group of women, largely wives of migrant caretakers, approached the leaders of their community to secure land for vegetable production. The community gave the women an acre of land as an experimental plot during the intervention phase, but they were unsuccessful in getting lands along river bodies to cultivate the vegetable all year round. Thus, they could not embark on the vegetable production. Hawa indicated that, although vegetable cultivation has taken off as an alternative livelihood in the community after the intervention, "the men have taken over; they own the lands along the rivers and they have the money to cultivate vegetable" (Personal Interview, September 2018). Ending our discussions, Hawa said:

> I have always worked hard, yet people do not think I am strong enough to work as a farmer by myself. I have never had land of my own to farm. I have never had capital to start any business. There is not much work to do in villages aside farming, and only men can even get the opportunity to be called farmers (Personal Interview, September 2018).

Hawa, however, added, "My daughter-in-law and I burn the cocoa husks to get potash for sale at the end of each season. It is not money [not enough to be recognised as income], but it is something" (Personal Interview, September 2018). When asked if she shares the income from the potash with her daughter-in-law, Hawa indicated, "I use the money to buy soap, body cream and a few things needed in the house; it is not a lot of money to share with my daughter in-law" (Personal Interview, September 2018).

The complexities of rural women's lives and the place of interventions in their lives

Hawa's life brings to the fore the old question of gendered access to productive resources in rural agrarian communities. Constraints to rural women's access to land, labour, and capital, for instance, is undergirded by gendered norms that govern who gets what, when, and how. Concerning land, for instance, women are perceived as people who lack the strength to put land to productive use (Higgins and Fenrich, 2011). Thus, rural women are confronted with gender-based discrimination in accessing land for farming, despite the enormous labour they provide in household farms. Although rural women, such as Hawa,

can work and succeed as own-account farmers, gender stereotypes continue to present hurdles to their access to agricultural productive resources, especially land on their own account. These women live in the shadows of men – husbands or sons. In the case of Hawa, she had lived in the shadow of her husband, and then, after his demise, in that of her son, who stepped in to keep existing sharecropping arrangements. While Hawa's life manifests constraints with regards to land, the few rural women who get access to land also face constraints with labour, inputs, crop extension service, and markets (see Kumase *et al*, 2010; Hill and Vigneri, 2014).

Rural communities have rarely considered women as having the right to access productive resources, even when such resources are abundant. For rural women, the persistent constraints surrounding access to land, labour, and capital seem to be worsening due to scarcity. For instance, many rural areas are facing land scarcity from population increase and competition from non-farm uses (Bugri *et al*., 2017). And amid this scarcity, there is an invoking, reawakening, and deepening of gender-based discrimination in access to, use of, and control over land. Furthering the notion that women cannot put resources to productive use, when such resources are scarce, it is considered an imperative to give them to men who will put them to productive use. This notion seems to be internalised by women such as Hawa, who invariably indicates that the reason she did not have access to land or income was because those resources were not abundant or enough.

Many rural communities live and thrive on land; thus, interventions have also focused on land-based agricultural livelihoods. For many decades, however, land-based agricultural interventions meant to improve rural women's lives have been less impactful than expected. Even when interventions have provided labour, capital, and extension services, women's inability to break constraints to accessing land have made such interventions unsuccessful. In some instances where new or upgraded land-based agricultural interventions have showed commercial viability, men have captured such activities. As Hawa highlighted, interventions to upgrade vegetable cultivation (which has been a female activity in many rural communities) from the level of subsistence to commercial production, has seen a de-gendering and re-gendering of vegetable cultivation into a male activity when the commercial viability became eminent.

Such instances further widen the gender gap as an unintended consequence. Although interventions sensitise rural communities to the collective good that women's access to agriculturally productive resources can generate, the persistent gender-based discrimination in accessing land, for instance, and its further deepening due to impending scarcity, make land-based agricultural interventions less appealing for rural women, who are the intended beneficiaries.

In other instances, interventions have focused on non-farm livelihood activities such as agro-processing and small-scale manufacturing of household consumables. In these interventions as well, women, especially less resource-endowed ones, have consistently faced constraints to mobilise capital to start these IGAs without consistent external support. Many of such IGAs collapse a few years after the active interventions fade, as in the case of Hawa and her group's soap-making venture. In these interventions, little attention is given to distinct categories of rural women, their social statuses, and resource endowments and hence to their differential access to the material outcomes of such interventions. Few women have been able to take advantage of such interventions. These few women sometimes derive power and access to resources through their relationship with men, such as mothers-in-law who have access to the labour of daughters-in-law through their sons' marriages. The achievements of the few resource-endowed women are trumpeted, and this often obscures the realities of many deprived women who are unable to access the material outcomes of such interventions.

Rural women are not a homogenous group (CEDAW, 2016). Relational hierarchies exist among them in households and communities, and these engender differential access to resources. The norms governing relational hierarchies among women and the associated discrimination against more deprived rural women seem entrenched. Yet, they are so subtle that rural women themselves often internalise and perpetuate these norms unconsciously. Interventions that focus on households as units, for instance, unconsciously empower women at higher hierarchical levels, reinforce differential resource access, and widen existing gaps between the more and the less resource-endowed women. Thus, more deprived women in rural areas not only live in the shadows of men, but also in the shadows of socially and economically powerful women.

For the few women who take advantage of interventions to improve their incomes, their achievements also seemingly further the course of gender norms and the ascribed uses of women's income. Women's income is labelled as household income and women seem to have internalised this role. In the case of Hawa, for instance, although she bemoaned working with her mother-in-law in the shea butter processing activity, and not having access to that income which was used to buy consumables for the household, she conceived her experience as a norm. Thus, two decades later, she works with her daughter-in-law to process cocoa husks to potash, but does not share the income with her. Instead, Hawa also considers the income as household income, and uses it to buy household consumables. For many rural women, their access to income reinforces their socially ascribed roles, constructed in ways that further the course of patriarchy. Thus, for even the socially and economically endowed mother-in-law who is able to "exploit" the labour of her daughter-in-law, the power she derives from patriarchy is limited in its potential for empowerment, and even more so for other, more deprived women.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of rural women, such as Hawa, epitomise the complexities of their lives. These are fashioned around a configuration of multiple sources of discrimination entrenched in socially constructed gender norms and relational hierarchies that still constrain women's access to productive resources, and impede their ability to take advantage of the material benefits of interventions aimed at improving their lives. While providing rural women with inputs and extension services for agricultural activities, and training them on IGAs may be easy solutions to problems, may appear to be easy solutions to problems, and appear to improve their livelihoods, the fruits of these interventions may hang too low to make a difference in their lives, especially for more deprived women. For instance, interventions that give inputs, extension services, and labour for land-based agricultural activities without tackling structural discrimination in land access are unable to improve the lives of many deprived rural women, who still face persistent discrimination in accessing land. Also, non-farm interventions on IGAs that are insensitive to relational hierarchies among women empower

fewer women, who mostly derive their power from patriarchy, which appears to give them privilege over more deprived women. The empowerment of these few women does not benefit deprived women, and further widens the gap among women created by persistent hierarchical discrimination. Nor does the income of the women at the higher levels of the hierarchy empower them beyond their socially ascribed roles of household provisioning. Finding areas that have the strongest potential to improve the livelihoods of rural women, especially the more deprived ones, therefore, requires going beyond interventions that focus on low hanging fruits, which may be too low to make a difference. It necessitates critically reflective and pragmatic approaches on how to confront context-specific gender norms, household and community relational hierarchies, and associated stereotypes. These gender and hierarchical stereotypes are the underlying mechanisms that get invoked, manifested and magnified, in multiple dimensions of discrimination, and persistently constrain rural women's ability to live and thrive, even when interventions provide productive resources.

Endnotes

1 Hawa and Adamu are pseudo names for the woman and her spouse whose lives I present in this Standpoint.

2 *Abusa* is a sharecropping arrangement in which a farm owner hires a permanent farm hand, popularly called "caretaker,", to provide all the labour needs of a mature cocoa farm while the farm owner provides the chemicals needed to prevent pests and diseases. The caretaker receives one-third of the annual proceeds from the farm as payment.

3 *Abunu* sharecropping is an arrangement in which a landowner agrees to give land to a tenant farmer to start a new cocoa farm. The tenant farmer is responsible for all the capital and labour investment in the farm until the cocoa trees are mature and start bearing pods. This is usually between four and five years after establishment. The landowner and the tenant farmer then divide the farm into two equal parts and manage their farms separately. The land used by the tenant farmer reverts to the original landowner when the cocoa trees die. This is usually after about 35 to 40 years.

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