



## **Gender and Trade Network in Africa (GENTA)**

# The Impact of Trade Liberalisation in the Agricultural Sector on African Women: Links with Food Security and Sustainable Livelihoods

Prepared By: Winnie S. Madonsela  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the arguments by proponents of trade liberalization that increased international trade has resulted in significant gains in food production, many people, mainly in developing countries remain hungry and malnourished.

Statistics world over indicate that women and children are among the worst hit by unfair trade regimes. Completion of the Uruguay Round on further liberalization of international trade which saw the birth of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has worsened the position of Africa and other developing countries in the trade arena. The WTO through its Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) with its commitments on market access and elimination of commodity support programs has actually rendered agriculture in many developing nations unsustainable. Whilst it may be true that in developed nations commodity support programs have led to distortion of global commodity prices, it is not true, however, that if such policies are applied by underdeveloped nations they hamper global economic development. By nature, developing nations, particularly African countries are not characterized by food surpluses therefore any commodity support programs would not harm world trade. If the present statistics reflecting widespread famine among African states are anything to rely on, these countries are justified to demand increased in commodity support programs.

The present trade regulations coupled with unfavorable climatic conditions have reduced most of sub Saharan Africa to official international beggars for food and other forms of aid. The adverse impact of a terms of trade that is skewed in favor of the West, encouraging increased food surpluses and dumping into less developed nations becomes even more serious when one observes the type of food aid flowing into Sub Saharan Africa. Food aid now comprises mainly genetically engineered food that has been largely rejected by Western populations. A few Southern African countries have made an effort to resist this poisonous aid but it is not clear how long their governments shall be able to hold out in view of the deepening poverty crisis.

African states that continue receiving genetically modified food should be made aware that the long term repercussion of their action is even more serious. This change in consumption patterns in African states is likely to, not only, impact negatively on their health budgets but there is a serious danger of contamination of indigenous seed resulting in further deterioration in the quality of cultivable land. Furthermore, this may result in the need for clearing of forests and other virgin lands for agricultural production in the process destroying ecosystems leading to further degradation of the land. This would certainly render the desired goal of achieving sustainable livelihoods and food security for populations of the South truly elusive, an even more precarious condition for women as they are already marginalized in the global economy.

## II. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN AFRICA

Agriculture is the mainstay of the majority of sub Saharan African countries. Women in Africa play a decisive role in household and national food security. Women in the rural areas engage in agricultural production primarily for domestic consumption. In addition to their daily chores of gathering, storing and preparing food, women in most parts of Africa have embarked on income generating projects. Women are engaged in poultry farming, piggery and other forms of livestock production.

In crop production, women provide most of the labor required at the various stages and even in post-harvest activities. According to the FAO, developing countries are primarily rural economies and women produce more than half of all the food that is grown. Research has shown that the majority of women in rural Africa are actively involved in agricultural activities. Fifty percent of the women's population in the Third World is responsible for ploughing and leveling land whilst 70% are involved in planting, tilling and harvesting.

In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean , women produce up to 80% of basic foodstuffs. In Southeast Asia and the Pacific as well as Latin America , women's home gardens are an important source of livelihoods for women and their families. In Southeast Asia , whilst women do 60% of the agriculture and food production, in rice cultivation alone, when considering the whole of Asia , they provide from 50% to 90% of the labor. Women in rural Africa produce, process, and store up to 80% of the food. The erosion of domestic agriculture production through trade liberalization policies has several and significant impacts on food security, livelihoods of women and their families.

With regard to specific case studies on the importance of agriculture and women's involvement in agriculture, we review the situation in a selected number of African states; these include Egypt, Malawi , Namibia , Swaziland , and Tanzania . Although this is not a representative spectrum research has shown that most African states conform to the trends indicated in the cases quoted with a slight degree of variation.

The national sectoral report on women, agriculture and rural development of 1994 indicates that for Egypt and Tanzania agricultural production accounts for 18% and 62% of the GDP respectively. This report also states that for Egypt agriculture accounts for 8% of total exports whilst in Tanzania it accounts for more than 70% of export earnings. Regarding women's involvement data reflect that for Egypt 4% of the economically active in agriculture were women in 1986 and that this figure has been increasing over the years. In Tanzania 1992 statistics estimate a 54% of women to be actively involved in agricultural production and 98% of those are rural women who produce for both commercial and subsistence agriculture. Namibia is another agriculturally based economy; statistics published in the 1994v report quoted above indicate that 80% of the Namibian population is engaged in agriculture. The land accommodates about 64% of the population from which 90% are dependent on subsistence farming including livestock. With regard to women's involvement, 59% of women are engaged in skilled and subsistence agriculture but most of these workers are classified under unpaid family workers.

In Swaziland, the land tenure system is the main determinant of productivity of the agricultural sector. Land tenure is divided into two broad categories namely, Title Deed Land (TDL) and Swazi Nation Land (SNL). SNL is different in that it is land that is held in trust for the Swazi nation by the King whereas TDL is characterized by private ownership. Data indicates that production on Swazi nation land is poor and its contribution to the attainment of food security and sustainable livelihoods is not encouraging at all. The main crops grown on Swazi nation land, a sub sector that heavily depends on rainfall patterns, are maize, cotton, and tobacco. Real value added by this sector increased by 6.3% in 1999 compared to growth of 10.7% attained the year before. The improved performance can be attributable to good performance of the maize and cotton sectors during the 1998/ 1999 cropping season. The yield on these two crops could have been higher had it not been for the dry spell experienced throughout the first two months of 1999. It is important to note that apart from maize, the staple food crop, all the other crop mentioned above are not food crops and are basically produced for further processing in manufacturing industries and eventually find their way into the export market. The disturbing issue regarding export crop is that it tends to be male dominated and despite the fact that women provide the bulk of labour in the fields they generally do not have a share in the proceeds from the sale of the crop. Even remuneration rates are so low and working conditions so poor that women's involvement in some forms of commercial agriculture does not improve their livelihoods.

The importance of the agricultural sector to the Swazi economy takes two forms namely the provision of livelihoods and income for the majority of Swazis who engage in this sector's activities and the provision of substantial support to the manufacturing sector, in terms of intermediate inputs required by the largely agro based manufacturing companies. The overall performance of the agricultural sector improved in 1999, value added grew by 8.8% compared to growth of 3.1% a year earlier. As a share of GDP at factor cost, the agricultural sector increased to 10.4% compared to 9.9% in the previous year. As has been mentioned earlier, women could be realizing good benefit from agriculture if production on SNL was more organized and capable of yielding higher incomes.

Malawi has one the highest population densities and is depended on one harvest a year. Food security is very difficult to achieve and more so the soils are very poor. About 70% of rural families have less than one hectare of land, which is very small for family food security. In the mid 1980's the situation improved through subsidies which enabled the agricultural sector to achieve extensive systems of agricultural inputs. The removal of subsidies in some components such as fertilizers has affected the small holder farmers, thus restricting farming families on fertilizer technology that has been the key to Malawi's agricultural development strategies as a result of their poor soils. Much as we want the removal of bio diverse product some countries will be affected in the process due to poor production that they will experience in the long run.

### III. WOMEN, TRADE LIBERALIZATION AND FOOD SECURITY

Food security plays a very important role to determine an economic situation at different levels namely individual, household, national, regional and global level. One may say that it also determines the level of poverty in any particular country. It has been noted that women play an important role to maintain food security worldwide. A country is said to be poor when there is

persistent food crisis, an important measure of the extent of poverty level is the unemployment rate. Employment enables people to acquire food security and this employment may be in a formal or informal way. Most African countries depend largely on agricultural products and with women playing an important role on the part of commercial and subsistence farming, although it is barely recognized since it is seen as informal since wages are low and prices are low.

Food preparation involves work. Women in both rural and urban areas are almost exclusively responsible for the nutrition of their children, from gestation through weaning and throughout the critical period of growth. In addition, they are the principal food producers and prepare for the rest of the family. In general, most of this food comes from home gardens or from family and community plots. But it has been noted that women also spend a significant part of their household income and a much larger proportion than men buying additional food for the family.

In recent years, commercial farming has developed to be not only capital intensive but also highly depended on farm chemicals in agricultural practices that are harmful to the environment. Genetically engineered seed has continued to destroy the pH balance of soils and renders them infertile causing a further threat to food security and sustainable livelihood for women and their families.

It has also been noted that large numbers of small holder farms in the South use pesticides routinely when they can afford them, especially on vegetables and other cash crops, but also on domestic consumption. Large scale export agriculture still relies heavily on chemical pest control but importers and consumers in the north are increasingly concerned about the levels of pesticide residues in tropical exports. At the same time many, many international and local organizations are working with farmers to promote safer and sustainable farming methods.

Globalization and new trade agreements are rapidly changing economic, social and political conditions worldwide, with profound consequences for Southern governments and the income and the food security of their citizens. To some extent pesticide problems have been pushed off the development agenda as lobbying a debate focuses on GM crops, bio-diversity, food security and corporate control of food systems. The few studies which look specifically at interactions between food security and pest management to date have been on the impact on traditional export cropping by small-holders, mainly in Latin America. They revealed serious health and economic problems caused by increased dependency on pesticides.

There is a high involvement of most African women in the agricultural sector. With regards to agricultural product exports, the problem for most developing countries would be the lack of availability of exportable surpluses. Diverting agricultural products from domestic consumption to export oriented products would be profitable for farmers with exportable surpluses, but for other producers with exportable products and without surpluses could cause scarcity domestically and adversely affect local survival. Such could result in countries incurring National debts and experience incapacity to pay for food imports aggravated by food insecurity in developing countries. This impacts with particular force on women as the resource managers of their communities.

#### IV. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY WOMEN

Women in Africa encounter a lot of problems in their involvement in agricultural activities. These problems range from lack of land, markets, credit, education and proper technology, to name a few. The combined effect of these handicaps is an increasing feminization of poverty. Since the 1970s, the number of women living below the poverty line has increased by 50 percent, in comparison with 30 percent for their male counterparts. Below is a presentation of the nature of some of the problems faced by women in agriculture:

##### (i) Time use indicators

A large proportion of women's time is allocated in household duties and thus time spent on farming is never valued and thought in terms of commercial production. Production done on a small scale and as such women's capabilities is ignored in some African states. As more and more men migrate from rural areas in search of work, women bear a heavier burden. In some regions of Africa, women now head 60% of households. The expanded workload can place women in a situation whereby if they produce it would be for commercial purposes in order to increase the family income compromising food security in their households.

##### (ii) Lack of recognition of women's work

In recent years it has transpired that women and their productivity as household supporters play a very important role in terms of contribution to statistical figures towards national output. Women serve as unpaid labor in the informal sector and their effort is ignored in the compilation of national accounts. As small holder farmers women are often faced with the dilemma of having to convert part of their farms to produce for commercial purposes. This widespread conversion of farms has resulted in increased cultivation of non traditional food crops with low nutritional value and the widespread practice of horticulture, posing a further threat on food security.

##### (iii) High levels of illiteracy and use of poor technology

Education is a means of having services to sell and there is a discernable improvement in food security as a result. Education has the potential to play a central role in development of a culture of entrepreneurship. Presently in most African states entrepreneurship in agriculture is still a new phenomenon particularly among women. For sustainable livelihoods to be realized amongst women, development of human capital is essential. Data indicate that education levels are generally lower among women and particularly women residing in rural Africa. Extension services reach women much less frequently than they do men. Statistics indicate that women receive no more than 5 percent of extension resources.

Improved technology is an essential tool for massive production. Structural adjustment programs have forced many households to adopt survival strategies, with detrimental effects on women. Removal of government subsidies for agricultural inputs and food stuffs and dismantling of state-owned marketing boards has resulted in a serious drawback to efforts of poor women farmers.

#### (iv) Lack of markets

Trade liberalization has a great impact on African states, especially Sub Saharan Africa in relation to market accessibility. Africa competing with developed countries has opened up domestic markets with the undesirable consequence of reducing African economies to dumping sites for low cost producers of agricultural produce in the developed countries, particularly Europe and the U.S.A. These cheap imports tend to replace the local produce and as a result discourage commercial production. The WTO Agreement on Agriculture has been seen by some African states to support the developed countries and this can be illustrated by the US-Africa trade agreement. US agricultural exports to Africa were increased by 3.6% rising to \$760.6 million meanwhile African exports to US were increased by 0.04%. This is a clear indication that under the new trade regime Africa appears to support US indirectly.

#### (v) Land ownership and control

In most countries, women do not own the land they cultivate. When women own land, it tends to be smaller, less valuable plots that always overlooked in statistics. Furthermore, women are usually responsible for the food crops destined for immediate consumption by the household, that is, for subsistence crops rather than cash crops. Lack of recognition in society has resulted in women's capabilities being overlooked.

#### (vi) Lack of credit

Women have limited control over cash generated from agricultural activities irrespective of their important role in production. This has also limited their ability to access credit by offering the land they till as security in exchange for loans. It has also restricted women's ability to explore economic opportunities through starting small businesses. In response to world market expansion women have experienced problems in acquiring enough credit for quality produce and government tends to overlook their needs in terms of tax incentives as an export promotion strategy. More often than not, tax concessions are offered to foreign investors thus discouraging local incentives.

In a number of African countries, such as Swaziland, women are considered as minors in their marriages and always have to seek approval of their husbands when applying for credit from banks and in setting up business.

### V. SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERTAKING GENDER ASSESSMENT

It is of great importance that women are fully integrated into trade liberalization to assess their capabilities in trading with world markets. Extension services established need to address specific needs of women, their daily routines and the deployment of more female extension agents. This can play a major role in improving the conditions of rural women.

Unsustainable agricultural practices tend to compromise the natural resource base upon which all food production depends. In many African countries productivity is declining as a result of the use of harsh agricultural methods which worsen land degradation thus posing a further threat to

food security and sustainable livelihoods of vulnerable groups of society which comprise mainly women and children.

According to the World Resource Institute, if there are no meaningful remedial measures put in place the number of malnourished children is expected to have risen by 50% between 1999 and 2020. This affects women directly as they are the main carers of children and other household members. A further complication arises from the prevalent scourge of HIV/AIDS where women tend to suffer either as infected or affected persons since they serve as managers of the household.

## VI. SUMMARY

Generally, African states depend on agriculture for food and commercial activity. Due to increased commercialization of agriculture, vast pieces of land have been converted from production of food crops to that of export crops such as sugar, cotton and tobacco. Trade Liberalization programs have detrimental effects on food security and sustainable livelihoods of women in Africa .

Despite their contribution to food security, women lack a voice in development programs of their nations. It is important that forums be created even at international level that will ensure that the voice of grassroots women are considered when trade policies are put in place, particularly in the development of policies governing agricultural production.

Production of some crops highly depends on the climate, and women in drought stricken areas are handicapped in their efforts to undertake large scale production. Apart from scarcity of water, women face a lot of problems in both subsistence and commercial agriculture of an economic, social and political nature.

Removal of domestic support programs in agriculture in developing countries has reduced incentives for small business farmers to produce for export, the majority of which are women. It is also worth noting that women's work is often neglected in the compilation of national accounts. Women's work at home is generally considered to be part of their duties as wives and mothers, rather than an occupation to be accounted for in the national and the global economy.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Formation of farmers' organizations would help to discuss, analyze, and find solution to problems that also include gender issues, related to agricultural and household work.
- African Governments should endeavor to create banks of gender segregated data. Presently the situation is such that when data is collected for national statistics, gender is often ignored or the data is biased in the sense that it is collected only from males, who are assumed to be the heads of households. It is important to take into consideration that there is an increasing number of female headed households even among African communities.

- It is time that African governments recognized that women as legal citizens of their countries are equally entitled to economic, social and political freedom. It is clear that, among other factors, women's invisibility is further accentuated by their lack of political power and social representation resulting from prevailing attitudes, gender-biased legal and social structures and illiteracy. Women's participation in decision-making is fundamental to their role in development and contribution to food security.
- It is important for African governments to join the rest of the world in the commitment to the reduction of use of harmful non-renewable sources of energy as agreed at the recent Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg , August 2002. There is a heavy dependence on fuel wood energy in the absence of better alternative energy sources. Global warming has had detrimental effect on agriculture, it is therefore important that it be placed in the priority list if sustainable livelihoods are to be realized. Intensive exploitation of natural resources aimed at increased supply of primary export commodities and incomes has led to soil erosion, deforestation and increased threat of desertification.
- African governments should set funds aside to train women on sustainable agriculture. Technology designed to suit women's needs can contribute to minimize poor working conditions and provide women with an opportunity to join in other more beneficial or rewarding activities. Currently women receive about 18% of the region's total technical assistance and training.
- Governments should embark on policies aimed at equal distribution of land among men and women. Lack of ownership and control of land has resulted in low incomes among women and an increased feminization of poverty.

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