

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN BOTSWANA AGRICULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

The Government of Botswana Economic Snapshot has observed that Agriculture provides a livelihood for more than 80% of the population, but supplies only about 50% of food needs and accounts for only 3% of GDP. Subsistence farming and cattle raising predominate. The sector is plagued by erratic rainfall and poor soils. The Ministry of Agriculture has observed that the proportion of men to that of women who are role players in Agriculture is in favour of women who are observed to be the majority, yet statistics show that only 36% of farm holders are females (*Ministry of Agriculture*, 2008). Essentially, therefore, it shows that participation of women, their leadership, and decision-making in agriculture is a gendered issue.

Geography of Botswana

Botswana is a landlocked country located in Southern Africa, North of South Africa. Botswana occupies an area of 600,370 square kilometres, of which 585,000km are arid to semi-arid land. Most of the country is near-desert, with the Kalahari occupying the Western part of the country. The Eastern part is hilly, and there are salt lakes in the North West (https://www.princeton.edu/.../Geography_of_Botswana).

There are vast distances to be covered between destinations from Gaborone, the capital city, to other growth points, as shown in the map below. The country is divided into the following districts:

North West District
Central District
Ghanzi District
Kweneng District
Khalagadi District
South District
Kgatleng District
Eastern District



Map of Botswana showing the districts and main centres

A Journey into the Countryside

Our team of three set out from Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana, in November 2009. This is the month when rains begin to fall, and farmers are galvanized into farming activities of all sorts: clearing the bush, tilling the land, tending goats and cattle. The greenery, by that time, has covered stretches of land, and new life among the livestock is visible since there is water around.

The objective of our mission was to meet women peasant farmers in agriculture, and hear their side of the story while also observing activities they would be engaged in. As we passed Kumakwane and Tamaga (Villages along the road to Khanye) we witnessed activities along the roadside, and it was mainly women and young children working on the land, and they

waved at us happily as we drove by. About five kilometres outside a village called Moshupa, we made a stop by a field where we saw a mother carrying a baby on her back, and there were two other girls of around five years of age, walking by her side, and their granny behind them. The two elders were carrying hoes. When we asked where they were going, they indicated that they were going to the *masimo*, the local word for 'arable land'. We wanted to know why the young men and women, as well as the husbands were not with them to assist with the tasks. We engaged the elders in a discussion:



An old man, woman and grandchild tending wilting crops

“Where is your husband and the young men and women who should be assisting you with work in the field?”

“They are away in town...in Gaborone, also South Africa... to earn some money”, answered one of the two women.

My friend then asked, “Do they send you money for food?”

“Sometimes they do... but they also complain that money is not enough for them in town. So we do not get much from them”, answered the older woman.

I then asked, “so, what do you do for food?”

“Food...food is a big problem, that is why you see us getting up early and go to the lands. If we do not do that, these little children will die...mmmm.” answered the older woman.

My friend asked the younger woman, “So... who owns the land you are working on?”

“It’s for my late husband...but you know that our law does not allow women to own land. It was a bigger piece, but when my son inherited the land, he sold part of it and finished all the money buying himself beer...” The younger lady shook her head as she said this.

We drove on and joined the Trans Kalahari Highway, passing by farmlands where cropping was in progress. After passing Jwaneng Mine, some kilometres outside a village settlement called Kang, we stopped by a homestead where women were sitting outside a hut. We asked for some water and their response was that there was not a drop because they had not yet gone to fetch water from a bush pump some six kilometres away.

My friend then asked, “ So you get water from such a distance everyday? Who helps you?”

“Nobody. As a woman I have learnt to do it because men are not supposed to carry water on their head except when they use a donkey cart, that’s when they load containers of water on the cart. Young boys and girls are away in town”, answered one woman.

“ How about food? Do you have enough?” I asked.

“No...no... it’s never enough here. Most young men and women, and our husbands go to town where there are city lights. Some do not come back. They only come when they are sick or when they come to leave their children”, one of the women retorted.

My friend asked, “What do you mean?”

The woman then responded, “You see that hut there? There lies my sick daughter who has these three children you see. She has a strange illness and health people have said we must be careful when we wash her. She needs food. Her children need food. We all need food. We get a bit of milk from the goats, but that too is not enough. I have to make sure I work in the fields so that I can feed them”.



We stopped by a homestead where women were sitting outside a hut.

“Are these your goats?” I asked.



These are for my late husband

“These are for my late husband, and they were inherited by the son who is in a town called Selibe Phikwe. When I want to slaughter, I have to write him a letter, seeking permission to do so. The letter takes long, and sometimes he does not reply.” She shakes her head, then goes on ...ooh I wish I were a man”.

My friend asked, “So how do you manage to feed the children?”

“It’s all by the grace of God. I don’t know how I am managing. Mind you my other child, a son, died of the same disease, which my daughter is suffering from. We are told they must eat good food when suffering from that disease...but where do I get good food from? The few chickens I had are all finished. Those are the only ones I could call mine. The goats belong to men, just like the cattle,” the woman replied.

My friends and I gave the women fifty Pula (P50). Pula is the name of the currency used in Botswana, and is equivalent to five US dollars (\$5). The manner in which one of the women expressed her gratitude cannot be expressed in words. She was forever thankful, and she wished us long life and blessings from ancestors.



One of my friends posing for a photo among the women and children near Ghanzi

Our final destination, before returning to Gaborone, was D’kar, a settlement for remote area dwellers (RAD). These have often been erroneously referred to as *Bushmen*, but the correct name for them is *Basarwa* or the *San*. Since the sun was setting, we decided to put up in a small cattle-farming town called Ghanzi.

The following morning we set out to our destination. After a two-hour drive we then arrived at D’kar, in the middle of the Kalahari Desert. After a brief visit at the primary school, built by the Government of Botswana for the Basarwa children, we walked around to mingle with the San Community. Around them are cattle farms where many of the San men work for cattle barons.



A typical hut for Basarwa



A Mosarwa woman looking for food

Our guide told us that hunting and gathering were still a way of life for the San, and although there was a school built for them, attendance was erratic. This is simply because school is a totally different way of life. The men would work for cattle farmers in an equally erratic manner, and while they were thus occupied, the women went about gathering food for the families. Although we experienced language problems, we were left in no doubt about the role of women in seeking food for the families while men went hunting. The government of Botswana previously introduced a scheme where those Basarwa who accepted being resettled were given some goats as seed to start their own flock. They were also given small plots to grow some crops. Both tending of goats, and growing of small crops fell mostly on the shoulders of women, notwithstanding the little knowledge they had about agriculture.

The Botswana College of Agriculture

When you travel from Gaborone going to the second biggest city called Francistown, you follow the N1 route, a route that takes you to Zimbabwe and Zambia, respectively. Barely five kilometers from the city centre, to your left, you see the Botswana College of Agriculture. There are impressive buildings to your immediate left. You cannot miss it.

After returning from our journey into the countryside, we decided to pay a visit to this fine college to ask a few questions about the state of agricultural training in the country. We specifically wanted to know whether there are any policies governing women participation in Agriculture; the actual numbers of women trained at the college on an annual basis; the extent to which rural women are given refresher courses to enable them to play a more meaningful role in food growth. The bit of information we got, showed that the proportion of trained women in the field of agriculture is lower than that of men. Also due to the remoteness of many parts of the country, it was not easy for extension officers to reach such places on a regular basis in order to give women the much needed assistance. We were also informed that one major factor that interfered with the desire to do farming – both crop and animal husbandry – was the drought phenomenon. It was indicated that Botswana is a dry country, and effort to do any meaningful farming was often frustrated by the natural conditions.

Following the tour across the country, and the visit to the college of agriculture, we sought to establish what literature has to say about the role played by women. One of the recent sources we consulted is *Gender and Agriculture*, prepared by the Botswana Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, Agricultural Planning and Statistics.

Insights from Literature

In order to implement the agreements made at various fora on Gender and Development, Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) initiated the development of the Agricultural Gender Policy Framework in 2003 to address the needs of different groups, men, women and youth so that they can actively participate in agriculture to contribute to food security, employment creation and ultimately, to increase the contribution of the agricultural sector to the National Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which has been declining from 40% in 1966 to 2.6% in 2000. This decline has pressured the Ministry of Agriculture to review most of its policies to see what improvements are needed to increase participation in the agricultural sector. Despite this decline in productivity, the role of the agricultural sector in household and national food security, employment creation, reduction of poverty, and other opportunities remains of critical importance. In a study conducted in 2006, a number of gender related critical issues was identified.

1. Access, Ownership and Control of Agricultural Resources

The 1993 Agricultural Census data indicate that only 36% of farm holders are females. This has mainly been attributed to the inheritance rights where the preferred heirs were sons of the family. Experiences during the journey seem to confirm the state of affairs. The law also used to discriminate against women where women were regarded as ‘minors’ and therefore were not entitled to possession of property including land and other valuable resources like cattle. A male guardian under the traditional organization of labour in Botswana had to own, farm cattle and make major decisions on major and valuable agricultural activities while women are treated as passive participants. However, law has since been amended to remove the marital powers and allow women to own immovable property under the Deeds Registry Amendment Act of 1996. Despite the amendment, it is true to say entrenched habits and beliefs take long to eradicate, and the syndrome still persists especially in remote areas.

Many policies, programmes and projects are also being reviewed and strengthened to ensure equal participation of both women and men. For example, the recently developed loan schemes require that female beneficiaries make a down payment of 20% whilst their male counterparts pay 30% of the total loan. However, the impact of these legislations is yet to be seen. Otherwise this is a positive way of encouraging access to ownership by women citizens.

2. Gender differences in roles and activities

There are similarities among the women in many countries of Southern Africa e.g. in Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, and South Africa. Women are engaged in the formal employment as teachers, nurses, secretaries, etc. but are also heavily involved in the informal and the traditional care work, which is unpaid. Such work includes performing domestic and community-based activities, home-based care for HIV & AIDS affected and infected patients. Consequently, these activities add to the heavy workload that women perform in the agricultural sector. Educated or not educated, women tend to lead households regarding food security, and the cases we came across when we travelled as far as D’Kar bear testimony to that. The result is that women, especially rural women, are trapped in the cycle of poverty, hence “feminization of poverty”. They will be doing valuable work, e.g. caring for the HIV affected and infected, but this is unpaid service, and goes unrecognized in many cases.

3. Women’s empowerment and equal access to decision-making

From the cases as cited in the countryside tour above, it is manifest that the law of inheritance has always favoured men. Resources such as land, goats, and cattle are the inheritance of

males. This means women are not empowered to exercise decision-making in such areas. This is tantamount to gender disparity. The historical and cultural dimension is that the country's only existing College of Agriculture used to train males in the majority as the belief was that agriculture was for men. With the passage of time, it has become very clear that the agriculture sector is dominated by males. In May 2006, Ministry of Agriculture staff comprised 2001 personnel (27%) females and 5478 (73%) males. In this disparity, there were only 11% of women in decision-making levels of MoA as compared to 89% male.

This is also visible in the farming communities where farming associations are mostly dominated by males and organizations like the Cattle Owners Associations are by all means the male domain. For a long time now ranching has earned a lot of people decision-making positions as it is an area of high returns and social respect. However women only own 18% of the national cattle herd in Botswana (MoA, 2000). It is argued that with more trained women in the sector, the chances of those women to cascade knowledge to fellow women are likely to improve.

4. Security in Agricultural Production Areas

Recently, the issues of security in agricultural lands and cattle posts has been of serious concern to the nation with a large rural populace which thrives on agriculture and related activities. This comes from the fact that sound agricultural activities like cattle rearing and farming are done in cattle posts and areas, which are detached from service centers and in some cases very remote areas that have limited infrastructure such as telecommunications, roads, police services, electricity, etc. These areas are also very far from developments and the households are sparsely distributed, and they are therefore, dangerous areas for females to live in. Of late there has been an increase in gender based violence cases including rape, murder and sexual harassment on females in farm lands, and this alienates females from practising in ranching and other agricultural activities (MoA, 2000).

Five issues in targeting women in rural Botswana

In Botswana, Agriculture is largely a rural enterprise, and given the cases cited in the tour, it is logical to find ways of improving the lot of women in rural areas. Perrett (1996) has suggested five issues concerning targeting rural women. This makes sense because a very high percentage of rural households are headed by women, and women are also more likely to retain some initiative and entrepreneurial spirit. Apart from policy formulation at statutory level, there is need to strategise. The five issues discussed below are worth taking into consideration.

i. The Mobility Issue in Targeting Women

The ethnic minorities such as the Basarwa continue to be quite mobile, in spite of being nominally "settled" in RAD settlements. A major push factor in their mobility is the search for food and, to a lesser extent, income. Seasonal mobility is not just a matter of the adult male migrating to look for work. Sometimes whole families, or a part of a family, move further into the bush or to cattle posts to search for veld products or wildlife, or to get away from conflict in the settlements.

ii. The Organizational Issue in Targeting Women

It would be hard to find women's groups or organizations in RAD settlements; they are more prevalent in villages. Overall, the study found widespread conflicts and ethnic and other divisions in the majority of RAD settlements and in villages. The *Kgotla* meeting (*Kgotla* is

the traditional place where court cases are tried), which traditionally was the means for community discussion, problem solving and decision-making, has been co-opted by outsiders and dominated by the local elite. The Basarwa now consider the meeting foreign and too fast paced, and retreat from participating in it. The language question is also a major hindrance because those who purport to teach the Basarwa are not able to speak the language and vice versa. The problem is less severe among Batswana villages countrywide.

iii. The Workload Issue in Targeting Women

Women in Botswana, as is common, tend to have more constraints on their time than do men, both in RAD settlements and villages. A considerable part of their day is taken up with the collection of veld products to feed their families, and of water (where cattle owners have captured the settlement water supply). Women, more frequently than men, also perform the manual labour required in drought relief programmes.

iv. Skill and Knowledge Constraints in Targeting Women

Women suffer from a lack of literacy and a lack of understanding of the cash economy and cash management. Overall, only 55% of heads of households in rural Botswana have some education. The percentage is lower among female heads and ethnic minorities such as the Basarwa. Such lack of education and skills will hamper women in setting up their own small businesses, or performing wage employment. Among the very marginalized RAD populations, lack of money management skills is aggravated by the fear of witchcraft that is associated with individual achievement and with ownership of cash.

v. Natural constraint

Botswana (see map above) has vast stretches of land, which fall within the Kalahari desert. The places are dry, and have little rainfall, which makes agricultural production considerably difficult. Women tend to show passion for crop production, for that is their only hope in the absence of any other source for food. The sad thing is that there is very little they could do as the sun scorches their crops, and in the absence of drinking water, goats and cattle perish as they watch helplessly.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the cases, as well as from literature that in Botswana, and probably in other countries in Southern Africa, the gender issue in agriculture is critical. It is manifest that women tend to be entrapped in the poverty condition on account of a number of factors, including social attitudes, culture, remoteness from areas of development, and lack of clear policies by central government on gender mainstreaming when it comes to agriculture. Where such policies exist, excellent as they might be, communication could be hampered by poor financial resources by the government to reach remote area dwellers. Regarding the last destination visited in the cases cited above, the issue of Basarwa remains considerably critical for a variety of reasons. The chief one is acculturating the women into formalised agriculture when they have a background of seasonal migration. In the final analysis, one can observe that the nations should recognize the important role of women in agriculture at both echelons – the schooled women, and rural women who should play an increasing leadership role in fending for families.

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