



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

AGRICULTURAL RESTRUCTURING
IN
SOUTHERN AFRICA

**Papers presented at an
International Symposium
held at Swakopmund, Namibia**

24-27 July, 1990

Edited by

**Csaba Csáki
Theodor Dams
Diethelm Metzger
Johan van Zyl**

**International Association of Agricultural Economists
in association with
Association of Agricultural Economists in Namibia
(AGRECONA)**

First published in 1992 by the Association of Agricultural Economists of Namibia

P.O. Box 21554, Windhoek, Namibia.

© International Association of Agricultural Economists.

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Printed in Namibia by Windhoek Printers & Publishers (Pty) Ltd,
P.O. Box 1707, Windhoek, Namibia.

Distributed by the Association of Agricultural Economists of Namibia,
P.O. Box 21554, Windhoek, Namibia.

ISBN 99916/30/10/4

HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY AND WOMEN PRODUCERS IN NAMIBIA

R G Morgan

INTRODUCTION

The economic and social role of women in Sub-Saharan Africa remains underestimated, both statistically and in policy formulation. Particularly under-recognised are the multiple roles that women fulfil: as good producers, carriers of water, collectors of firewood, processors and preparers of food, carers for children and the elderly and, in many rural areas, the primary family earners of cash incomes as well. Estimates of the time contribution of women to food production in much of Africa range as high as 70%, in addition to their still more dominant roles in these other areas. Meanwhile, women's access to the assets, inputs and services which are needed to perform these roles tends to be highly disadvantaged. Lack of female security in land ownership or control, concentration of extension services on men, barriers to obtaining commercial credit, and the handicaps relating to inadequate public provision of basic health care, combine in many countries to trap women in a vicious cycle of low incomes, low productivity, extreme workload and poor health.

At the same time, economic alternatives for African women to semi-subsistence food production, seasonal employment and petty marketing are not readily available. Virtually throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, more boys than girls attend and complete secondary school. Women consistently suffer to a greater extent from illiteracy. Patterns of high fertility and high child death rates limit female involvement in formal sector job markets under existing conditions. Where they are involved, their remuneration levels are on average well below those of men.

On the other hand, women are often prominent as community organisers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite their duties as producers, home managers and mothers, women are highly involved in group activities, particularly on an informal basis, aimed at improving community services, promoting economic opportunities and achieving social and legal reforms.

Despite a dearth of relevant data, it is evident that these broad features of women's positions and roles in Africa apply readily to the situation of women in Namibia. It is in terms of these multiple roles and structured disadvantages that the position of women in Namibia as farmers and food producers must be considered.

NAMIBIAN WOMEN IN PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION

Women farmers

The large majority of arable crop farmers in Namibia are women, and inputs to crop farming in terms of labour time are overwhelmingly contributed by females. In many farming families, women and the elderly are the only source of labour, due to migration of males in search of employment. In such families, lack of direct access to draft animals and to cash for hire of draft power may be a major constraint on the ability of women cultivators

to farm sufficient areas to ensure household food security at minimum nutritional levels. Equally, the capacity of families which rely on hand cultivation to obtain crop surpluses and expand domestic consumption, savings or investment, is highly constrained.

The gender imbalance in labour availability in the main crop-producing areas of Namibia is indicated by the results of the last national census in 1981. The percentage of females in the total population in the crucial 15-44 years age group were found to be as follows: Ovambo region, 59%; Kavango region, 58%; Caprivi 58%. These three areas account for at least 60% of Namibia's total population, and 99% of its crop-producing households. Perhaps a quarter of working male residents in the northern regions have, at least until recently, been employed in activities related to the military. This gives some indication of the lack of direct application of adult male labour to family food production. Meanwhile, rural households in Ovambo tend to have comparatively high proportions of older people and children, and high dependency ratios overall¹⁾.

The marketing opportunities for the produce of small-scale farmers in Namibia are severely constricted. No organised markets exist as yet for millet, the major crop in the Ovambo and Kavango regions (although considerable unsatisfied demand for this food in processed form may exist in central and urban Namibia), nor for other common products such as cowpeas. Limited facilities are provided for the sale of cattle in these regions, e.g. the cannery at Oshakati, but no access is as yet available to buying outlets beyond the far north, through which the benefits of export-market prices may be obtained. Access to reasonably competitive markets for owners of small goat and sheep herds in communal areas of central and southern Namibia also appears to be problematic, and has been highlighted by distress sales at low prices following poor rainfall in the 1989/90 season.

Concurrent with the lack of crop-marketing facilities is an absence of crop-processing facilities, except for the small minority of farmers growing maize. The millet and sorghum farmers of Namibia, largely women, presently process all their output by hand, a time-consuming exercise that may well act as a disincentive to increasing production.

Meanwhile, agricultural services of all kinds are very poorly developed both in the northern regions, and for small-scale farmers (i.e. all but the largest 5-10%) in the rest of the country. Those services that do exist tend to concentrate on assistance to activities, such as stockraising, dominated by men (e.g. inoculations for cattle), or on male producers themselves (a significant exception is provided in the agricultural training activities of Rossing Foundation in Okashana). Services for small farmers which barely exist at present (particularly outside Caprivi) include: accessible and affordable sources of improved basic seed; provision of information on yield-enhancing cultivation techniques derived from local farmer-based research; sources of credit or subsidies for securing draft power, ploughs and harnesses, tools, fencing material and additional labour inputs for asset-poor and labour-scarce farming families; and, as described above, accessible and reliable product markets for the sale of surpluses.

Non-arable production is of considerable importance for northern Namibian households as a source of income and a contributor to food security. However, such activities tend either to be dominated by men (e.g. cattle farming), or to be of a seasonal nature (fish-catching in ponds and swamps). Income from handicrafts (basketry, wood-carving) appears to be of importance for significant numbers of families in these regions, but a lack of producer organisation and involvement in marketing may limit direct economic returns.

Namibian women and child nutrition

The position of women farmers in Namibia, at the juncture of Independence, is thus economically one of a residual majority, but one on whom the survival, health and nutritional well-being of most of Namibia's children directly depends. The large majority of rural households in Namibia are absolutely poor in terms of overall income levels, and many lack a resident wage-earner in formal employment. These conditions are especially prevalent among households headed by women. The scale of assistance received by such households from the remittances of absentee family members is not precisely known, but is likely to remain considerable whilst tending to decline in real terms and reliability²⁾. Such remittances serve to stave off subsistence crises in families otherwise reliant on crop income and therefore vulnerable to drought. The additional income source from the monthly pension provided to an elder family member often supplies a crucial but at present levels still inadequate supplement to basic consumption and nutrition.

The fragile economic and ecological base of northern farming families was eroded during the 1980s by the impact of warfare and droughts, particularly in Ovambo. Three factors in particular are thought (in the absence of any survey-based production data) to have weakened food output during the military occupation of the last decade: displacement of population; direct damage to crops; and the effects on labour inputs of the curfew and military recruitment of males. Several years of poor rainfall coincided with these factors during the 1980s. A widespread shortage of the most basic production input, millet seed, was reported in Ovambo prior to the 1989/90 planting season²⁾, and was alleviated to some extent by seed importation undertaken by United Nations agencies. No significant investment in arable farming in Ovambo has taken place in the last 10 years, whether from public, private, community or family sources. The apparent deterioration of soil fertility, fuelwood resources, seasonal water sources and grazing conditions suggest considerable disinvestment²⁾.

This process of progressive weakening of the northern household economy has been associated with findings of extensive child malnutrition in the Ovambo region in recent months. As one fragmentary indicator, the number of cases of acute malnutrition seen at Oshakati Hospital rose from 81 in 1985 to 531 in 1988, whilst over 100 children were admitted at this facility due to malnutrition in June 1990 alone³⁾. These figures may relate to improved detection of malnutrition and health service coverage. However, results of a household survey¹⁾ carried out in four areas of Ovambo in April-May 1990 show levels of wasting (low weight for height) of 8-12% in children from 6-60 months of age, levels of severe undernutrition (low weight for age) of 4-10%, and levels of moderate malnutrition of some 35% of the young child population. Levels of child stunting (low height for age) were estimated at 30-38%. The findings on malnutrition were highly consistent for the three rural areas and the one peri-urban zone included in the Ovambo survey of 1 134 children. In comparative terms, the incidence of malnutrition found in Ovambo was for most indicators 2-3 times that of Katutura, and of rural Botswana.

The survey also found that households headed by women were slightly more likely overall to contain an undernourished child, and significantly more likely to have a child with stunted growth - a possible reflection of lower food intake over time and other factors related to poverty.

Namibian women in employment

In much of the central and southern areas of Namibia, women's role in

employment is crucial in determining the food security and nutritional levels of their families and children. However, women form only some 33% of the formally-employed (non-military) labour force⁴⁾, although they are a large majority of the "service workers" and a slight majority (perhaps surprisingly) of the "professional, technical and related workers" categories used by the former Department of Economic Affairs.

For aspirants to the formal labour market outside the Windhoek region, however, employment prospects are very bleak. This area, with about 9% of the total population, supplied in 1988 some 42% of all employment opportunities, whilst the Ovambo region, with almost half the population, provided only 6% of formal employment⁴⁾. It is worth noting that the public sector contributes about 90% of the approximately 11 000 jobs available in Ovambo^{2,4)}.

Given the low levels of formal employment opportunities in Namibia, and the unequal access of women, it is likely that families depending on women's incomes as a primary cash source are typically disadvantaged. Limited data from surveys of the National Building and Investment Corporation (NBIC) in 1985-86 in low-cost housing areas of central and southern towns show, with one exception, considerably lower average monthly incomes among female-headed households. In most locations, households headed by women had average incomes less than 50% of levels (ranging from R69-R412 per month) received by male-headed households⁵⁾.

The disadvantaged position of women in the formal labour market stems in considerable measure from the relative lack of educational opportunities for females earlier in life. Whilst girls form a slight majority of pupils in the educational system up to and including Standard 9, boys dominate the enrolment in higher and specialised education, and have exclusive access to the technical institutes in Namibia⁴⁾.

Namibian women as heads of households

The burdens facing women as heads of families, *de facto* or otherwise, have already been referred to in some detail. Most evidence suggests that this phenomenon is common throughout Namibia (as in some other Southern African countries with strong historical patterns of labour migration, including Botswana and Lesotho). NBIC data from the 1980s indicate that in urban areas of southern and central Namibia, between 20% and 57% of "non-white" households are headed by females. Higher levels within this range are found particularly among "squatter" settlements⁵⁾. Meanwhile, 1990 household survey data indicate that 36% of households in Katutura, and 40-49% of those in Ovambo, are headed by women¹⁾. These data also confirm that women household heads are less likely to be wage-earners than their male counterparts (much less so in Ovambo), although they are somewhat more likely to be self-employed. In Ovambo, the family farm and domestic work account for the productive activities of the vast majority of women.

Namibian women as mothers

The conditions of reproduction for most African women expose them to both short- and longer-term health risks, affecting their children as well as themselves. In Namibia, such risks are high and result in part from the poverty under which most women undertake child-bearing and rearing, as well as from the inadequacies of access to and provision of basic health services. Particularly inadequate for many Namibian mothers is the availability of health care of a preventive nature. Until recently, for example, the immunisation schedules

of the various fragmented health authorities did not include the vaccination of mothers against neo-natal tetanus. In many rural areas, antenatal care for mothers is unavailable, and post-natal care for both mother and child is inadequate. The time burden of economic and domestic tasks on women, coupled with the distances between health facilities, the lack of mobile services and the absence so far in Namibia of a cadre of community-based health workers, combine to reduce both the benefits to mothers of basic health care and of facilities that do exist.

As a result, women are often left to their own resources and those of relatives and friends for pre-natal care and delivery. The combination of economic and domestic work burdens with pregnancy, in the absence of regular contact with primary health care services, is a hazardous one for Namibian women. Poor water quality and sanitation conditions further increase the risks of childbearing.

The extent of adult female and maternal malnutrition in Namibia is unknown: judging by conditions in other African countries with comparable socio-economic circumstances to much of Namibia, it is likely to be considerable, and to pose a further hindrance to female labour productivity, particularly in agriculture. An important indicator of maternal malnutrition which would be rapidly amenable to assessment through hospital data is the percentage of babies with low weight at birth (i.e. below 2,5 kg). Meanwhile, recent survey data ¹⁾ indicate high ratios of miscarriages and stillbirths to conception in parts of Ovambo, and suggest very high rates of maternal mortality (i.e. deaths of women from pregnancy and delivery-related causes) in this region as a whole.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR INDEPENDENT NAMIBIA

It is clear that the health and nutritional well-being of Namibia's children - the nation's future productive base as well as leadership - depend crucially upon the improvement of the economic and health status of Namibia's women today. Since the majority of women are engaged in food production as a primary economic activity, it becomes imperative to include women fully in the objectives of agricultural and rural development policies of the new government, and in the implementation of programmes in these and other sectors (such as domestic water provision, adult education and primary health care). Arguably, women should be placed at the centre of efforts to increase family-level incomes and basic food production, and thereby improve household food security and the nutritional status of vulnerable groups such as young children. The justifications for according women a central role in policy objectives and programme implementation in these sectors include the following:

- this is the fastest route to obtaining a broad-based increase in family level food security, and holds out greater potential and certainty for doing so than the "trickle-down" route of targeting the achievement of aggregate national food security, or overall job creation targets alone;
- widespread improvements in family-level food security are likely to bring about significant reductions in the high level of child malnutrition in Namibia, with future benefits in terms of the productivity of the country's workforce;
- an emphasis on raising the productivity of and returns to women producers is likely to translate with relatively greater efficiency into gains in health and welfare status for the nation as a whole, thereby reducing costs for curative and welfare programmes, and increasing national output.

Household food security and women producers in Namibia

Specific recommendations for agricultural sector programmes and programme design in the context of the urgent need to provide greater economic and production opportunities to women in Namibia include the following:

- In arable farming, women producers should be empowered through the provision of assets, technologies and knowledge. However, the supply of additional assets and technologies must be based on an understanding of the present farming systems, practices and needs of small-scale cultivators.
- Research programmes on existing farming systems should therefore be urgently initiated in the main areas of cultivation in Namibia with the full participation of women farmers.
- Meanwhile, "incremental" assets and knowledge should be made available which are likely to enhance the productivity of existing farming practices and systems and which are manageable by women producers (individually or in associations). Examples of these might be:
 - supply to farmers of improved varieties of open-pollinated millet and cowpea seed;
 - trial provision of small cattle herds to women's groups and associations for draft power purposes, similarly with donkeys (cf. the Arable Lands Development Programme in Botswana);
 - trial establishment by the Agronomic Board of millet marketing points in relatively high-potential areas of Kavango and Ovambo, jointly with small-scale diesel-driven millet processing units operated by traders (or cooperatives), allowing both for individual farmer "batch-milling" on a service-fee basis and bulk processing for commercial distribution and sale. The risks of such enterprises (or start-up capital costs) could be underwritten by the government in conjunction with aid donors;
 - assessment of the various grain storage designs already existing in the rural areas and demonstration of stores and storage techniques least susceptible to losses;
 - increasing the availability and economic accessibility of ploughs and agricultural handtools, perhaps through local credit and payback schemes managed on a group/association basis;
 - (as under Botswana's Drought Relief and Accelerated Rain-fed Arable Programme) making cash grants available to selected farmers to hire labour for peak-season tasks, such as field clearance and weeding, through a women-farmer focused extension service. Grants or provision of plants for tree establishment as windbreaks around existing field boundaries would be a further possibility;
 - enhancing total rural family income, as well as communal service infrastructure, through mounting by local government of labour-intensive non-peak season (post-harvest) public works projects, aimed at land, water supply and feeder road improvements. Such projects, providing a basic wage and based largely on village-level organisation, have typically involved and benefited women in Southern African settings.
- "New" inputs, techniques and technologies (e.g. hybrid seed, chemical fertiliser, mechanical cultivation and changes in tillage) should however only be introduced after participatory research with farmers on existing systems and practices has been carried out and analysed through consultative processes with the communities concerned. Equally, the design of extension programmes and messages should follow from, rather than precede, the understanding of existing systems, their rationale, and the implications of proposed changes. Not only economic implications of changes in farming practices

and technologies need to be assessed: in conditions of labour shortages facing many (particularly female-headed) households, and of an extremely fragile ecological base, the impact of proposed changes both for household labour needs and for longer-term ecological recovery must be fully understood and these factors regarded as limiting conditions.

- Finally, institutional support should be given to processes of self-organisation by women farmers themselves, assisting them to increase their participation in the setting of priorities and design of development programmes, their expression of felt needs, and their capacity to manage technical change, local ecology, additional assets and financial resources.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenge for those concerned with the economic well-being of women in Namibia, therefore, is several-fold:

- to increase the productivity and returns to women's labour invested particularly in arable farming and food production, under limiting conditions imposed by household labour shortages and the scarcity and fragility of natural resources;
- to increase opportunities for women's entry to other economic activities, including stock farming, non-agricultural formal employment and informal sector activities, particularly through increasing women's access to education, literacy, skills training, technical knowledge and financial credit;
- to reduce the time, energy and economic costs involved in performing domestic tasks, such as the fetching (or purchase) of cooking fuel and water, food preparation and processing (especially for millet);
- to reduce the incidence - and time-cost burden to women - of preventable and easily-treated common illnesses among children, through comprehensive Primary Health Care interventions (such as immunisation and diarrhoeal disease/malaria control) and the provision of essential health and nutrition information to mothers; and
- to improve the protection of women as mothers, through expanding access to maternal/childcare programmes, ranging from ante- and post-natal care (at formal health units and through trained Community Health Workers and Birth Attendants) to maternity leave provisions and childcare facilities (a likely component of a national Safe Motherhood programme). Investment in improving the health of women as mothers will pay direct economic dividends to the nation through increasing the capacities of women as producers, as well as those of their children in the longer term.

REFERENCES AND MATERIAL CONSULTED

Text references

- ¹⁾ Results of the 1990 Household Health and Nutrition Survey in Ovambo and Katutura undertaken by UNICEF with the Ministry of Health and Social Services, Windhoek, Namibia.
- ²⁾ "Household Food Security in Northern Namibia", Food Studies Group, University of Oxford, February 1990 (report prepared for UNICEF Windhoek).
- ³⁾ Information provided by WHO Mission on Nutrition, July 1990.
- ⁴⁾ Manpower Survey, 1988, Department of Economic Affairs, Windhoek.
- ⁵⁾ Housing Survey Reports of the National Building and Investment Corporation of SWA Ltd.

⑥ "Statistics of Schools, 1985-1988", Department of Economic Affairs, Windhoek.

Other publications consulted

"Strategies for Children in the 1990s", United Nations Economic and Social Council, UNICEF 1989 Executive Board Session, Mimeo, 7th February 1990.

"Within Human Reach: A future for Africa's Children", UNICEF, New York, 1985.

"Engendering Adjustment for the 1990s", Report of a Commonwealth Expert Group on Women and Structural Adjustment, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, 1989.

"Household Food Security and the Role of Women", Misrak Elias, Mimeo, UNICEF Regional Office, Nairobi, January 1990.