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Food Systems under Stress in Africa

African-Canadian Research Cooperation

**Proceedings of a
Workshop held in
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
7-8 November 1993**

**Edited by
Ronnie Vernooy and
Katherine M. Kealey**



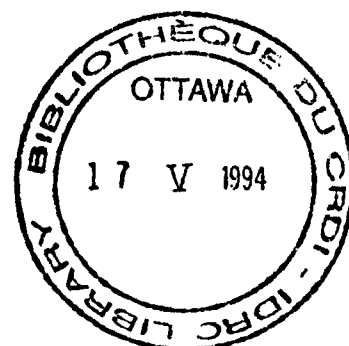
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Women, Migration, and Forest Resources: The Case of Burkina Faso

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***Abstract** For centuries, women have had vast knowledge of forestry resources that has enabled them to manage trees and tree products in an efficient manner. This knowledge has been transmitted informally between members of the same family; from the older ones to the younger ones. Because of the increasing pressure on the natural resource base, which forces many rural women in Burkina Faso to migrate to towns and cities, this knowledge is used less and less. This, in turn leads to the further deterioration of the natural resources (e.g., desertification).*

Burkina Faso is a landlocked country at the edge of the southern Sahelian zone (some 274,000 km² and a population of about 8 million). Rains decrease in intensity and frequency from the south to the north. This, to a great extent, demarcates the climatic and vegetation zones. The Sudano-Guinean zone is situated in the southwestern part of the country. It has higher rainfall (100 mm) and scattered forests and wooded grasslands. Ligneous species in this zone are found in higher densities and are taller and more stratified than in other areas.

The Sudan climatic zone is the most extensive. It is poorer in forestry products than the Sudano-Guinean zone. In fact, because of lower rainfall and an extended dry season, the scattered forests have many short or only average-height trees. The foliage is less than abundant and trees are gradually replaced by thorny species. These unfavourable climatic conditions are an enormous handicap for agricultural production always so dependent on rainfall. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the country has suffered from insufficient rainfall resulting in continuing low levels of agricultural production. Other factors that are contributing to this low productivity are the monotony of cultivated varieties and plagues.

In spite of these conditions, agriculture is the cornerstone of Burkina Faso's economy. In fact, it occupies more than 90% of the work force (census of 1985), produces 50% of the gross national product (GNP) and generates more than 65% of exports. Forestry resources, which offer an inestimable number of products used not only for food but also for medicinal purposes, compensate to some extent for agricultural deficiencies. Thus the natural habitat in Burkina Faso is in very high demand. This demand increases as the population increases. As a result, there is extreme degradation of the environment and reduced agricultural production. Agriculture in Burkina-Faso is mainly done on small, family farms with women playing a leading role. Not only do they participate, as do all the other members of the nuclear family, in cultivating the fields, but they take all the responsibility of domestic work fetching water and firewood, cooking food, etc.). The exploitation of forestry resources is, in fact, the exclusive domain of women.

¹This paper is based on notes prepared for the seminar and on a paper entitled "Women, migration and natural resource management." (*In* Women, environment and development network. Wednet Review and Assessment Meeting, 28 April to 1 May 1993, Environment Liaison Centre International, Nairobi, KE.)

This major responsibility in the economic life of the family, however, does not mean that women have a privileged position. Resources and production are controlled exclusively by men. The plots given to women for their own cultivation tend to be situated on less fertile ground; and women have difficulties getting inputs such as fertilizers to improve the soils.

The effects of the two serious droughts (1972–1973 and 1984–1985) and irregular rainfall have made the conditions more difficult for women, especially those who live in the Sahel and the Central Plateau. In fact, the great famine, which was a result of decreased agricultural production, and the drought have increased women's workload. The women of the Sahel and the Central Plateau have to devote more time searching for firewood because they have to travel long distances, sometimes tens of kilometres. The chore of fetching water begins early in the morning and finishes late at night.² To complete this dismal picture, the products that used to be gathered and used to compensate for agricultural deficiencies, have become more and more scarce.

When families are faced with harsh conditions like these, and given the almost nonexistent financial resources they have, they migrate. The regions of the west and south–west, which have a relatively better climate, and large towns have become the major areas that receive these migrants. In the cities, they try to make a living in the informal sector, which, however, rarely provides enough income to live a decent life. It is important to note that families only decide to migrate when all other alternatives have been exhausted. When they move, therefore, they have very little to sustain them. To survive, they turn to forestry resources. Women play a significant role in the exploitation of these resources because they have traditional knowledge in this field. Our research, carried out in the capital of Ouagadougou and its surrounding areas (Central Plateau) and in the Houde area (along the road from Ouagadougou to Bobo-Dioulasso, 255 km from the capital and 65 km from Bobo-Dioulasso), has tried to uncover this hidden knowledge and evaluate the impact of migration on it.

Women and Forest Products

This research concerns the relationship between migrant women and forestry resources. Its main objectives are:

- To discover and evaluate what migrant women know about the management of forestry resources,
- To study migrant women's behaviour toward forestry resources in the area where they settle, and
- To study the effects of migration on the transmission of this knowledge.

²Monimart, M. 1989. Femmes du sahel, la desertification au quotidien; Karthala et OCDE/Club du Sahel Paris. p. 25.

The research techniques that we used are semi-guided discussions, discussions with individuals (in both cases using a short list of questions), and participant observation (visits to the bush and collection, processing, and storage of forestry products).

The notion of natural resources covers a very vast area. In fact, it includes all the resources that humans can use from nature. The main resources that are used by humans are: land, forests, fauna, etc. In this paper, we do not intend to examine all the natural resources. We are interested only in forestry resources such as fruits, flowers, wood, leaves, seeds, nuts, roots, etc.

In the two areas of research, we found that the ownership of land includes the ownership of trees. Because women cannot own land, however, they are not allowed to own trees either. One rather rare exception concerns trees on some fallow land and uncultivated bushland that is unprotected. In all other cases, women depend on men for the exploitation of forestry products.

In Burkina-Faso, as in most of the Sahelian countries, the degradation of forestry resources has been increasingly marked. Nevertheless, despite the social, cultural, and socioeconomic transformations in the Sahelian countries, forestry products are still vital for the people's livelihood.

These products are used in several areas: as food, for health, for energy, etc. Consequently, the continued degradation of the environment has been a tragedy for everyone. Women, however, have been affected most. In fact, because of their traditional social status as the main providers of food, women require forestry resources more and they, therefore, have had to continue using them to fulfil the needs of their families. The more resources become scarce, therefore, the farther afield they have to go and the longer it takes to get supplies. Thus, all year long, often assisted by their children (daughters) they go into the bush in search of forestry resources. Some of the products that are gathered are used for the daily preparation of meals, whereas others are used to treat diseases. The link between women and nature goes back to time immemorial, which means that women have an inestimable knowledge on the use of forestry resources.

Many people from the rural areas migrate to the towns (they are attracted by the facilities that are available and the hope of finding a salaried job) or they migrate to other greener, rural zones to flee the disastrous effects of the prevailing drought in the Sahel. Many of these people, among whom are many women, arrive in the new areas without any food. They look to the women to feed the families because of the knowledge they have in the management of forestry products. Thus, right from the beginning, each migrating family becomes a refugee of nature.

Although women are the main users of forestry resources, they are rarely consulted when projects for the regeneration of forests and bushland are being formulated. It is true that many women participate in these projects but, in most cases, they only execute what has been decided; all the background work is monopolized by men.

Worse still, an idea is spreading that women, because of their domestic activities (collecting forestry products) are the major agents of desertification. We do not intend to deny the damage done to the environment by deforestation, but women cannot be blamed for this situation. In our view, what is important are the socioeconomic conditions that have made firewood the only source of energy accessible to the majority of the people. Furthermore, by insisting on the harmfulness of their actions, might this paper not conceal the positive relations that women have with the

environment. In other words, can the relationship between women and the environment be analyzed merely in terms of desertification?

Based on this we can define our research assumptions more clearly. Women have vast knowledge that enables them to manage forestry resources efficiently. This knowledge is transmitted in an informal manner between members of the same family; from the older ones to the younger ones. Because of the scarcity of natural resources, however, this knowledge is used less and less and this aggravates the problems of desertification. Nevertheless, this knowledge contributes in improving, however little, the living conditions of migrants.

Unfortunately, the women who migrate to urban centres end up losing their knowledge because they cannot use it. Only those who sell forestry products manage to preserve some of the knowledge. Women who migrate to other rural zones also preserve their knowledge. In the majority of cases, they even increase their know-how by adding knowledge learned in the new zone where they settle.

Although the traditional management of natural resources used to safeguard the balance between human needs and nature's natural rejuvenation, the new methods of exploiting these resources (the ones used today) seem to be more of a battle with nature for human survival. In fact, because of a number of unfortunate circumstances (successive droughts, poor harvests, migration, runaway population growth) natural resources have been in higher demand than ever before. So the balance that used to exist has been upset. Consequently, there has been serious and persistent degradation of the environment.

This critical situation, however, has not changed the traditional role of the woman as the main provider of the family's food. So women's work has become even more arduous. They are the ones who suffer most when natural resources become scarce; the more difficult it is to find wood, the longer the distances they have to travel to find it. Without doubt, we can say that women understand the value of natural resources more than anyone else. Moreover, we discovered that women have traditional knowledge about the healthy management of natural resources, and they also know how to transform and use forestry resources. Most of the methods used by women to manage natural resources find their roots in the past. This means that even when natural resources were plentiful, there were still many rules and regulations about how to exploit them.

These rules and regulations were passed on through stories and sets of rules that were considered as taboos. This knowledge was informally transmitted from mother to daughter and from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law during evening gatherings when they were told stories relating to day-to-day activities. People respected the rules because, although the stories were supposed to make people aware of how to manage natural resources, the taboos and prohibitions were shrouded in threats of possible curses and even death for those who breached them. Thus picking raw fruits or cutting green trees were considered dreadful of fences; transgressors were threatened with being struck down by lightning.

Although today these rules and regulations are no longer respected (in the ecologically devastated areas), the women who break these laws live with a guilty conscience. In fact, almost all the women we interviewed believed that the droughts had been caused by the nonobservance of these taboos regarding the management of natural resources. It would seem that this is an

indication that traditional methods are disappearing because of the environmental crisis that has been caused by the overexploitation of natural resources. It would seem also that women are conscious of this but cannot do otherwise. In fact, the migrants in both the urban and the rural area are even more "attached" to natural resources than anyone else. The resources are used daily not only for the survival of the family (medical treatment, food, energy, etc.) but also for commercial purposes, to enable these poor families who normally have no other source of income to meet their basic needs.

Because of their rural origin these women know a lot about the management of forestry resources. Those who have migrated to another rural area have the opportunity of applying their knowledge, and even adding to it. We can say too that even women who are used to using devastating methods (on nature) can revert to using healthy means of managing natural resources as soon as the conditions are right.

Women, therefore, plunder nature against their better judgment, but they have to do it for the sake of survival. This is the case of the rural women who migrate to towns. Although they too have knowledge about the healthy management of natural resources, they cannot apply it. Because of population pressure, resources are scarce. The migrant women have to depend on these resources because they have no formal training that would enable them to earn reasonable salaries. Moreover, because they are migrants, the families are often poor. They have no land or animals or money. They settle at the edges of towns and use forestry products for food, for medical treatment, and to earn money to buy basic necessities that nature cannot supply. We also discovered that, although it is more difficult to get supplies of medicinal plants, a large proportion of the population (80–100% in the rural areas) often use forestry resources for this purpose.

Recommendations

The findings of our research, as summarized in the foregoing, have motivated us to formulate a series of practical recommendations that can be used by government and nongovernmental organizations to improve the food security of women (and men) in rural and urban areas. These recommendations are the following:

Government

Land Ownership

- Initiate a process that would finally give women the same rights to land ownership as men (this would include ownership of trees found on the land).

Reforestation

- Because women have much knowledge about the management of forestry resources, they should be given their rightful place when issues on reforestation are being discussed. They (as much as men, or even more) should be consulted when programs are designed.

- Given that indigenous species are very useful and women have wide knowledge on how to exploit them, every effort should be made to plant these species.
- People should be encouraged to start plant nurseries to provide seedlings that can be planted in and around the urban centres to curb the process of desertification, and also make it easier for women living in urban areas to have access to forestry resources.
- The promotion of energy-saving stoves should be intensified and poorer women should be assisted in getting them.

Traditional Medicine

- Intensify all efforts that deal with the use of medicinal plants by giving guidance and support.
- Initiate training sessions for traditional practitioners to teach them the basic rules of hygiene so that there is less risk of contamination when products are administered. Also teach them how to improve the appearance of the products they put on sale.
- Demand that strict rules of hygiene be adhered to at the selling points and help the women traders to improve their preservation methods and the quality of their products.
- Strive to establish collaboration between the Ministry of Health and the traditional practitioners.
- Allocate small pieces of land to women and guarantee them the right to use the medicinal plants that they grow on this land; such plantations should make it easier to supply the urban centres with medicinal plants.

NGOs

In Burkina-Faso, NGOs work very closely with the grassroots communities. They are constantly in the field, so very often they know the people well. We, therefore, make the following recommendations:

Reforestation

- Women should be involved in defining the objectives of reforestation programs.

- Traditional practices that can help in reversing the process of environmental degradation should be identified and programs formulated.
- Campaigns to promote the use of improved stoves should be supported.
- Income-generating projects for women should be identified and executed so that the plundering of forestry resources for commercial purposes can be reduced.

Traditional Knowledge

- Legitimize the traditional knowledge that women have and show how important it is by conducting public awareness campaigns.
- Make the women in the urban areas aware of the forestry products that are available (karite butter, soumbala) and that they are usually more healthy and nutritious.

Traditional Medicine

- Support the training and improvement of traditional practitioners.
- Help to improve the preservation of plants and hygienic conditions at selling points.
- Initiate and encourage projects for growing medicinal plants at the edges of towns as well as in the countryside.

Women's Welfare

- Particular attention must be paid to women in the urban areas. In fact, these women who live around the edges of the towns usually do so in conditions of abject poverty. They are often overlooked by women's organizations in the urban or rural areas as well as by development projects.
- Identify and set up projects to improve these women's living conditions; for instance, they could be involved in projects for growing medicinal plants.
- Make it possible for women traders who deal in forestry products to get loans.