

**ENGENDERING DEVELOPMENT  
GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR AND WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING POWER  
IN RURAL HOUSEHOLDS: THE CASE OF CAMEROON.**

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Abstract

*This paper has tried to show that changes are occurring in women's economic status, and that these changes are impacting their decision-making power within the household. The intra-household relationships are being reshaped and gender roles within the household redefined. Nevertheless, men are still the heads of households and the major decision makers.*

*Decision-making is a measure of empowerment. This paper has shown that economic power is a major variable to empowering women. Unfortunately, economic power comes as a result being involved in activities that go through the market and are thus given a monetary value. Most of the activities women are involved in even though they are life supporting and sustaining, do not go through the market, and are thus not valued. Women who are more involved in income-earning activities participate more in decision-making within the households than those who are mostly involved in only for household consumption activities. Women with some income-earning power are consulted more often by their husbands, especially on issues that require their (women's) financial contribution. What this implies is that the woman's earning power is important to her ability to bargain with the husband over issues in the household: it is a way of taking away some of the powers of the man. As women get into more market activities, they are increasing their incomes, and reshaping the decision-making process in the household. Conflicts arise because men feel threatened, which is why in some homes the decision-making process is through negotiations, and in others it is through confrontation.*

*There is need for government policy to integrate women empowering activities into various projects and programmes, and to facilitate their access to labour-augmenting resources (finance, technology, etc). Although women's empowerment is one of the Millennium Development Goals, Cameroon has been very slow in moving the process forward. According to UNDP Cameroon Office (MDG Progress, 2003), it seems unlikely, given the progress made so far that Cameroon will meet the deadline.*

## **Introduction**

In Cameroon, women make up more than 50 percent of the population, but do not usually have a say in many major decisions that are taken, not only in the households, but also at the national level: decisions that affect their lives and shape their relations with men. These decisions also shape the way the nation functions. Considering that decision-making seems to be based on, among other factors, economic power, earning incomes is likely to confer a certain degree of decision-making power on women (Ngome, 2003). Change in the division of labour to influence the incomes of household members is one of the ways which influence decision-making.

In most rural areas of Cameroon, women are including a market-oriented dimension to their farming activities. This is an improvement from years before when food crop farming was almost exclusively for household consumption. This additional focus on food crop farming is mostly as a result of the need to supplement household incomes following the drop in salaries which came as a result of the economic crisis Cameroon and many African countries have been facing since the 1980s. Nominal incomes for salary earners in Cameroon were slashed by over 60 percent in the early 1990s (Tchoungui et al., 1995). Most of the salary earners are men. The agricultural sector was not spared either. Most of Cameroon's foreign earnings come from agricultural commodities – cocoa, coffee, cotton. The production of these commodities is in smallholdings owned by mostly men. In the 1980s, world prices for these commodities collapsed, and of course, the incomes of the smallholders dropped drastically. The burden of making up for this shortfall within households was placed on the backs of women, and yet women have limited opportunities to make decisions on many issues.

This paper looks at how gender division of labour impacts women's decision-making power, and whether the traditional division of labour leads to inefficient allocation of resources that retard development. The types of activities members of households are involved in, impacts their decision-making abilities

A number of factors are responsible for gender division of labour today: some are gender neutral and others are gender-biased. For example, child care, household-care (cooking, cleaning, fetching wood and water, etc.) are gender-biased. They have come about as a result of socio-cultural socialization. A gender neutral process is one where in a household, comparative advantage and maximization of household

welfare is used to determine which partner does what. Education is also another factor. The more education a woman has, the more it is likely she is going to venture into spheres traditionally considered male areas. These factors have important implications for women's empowerment and their ability to contribute to the overall development of not only the household, but also the nation.

In the household, men and women are involved in different activities to ensure the availability of goods and services for family consumption. Although these activities may be different, they have a social connectedness. There exists an intricate and changing relationship of cooperation and exchange between men and women, which is potentially conflictual. Despite the conflictual nature of this relationship, gender division of labour in households is the main economic strategy used to meet family basic needs for shelter, food, health, procreation and education. And yet, the nature of this division of labour is one that constrains development.

Using data and information from the studies "THE IMPACT OF THE CHAD - CAMEROON OIL PIPELINE OPERATIONS ON GENDER RELATIONS, LAND RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY LIVELIHOOD" by Endeley and Sikod (2005), "GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR AND WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING POWER IN RURAL HOUSEHOLDS: THE CASE OF MBALANGI, EDIKI AND MABONJI VILLAGES OF MEME DIVISION" by Njolle Ngome (2003), and other publications by the Department of National Statistics, the paper shows that gender division of labour impacts the decision making power of women. Women who are more involved in income-earning activities participate more in decision-making within the households than those who are mostly involved in only for household consumption activities. Women with some income-earning power are consulted more often by their husbands, especially on issues that require their (women's) financial contribution. What this implies is that the woman's earning power is important to her ability to bargain with the husband over issues in the household: it is a way of taking away some of the powers of the man.

### **Division of Labour in the Household and Outcomes**

Women constitute nearly 51% of the Cameroonian population and 52 out of 100 of the poor are female. Women are at a great disadvantage in comparison with men in terms of health, nutrition, education and participation in the nation's economic and political life.

In this paper, we use the international trade theory of comparative advantage to examine household division of labour and the implication on decision-making. Basically this theory states that a producer produces that commodity in which he/she has the greatest advantage. In the household context, members of the household should get involved in those activities in which they have a comparative advantage. This way, household welfare can be maximized. Unfortunately, gains from this type of a relationship can be uneven because of the way activities may be perceived, and what activities are perceived to confer more power than others.

Activities that go through the market and are thus valued tend to confer more power on those who do such activities. In the household, men and women are involved in different activities to ensure the availability of goods and services for family consumption. Although these activities may be different, they have a social connectedness. There exists an intricate and changing relationship of cooperation and exchange between men and women, which is potentially conflictual. Despite the conflictual nature of this relationship, gender division of labour in households is the main economic strategy used to meet family basic needs for shelter, food, health, procreation and education. And yet, the nature of this division of labour is one that constrains development.

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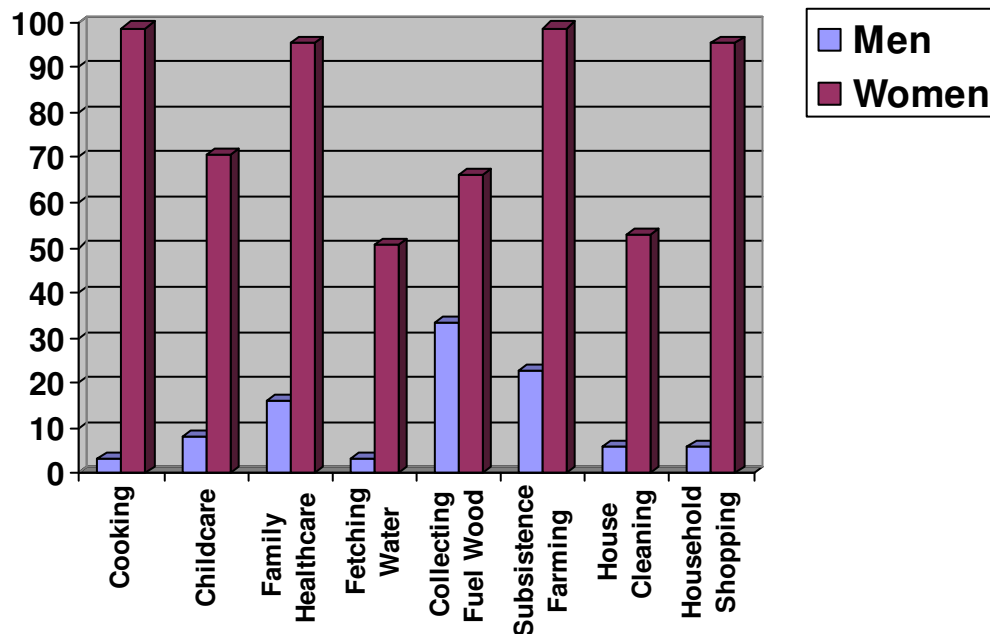
In most rural societies, in addition to gender, the allocation of activities to individuals depends on kinship, age, descent, culture, education, status and marriage. However, what is usually glaring is the division of market and non-market activities along gender lines. Market activities are tradable activities through interactions between consumers and producers, leading to monetary valuation of activities. These activities may be formal or informal.

In economic life and employment, women represented 37.5% of the active population in 1993: they were mostly found in agriculture. This is of course based on a very narrow definition of the workload of women (Kabeer, 2003). It obviously does not include the reproductive work of women.

Because of socio-cultural socialization and biology women in most societies have tended to dominate non-market activities. In Cameroon traditional division of labour most often situates women in roles based on providing emotional support and maintenance, while men are primarily responsible for economic support and contact with the world outside the home.

Interestingly, most women do not consider their chores as “work” and thereby do not rate these activities as entitled to any form of recognition. This is a perception most often reflected in the inequalities that women suffer, and reveals why it is unlikely that they will be active in decision-making.

**Figure 1. Non-Market Activities by Sex**



### **Decision Making in Households**

Decision-making within households has to do with bargaining, and this bargaining depends on the endowments of the parties. Incidentally, these endowments are not necessarily natural. Some are natural, but most are man-designed. These have often led to allocative inefficiencies in especially labour resources and other resources that are labour enhancing, that impact development negatively. Changing trends caused by education, growing awareness of the blatant inequalities and the need to correct them, and the economic situation, is reshaping the decision-making process within households. This is a process that is conflictual, as the man sees his dominant decision-making powers waning, and the woman is discovering that she is being empowered as she gets more and more into the decision-making

position. While in some homes this changing process is through negotiations, in others, it is through confrontation.

Many women experience decision-making problems as a result of the inequalities in the perception of the gains from the activities carried out by household members. A woman's ability to bargain in the household is usually augmented by the increase in her income, which leads to greater equity in the dispensation of household resources.

Ngome (2003) found in her study that 77% of the men and 73% of the women interviewed said the lack of income affects the man's decision-making power. She also found that 98% of the women and 83% of the men believe once a woman is in a position to meet the needs of the household, she obtains more respect from her husband. She also found that lack of income meant women were subjected to insults leading to lack of peace in the home.

Reasons why it is necessary for women to earn income: to aid the husband, to meet personal needs, to be independent, to better care for the children, to gain the husband's respect, for security purposes. Every woman in the study agreed it is necessary to earn an income, but the reasons were varied.

How women spend their earnings: children's and household needs; household and personal needs, husband decides, given to the husband when no household need to meet, use in the absence of the husband. As mentioned above, women are subjected to abuse when they are not able to contribute. Women contribute/give money to their husbands sometimes to stave off conflicts and confrontations with their husbands.

Almost all the women (95.3%) as well as the men (94%) are farmers. The rural world is predominantly agricultural. A few women are into tailoring, petty trading, and a few men are teachers.

**Fig.2. Areas of Decision-Making by Sex**

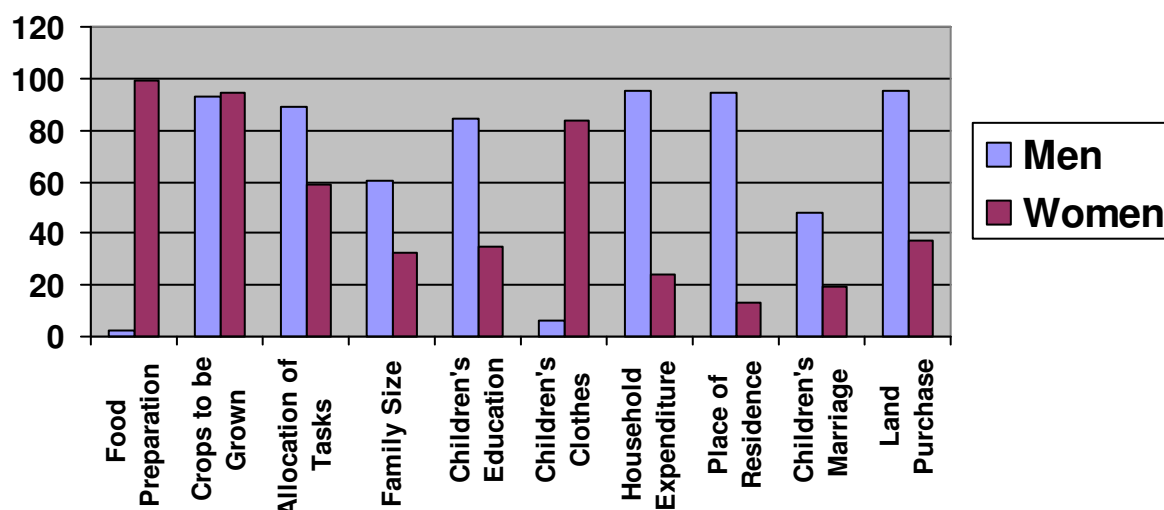


Table 1. Percentage of female wage-earners in the non-agricultural sector (%)

Provinces	Years 1990	Years 2000
Adamawa	0.7	4.0
Centre	6.0	19.3
East	1.8	6.8
Far North	1.5	0.8
Littoral	18.0	19.7
North	0.0	1.6
North West	3.6	4.6
West	2.0	4.8
South	18.9	7.7
South West	13.2	14.9
Cameroon	4.8	7.8

Source: MDGs 2003

An analysis of men's and women's time allocation captures the interdependence between the market and non-market or household economies. Women work longer hours than men. Much of women's productive work is unrecorded and not included in the System of National Accounts. Children are closely integrated into household production systems, and the patterns that disadvantage girl-children begin very early. Poor households need their children's labour,



sometimes in was that also disadvantage boys. Domestic chores, notably fetching water and fuel wood, are one of the factors limiting girl's access to schooling.

The transport sector strikingly illustrates the interdependence between the market and the household economies, and the associated time problem for women. The gender division of labour leaves women with by far the more substantial transport task in rural areas.

Women perform about 90 percent of the work of processing food crops and providing household water and fuel wood, 80 percent of the work of food storage and transport from farm to the village, 90 percent of the work of hoeing and weeding, and 60 percent of the work of harvesting and marketing (Ngome, 2003).

Reproductive work involves the care and maintenance of the household and its members including bearing and caring for children, food preparation, water and fuel collection, shopping, housekeeping and family care. Reproductive work is crucial to human survival and the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force, yet it is seldom considered "real work." In poor countries, reproductive work is, for the most part, labour-intensive, and time-consuming. It is almost always the responsibility of women and girls.

Productive work involves the production of goods and services for consumption and trade (farming, fishing, employment and self-employment). When people are asked what they do, the response is most often related to productive work, especially work which is paid or generates income (Moser and Levy, 1986).

The majority of women are small-holders producing on very small scale and relatively unaffected by developments in the use of improved tools and seeds, and yields are highly determined by the weather.. Their involvement in agricultural production is often a struggle to first provide enough for their households. This does not encourage savings against future consumption, against economic shocks and other hazards.

The role of women in poverty is significant. Yet, many factors limit the economic growth of women, and are responsible for poverty, especially in the rural areas. Analysis of men and women's time allocation by gender for example, captures the interdependence between the market and household economies, and shows why women tend to be poorer than men. Yet, they work longer hours than men do.

Micro-level analyses portray a picture of gender-based asset inequality acting as a constraint to growth and poverty reduction. Women face disadvantages, compared with men, in accessing the basic assets and resources needed to participate fully in realising the growth potential. These gender-based differences affect supply response, resource allocation within households, and labour productivity. The agricultural growth that is not achieved because of gender inequality is not marginal to the needs of the country, as it affects not only food security and wellbeing, but also contributes to greater vulnerability, and further reinforces risk-aversion.

Vulnerability refers to defencelessness, insecurity and exposure to risk. It is a function of assets: the more assets people have, the less vulnerable they are. An awareness of the diverse nature of assets, and their hierarchy, is essential for meaningful policy action. Women and children are more vulnerable because tradition gives them less decision-making power and less control over assets than men, while at the same time their opportunities to engage in remunerative activities, and therefore to acquire their own assets, are more limited.

Gender disparities in access to and control of assets – human capital assets, direct productive assets, and social capital assets - are more pronounced in the rural areas than in the urban areas.

### **Asset Inequality.**

A major reason why there is such inequality is because of the asset inequality that we discuss below.

#### **a) Human Capital.**

*i) Education.* There is a gender gap in the number of girls and boys attending school at all levels. These also vary greatly according to geographic locations, with the gap widening in the rural areas, and where certain religious and cultural structures are very strong. Girls do not have the same access as boys. The girl/boy ratio in primary education dropped from 85% in 1989/90 to 82.9% in 1997/98: in secondary education, the ratio rose from 82.1% in 1994 /95 to 85.6% in 1998/99. These ratios varied greatly from one region to another: the higher the level of education the wider the gap between the sexes (Table 2).

Table2. Girl/Boy Ratio in Primary School (%)

Province	1990	2000	Literacy Rate, Young Women
Adamawa	64	71	46.3
Centre	95	95	96.6
East	84	84	73.3
Far North	53	60	26.5
Littoral	96	97	96.8
North	56	59	31.4
North West	88	92	91.3
West	96	95	96.5
South	91	93	98.4
South West	95	96	93.9
Cameroon	84	83	77.2

Source: UNDP Office, Yaounde, MDGs, 2003

For the nation, there has been slight drop – 84 to 83 percent - from 1990 to 2000. The literacy rate for young women for the nation is just over 77 percent, varying from a low of just over 26 percent in the rural predominantly muslim north to a high of over 96 percent in the urban areas. At the socio-cultural level, some parents see no advantage in sending their children to school at the risk of endangering their faith when they themselves can teach the girls rural work and initiate them into their future responsibilities as mothers. This typically the case in the muslim regions of the country.

At the economic level, the poverty situation in households with scarce means, encourages parents to enroll boys rather than girls in school because girls are destined to marry and leave the family. Also, girls tend to do most of the household chores like helping their mothers to cook, fetching water and fuel wood, and baby sitting and home cleaning. They also work on the farm with their mothers.

*ii) Health.* Cameroon men and women, like other African men and women, face an array of health problems, though their needs and priorities are quite different. This is seen in the enormous gender differentials in the region's sexual and reproductive burden of disease (Blackden and Bhanu, 1998), as measured by deaths and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) (Table 3).

Table3. Sexual/reproductive burden of disease for people aged 15-44 as percentage of total burden of disease in SSA

Parametre	Female	Male
DALYs	30%	9%
Deaths	26%	7%

Source: Blackden and Bhanu, 1998

Because of ignorance and the means and the lack of enough health facilities, rural people die more frequently from malaria, and other water and air borne diseases than people in urban areas. In all of these, beside the one providing the care for the home, the woman is the one who suffers more than the man.

## **b) Direct Productive Assets**

### **i) Land.**

This is the most important resource to the rural communities. Having access rights to land and other land-based resources is a crucial factor determining how people will ensure their basic livelihood. The vast majority of the population and all of the rural population rely on land and land-based resources for their livelihoods. An enormous variety of rights to natural resources are found in Cameroon. These rights are firmly embedded in complex socio-economic, cultural, and political structures. Thus, tenure defines who has access to what parcel of land and/or resources, for how long, and for what purpose to use it. It applies in the same for the forest to ensure that land and forest use patterns are productive and sustainable. This is important because of the potential for environmental degradation, the reduction in the quality and quantity of a range of species and ecosystems and the impact on the life support system. This process affects men and women directly. Quite often women are affected more directly and differently than men by environmental degradation as a result of their reproductive and productive roles. Women are more involved on a day-to-day basis with household food security, fuel-wood collection, water collection, etc. In the parts of the country where there is increasing scarcity of sustainable natural resources of land and water, the rights of individuals – especially women – and households to these resources are being eroded. Women's rights to arable land are weaker than those of men. Women's rights to land vary with time and location, social group (ethnicity, class, and age), the nature of the land involved, the functions it fulfills, and the legal systems applicable at local level. Most women are granted only use rights to land. Less than 10 percent of those who obtained land certificates are women.

## **Gender, Land Tenure, and Institutional Issues in Cameroon**

The land tenure and resource access system operating in Cameroon is dynamic, and is the outcome of the checked history of the country as well as its rich ethnic diversity.

The first comprehensive attempt at a land tenure document by the State of Cameroon as it is today is the Cameroon Land Tenure Ordinance No. 74-1 of 6<sup>th</sup> July 1974. This ordinance guarantees to all persons and corporate bodies having landed property the right to freely enjoy and dispose of such lands. Although not explicit, it is assumed women and men have equal rights to land according to this law. In 1976 there was another Land Tenure legislation that modified that of 1974. It abolished traditional land tenure systems and prescribed new land tenure procedures.

Despite all the provisions in the written laws that favour gender equality in matters of land tenure, the reverse is the case in practice in many areas of Cameroon. In almost all the rural communities, the traditions and customs do not allow women to inherit land, and yet, women are the most users of land. Although women are users of traditional or family land, tradition inhibits them from claiming ownership and as such cannot obtain land certificates, which is a legal document to prove ownership. Nevertheless, women can obtain land certificates on land purchased by them. Unfortunately, this is not very common as many women are not financially viable to buy land and have not developed enough assertiveness to enable them undertake such a venture. Some women are deterred from fighting for inheritance rights because they are afraid of witchcraft and some mystical religious powers.

In some communities, unmarried females are allowed to inherit land when there is no son in the family or when the brother agrees (Table ). However, the rule is still strictly that land cannot be transmitted through the female line. For example, land cannot be transmitted from mother to daughter but could be transmitted to the daughter-in-law. This is to ensure that the land remains within the family, as it is generally believed that females will eventually leave the family for marriage into another family.

Thus, Cameroon's customs and traditions have a strong patri-lineal set-up, which restricts women's land rights to the cultivation of food crops because women are generally viewed within the traditional communities as 'property', which cannot inherit other property. These limitations have several adverse effects on women's rights. These include:

- social pressure on women to bear more sons in order to have security of access to land. This is particularly common in polygamous families.

- Women have limited access to credit as land certificates are very readily accepted by financial institutions as collateral.
- The adoption of certain innovations in agriculture such as agro-forestry is rendered very difficult as many women cannot plant certain crops on land over which they have limited use rights.

Women normally own smaller acreage than men, thus limiting the use of modern equipment and yet they constitute the backbone and mainstay of the rural economy, through their activities in agriculture and the informal sector. They make up over 60 percent of those who exploit natural resources – farming, harvesting non-timber forest projects (NTFPs), collecting fuel wood, etc. The written law has made provisions for gender equality in land tenure matters. The 1974 land tenure decree No 74/1 gives the right to any body to acquire land and obtain title, irrespective of sex. «Ownership shall mean the right guaranteed every person by law to use, enjoy, and dispose of property. No person shall be deprived thereof save for public purpose and subject to the payment of compensation under conditions determined by law» (Preamble, 1996 Constitution).

Despite these provisions in the law and other attempts to take care of gender equality on land tenure matters by the Government, certain elements of the law and practices act as hindrances for the implementation of the law. A typical example is the Land Consultative Board. The Government has vested a lot of power in it. This body is usually male dominated and headed by the Senior Divisional Officer or his assistant. No woman has yet occupied this position in Cameroon. Chiefs and two leading members of the village are members of the Consultative Board. This again excludes women, as it is very unlikely that women will be included among the leading members of the Village Council.

As concerns access and control of forest resources, women's rights are exercised only within the existing traditional or indigenous tenure systems.

**Table 4: How Women Acquire land**

	Responses		
	Married Widowed	Single	Divorced
Husband's Land	X		X
Fathers land or husband's	X	X	
Fathers land only		X	X
Purchase		X	X

*Source: Endeley and Sikod, 2005*

The most common way for women to acquire land is through their husband. They can also acquire land through their father (for single, divorced or widowed women), or through purchase

**ii) Labour.**

Men and women have different access to paid labour, and labour scarcity limits women's farming activity. The labour scarcity comes about because of the numerous and diverse non-market activities women are involved in. Labour remuneration also differs along gender lines, as the total income share received by men is over twice the share received by women. Endeley and Sikod (2005) found that even though the same amount of effort was put into producing various crops, men earned by far more than women because of the crops they cultivated. Women produce crops to sustain the household, and the excess is sold in local markets. Men produce what is generally called cash crops, because they are produced specifically for the market.

Like any other African household, the Cameroon household is a social institution for mobilizing labour, where there are strong differences between household members in their social command over labour that are directly related to their position in the household hierarchy. Men tend to be heads of household, and so household labour is quite often manipulated by them to the detriment of the woman. It is also interesting, the external perception of household labour. Endeley and Sikod found in their study of the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project that women were not hired to do the jobs men were doing, like digging trenches, laying pipes, driving trucks and tractors, etc.: rather women were hired as house help – cleaning, cooking, etc. This meant women could not earn as much as the men.

**Capital/Financial Assets.** In rural areas, finances are hard to come by. The situation is a lot worse for women. Women face gender-specific barriers in accessing financial services, including lack of collateral (usually land), low levels of literacy, and education; and they have less time and cash to undertake the journey to a credit institution. Credit institutions also discriminate against women by complaining of high transactions costs for the very small amounts women usually demand. Women therefore usually resort to informal sectors for their financial needs. This of course constrains their ability to expand their economic activities.

The majority of people suffering from absolute poverty in Cameroon live in rural areas and are engaged mainly in agricultural related activities (Fambon et al., 2000). One important way of responding to the plight of the rural poor, is to facilitate their access to economic assets essential for their survival. A diversified financial sector, capable of responding to the needs of the rural poor, in matters of financial services is required to achieve this objective.

### **Marketing of Agricultural Products**

In contrast to the marketing system which has been developed for traditional export crops (coffee, cocoa etc.), very little has formally been directed to improving the domestic and external marketing system for food crops.

The typical market place for semi-perishable food crops (plantain, tubers, vegetables, etc.) is at roadside stands and nearby village market centres. The bulk of these products are head carried by women to market points and sold by them directly to the passing public. There is relatively little flow of staple crops from rural to rural markets. This is perhaps due to the low value-to-weight ratio for these crops, and low demand since rural areas are primarily self-sufficient in their staple food crop production. This value-to-weight differential also makes it difficult for women to transport large quantities of their produce to the market. This has serious implications for the incomes of women in rural areas.

c. **Social Capital Assets. Participation/Voice.** Women are consistently underrepresented in institutions at the local and national levels. For example, only 10% of the members of the National Assembly elected 2002 were women. This was actually an improvement from the 5% in the previous assembly. Representation at the local councils is about the same. Endeley and Sikod (2005) found



that among 27 villages in the rural areas of the Central and Southern Provinces they studied, only two were women.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

It is clear therefore, that changes are occurring in women's economic status, and these changes are impacting their decision-making power within the household. The intra-household relationships are being reshaped and gender roles within the household redefined. Nevertheless, men are still the heads of households and the major decision makers.

Left on their own, empowerment would be a very slow process for the women. There is need for government policy to integrate women empowering activities into various projects and programmes, and to facilitate their access to labour-augmenting resources (finance, technology, etc). Although women's empowerment is one of the Millennium Development Goals, Cameroon has been very slow in moving the process forward. According to UNDP Cameroon Office (MDG Progress, 2003), it seems unlikely, given the progress made so far that Cameroon will meet the deadline.

Women who are more involved in income-earning activities participate more in decision-making within the households than those who are mostly involved in only for household consumption activities. Women with some income-earning power are consulted more often by their husbands, especially on issues that require their (women's) financial contribution. What this implies is that the woman's earning power is important to her ability to bargain with the husband over issues in the household: it is a way of taking away some of the powers of the man.

The creation of a Ministry for Women's Affairs, which together with the Ministry of Social Affairs, are actively involved with issues related to gender equality is seen as an attempt by the Government to tackle the problem of gender equality. At the international level, Cameroon has ratified a number of international conventions and instruments related to human rights, one of which is The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, (CEDAW) signed on the 6<sup>th</sup> June and ratified on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1994.

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