

The Social and Economic Aspects of Animal Traction in Agricultural Production among Female Headed Households of Lesotho and Swaziland

J.K.Rwelamira*

Abstract

This paper reviews research findings relevant to the social and economic conditions of female heads of household and the impact on the use or nonuse of animal traction by such households in Lesotho and Swaziland. Topics considered include: Ownership and utilisation of draught animals, costs of owning and utilising draught animals and implements and the special constraints of female headed households in the use of animal traction.

The paper concludes with recommendations for further research leading to governmental policy changes to enhance the use of animal traction by female-headed households.

Introduction

Female-headed households (FHH) for the purposes of this paper refers to three categories of households, namely:

- those from which the male heads of the households have migrated away from home and outside the food and agricultural sector to industries both within and outside their countries;
- those headed by widows;
- those headed by unmarried women.

In Lesotho and Swaziland women farmers play a significant role in agricultural production especially since a great percentage of rural men often leave their homes to find employment in the Republic of South Africa. The women, in their capacity as the household heads, have to combine roles of mother and farmer during their husbands' absence. Role conflicts resulting from this set-up have resulted in the women farmers suffering in many ways.

According to the Situation Analysis of Women in Swaziland (UNICEF 1985) the traditional division of labour in the family was such that men used to be responsible for clearing the fields and women for cultivating. Men also looked after cattle, built houses and as members of regiments, contributed agricultural labour to national and local

chiefs. Women contributed the bulk of labour in planting, weeding, harvesting and storage, in addition to performing the routine domestic labour.

With the advent of animal mechanisation and later the plough (1920-1930), men took over greater responsibility for preparing the land, previously accomplished by women with hoes. However, increasing male migration in search of work outside the food and agricultural sector to industries both within and beyond Swaziland has entrenched women's primary role in food and agriculture (de Vletter 1983),

Women thus now have increased responsibility for managing crops and livestock and a new role as household heads.

To help women cope with these new demands, development planners have to take special care, when introducing new technologies and methods or improving the old ones, to make them sensitive and appropriate to women's needs.

Overview of Ownership and Utilisation of Draught Animals

It is estimated that less than a third of the rural households have a pair of draught oxen and due to the weakened condition of most cattle during winter and spring it is often necessary to yoke together two or more pairs of animals especially for initial ground breaking. A number of soil series in Lesotho are difficult to plough unless rains have moistened the soil. The scarcity of tillage power thus leads to

*University of Swaziland Faculty of Agriculture
P.O. Luyengo, Swaziland.

preplanting being improperly done thereby impeding crop productivity. This is especially true with many FHH who are also unable to organise the ox-ploughing and labour needed from their own resources. They are either forced to cash hire, contract and sharecrop for ploughing services or use hand hoes which is very slow. Also only 13 percent of the rural households are reported to have auxiliary equipment such as planters, harrows and cultivators. Very few FHH, which enjoy husband remittances, have access to such equipment (IFAD 1985).

This means that the FHH without strong grown boys, have to make one or more of the arrangements mentioned above. For FHH, the problem may be threefold: the woman may be without a pair of draught oxen, without a male in the household and without cash to hire the required oxen and pay for ploughing labour. Since she has to wait for help, her entire field operation may be delayed causing irreversible effect on crop yield.

Swaziland

In Swaziland cattle are the most important livestock, kept by 63% of homesteads. There are about 95,000 oxen constituting 22.6% of the total cattle population. The average size of the farm holdings varies between 2 and 3 ha per household but the range is known to be from 0.25 ha up to 10 ha or more and a few homesteads holding no land at all (Engoru-Ebinu 1983). Of the homesteads that use animal draught 46% use their own oxen and 30.4% use hired oxen. Even though concrete data are not easily available it is known that the majority of homesteads that use hired oxen are either female-managed or female-headed.

Even though Swazi women are not hindered by custom from handling cattle, animal drawn implements, because of their bulkiness and weight, are usually handled by men. They depend on males to do the cultivation for them, but with the male exodus from the rural areas, the FHH suffer from inadequate supply of labour especially for cultivation and transportation of agricultural produce from the fields.

Costs of Owning and Utilising Draught Animals and Implements

Management and Feeding of Draught Animals

In Lesotho and Swaziland overstocking is considered a national problem, which is exacerbated by free communal grazing, subsidised veterinary services and low opportunity cost of herding by herd boys and old men which more or less ensures negligible maintenance costs of livestock.

No supplementary feeding is done except to dairy cows occasionally. All the livestock feed solely on natural pastures or veld. During the cropping season (in summer) the animals are restricted and are grazed during the day and returned to the kraal at night.

Capital Investment on Draught Animals and Implements

According to Engoru-Ebinu's case study (1983) an annual cost of Rands 388 is incurred by a small farmer using animal draught. This cost does not include purchase and maintenance of implements which are even more expensive. For an average Swazi traditional farmer, the capital required to invest in draught animal machinery is quite high, Rands 1000 or more. Worse still, the maintenance and repair cost of animal draught implements is quite high, and spare parts for such implements are costly. Most FHH may not be able to afford them.

Special Constraints of FHH in the Use of Animal Traction

Legal Status of Women

In both Lesotho and Swaziland a woman occupies an inferior position within the community and once married she becomes a 'legal minor' by customary law. Both countries have a legal dualism whereby two legal systems, customary Law and Roman-Dutch Law, co-exist. For the majority of women in the rural areas it is the former rather than the latter that governs their way of life. With such a status women fail to obtain credit and other necessary production inputs.

Managing Agricultural Production

Women's difficulty in this regard is evidenced by the results from a study of 525 migrant workers' families in Lesotho. Most wives of migrants, who for a greater period of the year are heads of their households, expressed their greatest problem as that of managing agricultural production and livestock in their husband's absence (Gordon 1981). Even households with teams of oxen and which received migrants' remittances still depended on sharecropping. The commonest arrangement is where one of the partners provides a team of oxen and rents an implement, while the other household, which may have males around, will provide labour to handle the oxen, seed and food for the workers (UNICEF 1985).

The situation is slightly different in Swaziland because the Swazi women have no inhibitions in handling oxen. Women usually do field cultivation

themselves. However, the tasks of ploughing, fencing and milking are still the province of adult males (de Vletter 1983) and females prefer not to do them.

Access to Other Factors of Production

FHH without a wage earner or with a wage earner who does not remit money home have no source of credit. The situation is complicated by the fact that women cannot easily obtain institutional credit. Their legal status explained earlier requires them to have a guarantor for institutional credit even when collateral is available. In many cases the woman will not have any asset to put down as collateral because women cannot, in their own right, own land, cattle and similar large assets (Nhlabatsi 1986).

Rights to occupy land in both Lesotho and Swaziland are determined by tribal chiefs and decisions on land use are often made by male family members. Men as heads of households are generally the ones vested with land rights. FHH, therefore, whose access to land is very limited, find themselves in a vicious circle: Without land rights their access to credit and other productive inputs and agricultural implements is very limited. For such farmers purchase and ownership of draught animals and implements will remain an unrealised dream.

Recommendations for Research and Governmental Policies for the Development of Animal Traction to Meet the Special Needs of FHH

To enhance utilisation of animal traction by women farmers, data should be collected on women's contributions in agriculture, their work and

constraints so as to formulate research programmes that would address female problem areas. Results of such research work would be used to design action programmes within national development plans that would address the constraints so identified. For example, since most FHH do not own oxen, research and policy implications of this would be to establish common pools of oxen and draught implements which could be hired out at reasonable charges.

Concentrated effort should be given to development of suitable approaches for extension of animal draught technology directly to women. For the women to benefit fully from draught animal technology, they have to learn about and use animal draught themselves. The assumption that husbands transmit new knowledge to their wives has been proven wrong.

Research for development of animal traction should include a careful study of the range of animal draught implements that are available with the view to make them affordable and appropriately adaptable to women's production systems.

Policy measures that govern agricultural credit should be reconsidered to integrate FHH in the mainstream of agricultural development. Research should look into establishment of revolving funds for the acquisition of draught animals and implements.

Governments should be encouraged from all possible avenues to review laws (customary or Roman Dutch) that respectively affect the position of women and their capacity to own and operate important factors of production such as land and livestock.

Résumé

Cette communication rend compte des résultats d'une étude sur la situation socio-économique des ménages dirigés par des femmes au Lesotho et au Swaziland et sur l'incidence du recours ou du non-recours à la traction animale par ce type de ménages. Parmi les thèmes abordés figurent: le taux d'équipement en culture attelée et l'utilisation des animaux de trait, les coûts afférents à l'équipement et à l'utilisation du matériel et des animaux de trait, et les difficultés particulières auxquelles se heurtent les femmes chefs de ménage lorsqu'elles ont recours à la culture attelée.

L'article se ferme sur des recommandations quant aux recherches à entreprendre afin d'aboutir à des changements de politique favorables à l'utilisation de la traction animale dans les exploitations dirigées par des femmes.

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