Stories from Northern Ghana: **women in agri-food processing**

In Northern Ghana, parboiling rice is one of the most common processing activities women undertake. In focus group discussions, women express themselves about their hopes and difficulties while women's small-scale agri-food enterprises are often de-valued in the push for a "modernization-oriented development".

Women in rural areas of northern Ghana engage in a variety of activities to make up their livelihoods. In addition to their farming and household responsibilities, they also generate income through small-scale agri-food processing. Along with small-scale trading, these processing activities contribute to rural women's micro-entrepreneurship both formal and informal. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, Sub-Saharan African women have some of the highest rates of entrepreneurship in the world. Using data from their 2015 Women's Report on Total Early Stage Entrepreneurship, women are more likely than men in Ghana to be starting a business (27% versus 24% out of the total population). However, the rate of business closure is twice as high for women as for men in Ghana.

In 2018, through the *UPGRADE* Plus project funded by the German Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (BLE), 27 women's groups including 523 women participants from areas surrounding Tamale (Central Gonja, Savelugu, Nanton, and Tolon Districts) were involved in focus group discussions structured using a participative group story method to visually trace back the activities of each group over the years since its creation and then collectively envision the groups' future direction. The processing activity that the women shared the most experience with in this region was rice, seconded by shea butter.

Parboiling rice: a "go-to activity"

Rice is sought after for making Ghanaian dishes such as the famous jollof rice and it is grown in the northern region of the country. Parboiling involves soaking raw rice in water, boiling and then drying it with the effect of making de-husking easier. Moreover parboiled rice has a longer shelf life because the process assists with reducing insect infestation and inhibits cracking. It also cooks more quickly. According to the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), there are an estimated 100,000 women involved in parboiling rice in Ghana at the home-level. In the northern region, parboiling rice is one of the "go-to" income generating activities for women.

M. Lelea, 2018 (et K. Schaller)

Boiling rice using fuelwood

RICE VALUE CHAINS ARE BEING TRANSFORMED WITH LITTLE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE GENDERED IMPACTS

Women buy rice from men in their communities or from the nearest market. In multiple groups interviewed, they estimated that 2-3 bags could be processed in one week. They explained that, "We do not store some as we do not have enough capital. We sell as we process." In one women's group, they explained that, "*We get benefits from the rice processing. If you mill it and it is good, you will get good market for it. After calculating your income and expenditure, if you make profit, you can support your child in school and also have some to save in your money box.*"

When taking loans from their women's group, many of the women described that their first impulse for income generation was to buy paddy rice: "*it happens that we told one another that we should form a group, so that we can be meeting and contribute a small amount of money... because we were seven and then gave it to one person to solve her needs. Then we said now that the days have passed, we have to increase the contribution ... Then one of us can go and buy a bag of rice and get a small price from it*".

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Spreading rice for more even sun-drying

To perform in challenging conditions

Women perform this work in the face of challenging conditions. As one women's group described, "*Our biggest challenge has to do with our road and lack of a mill. We have to go to other communities to mill. Lorries are not running here to ease our movement. We rely on tricycle motorcycles*." One woman emphatically added that, "Because we lack a mill, it moves us backwards". The mills on the market in Ghana are not affordable at the small-scale. Cost-effective mills are needed to save women time and energy.

In another group, they explained that, "*This is why we are doing it small small. We also do not have reliable water supply. Then fuelwood to aid us in the processing*."

Many of the women's groups lamented their dissatisfaction with the market and the challenge that they face to find reliable buyers. One woman retold that, "*Sometimes we process and there is no market*". As they do not have somebody specific to sell to, they may go to the local market and wait but not find a buyer or just sell it without a profit in order to avoid carrying the rice back home. Getting their rice to the market incurs costs and then when they get there, the buyer determines the price. Although local consumption of rice is increasing, this does not translate into demand for rice parboiled at the small-scale by rural women. The work that women do is undervalued and so when they are displaced, it goes largely unnoticed. Rice value chains are being transformed with little acknowledgement of the gendered impacts.

Demand for rice is high in Ghana (p. 30). In the Northern Region, one of the largest rice processing facilities in all of West Africa has been built and celebrated as a successful example of modernization of agro-food processing. Further this branded rice is a "Made in Ghana" competitor whilst the majority of rice consumed in Ghana is imported. With promises to create employment for 1 million over the next five years, the link in the value chain that has been emphasized has been connecting small-scale farmers to this processing facility. Development actors including international NGOs have been involved with facilitating the involvement of small-scale rice farmers to this rice processing facility as many large-scale enterprises do not want to deal with the heterogeneity of sourcing from so many smallholders. However, income from rice farming tends to be channeled through male household heads, while income from parboiling rice stays in the hands of women.

Seeking new livelihood opportunities for rural women

Considering these changing market dynamics in the rice sector, new approaches are need to keep money from agro-food processing in the hands of women. For example, exploring opportunities for processing underutilized species can provide income, increase availability of nutritious foods, and support agro-biodiversity.

An underutilized species that women process mostly for home consumption is from the African Locust Bean tree (*Parkia biglobosa*). Although there are more and more women who are interested in processing it for sale in the local market, the availability of the locust bean pods is declining because the wild trees are often not replaced after they are cut down. It is an important part of the Dagomba women's identity as it is exchanged among women at important events. Locust bean, locally known as Dawadawa, has an edible fruit pulp and the bean is used as a tea and as a savory condiment for flavoring stews. Roselle, air yam and many other underutilized species could be explored for further added-value possibilities.

As investments are made for modernizing agriculture in Ghana, it is imperative that interventions do not displace women's ability to gain income. Womens' voices need to be heard in planning processes and that their needs need to be considered within rural development. It is unknown how much longer parboiling rice will be a "go to" activity for women, so initiatives to build capacity for women to create other types of businesses will be needed. Local innovation funds, peer-to-peer trainings and network building are some of the approaches that can be embedded within broader initiatives for creating more justice within agri-food systems. ■

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