

Structural Adjustment Policies and Women in the Rural Areas in Africa: A Review of Some Major Issues

Layla El Awad Simsa'a

Introduction

Since the early 1970s most African countries have faced extremely unfavourable economic conditions. These countries have suffered from external imbalances (large deficits in the balance of payment), internal imbalances (large government budget deficits), high inflation rates, sluggish and very low growth rate of output and deteriorating living conditions. These problems were caused by a mixture of external and internal factors, e.g. rise in oil prices and manufactured imports, fall in prices of primary export, prolonged fall in terms of trade, drought and environmental degradation, civil wars, etc. To solve these problems these countries have resorted to foreign financing (borrowing on a large scale). However, in the face of a harsh external environment (continuous rise in oil prices, high interest rates on loans and increasing protectionism from the developed countries), the small-structured, dependent economies of these countries have become increasingly incapable of solving their problems. In fact, the massive borrowing of the early 1970s failed to increase productive capacity sufficiently and as a result, a huge external debt was accumulated. These countries, thus, have become more dependent on outside help and become less creditworthy. In such a position, these countries resorted to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) for assistance. The assistance from these international institutions takes two forms: direct loan disbursement and giving seal of approval for other lenders. The seal of approval of the IMF has become a

* Lecturer, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, Sudan.

prerequisite for disbursement of further loans from official and non-official lenders. The IMF, however, attached conditionalities to its assistance. Policy reforms aimed at getting prices 'right' were made a pre-condition for structural loans and grants. Countries seeking financial aid were asked to pursue policies which are expected to do away with distortion in prices (i.e. over valued exchange rates, artificially low food prices, high wage rates, low interest rates, subsidised inputs' prices, etc.). Eliminating this distortion is expected to reduce the internal and external imbalances and to improve the ability of these countries to repay their debt. These policies are known as stabilization and structural adjustment policies (SAPs).¹

The stabilization policies are intended to be a short-term process; i.e. lasting one to two years. The policies here attempt to reduce the internal and external imbalances by sharply reducing demand. Major measures included are devaluation, control of money supply; reduction of government expenditure; increase in taxation, etc. The structural adjustment policies on the other hand, have a long-term view of the economy. They concentrate on changes in productive structure, structures of incentives and institutions. The broad aim of the policies is to create the conditions conducive to the play of free market forces and free flow of goods and services between the country and the outside world. As envisaged by the advocates of adjustment policies, structural and institutional changes would improve resource allocation, increase economic efficiency and growth rates of output, especially growth rates of exports. In allocating resources the emphasis is on switching resources away from non-tradable goods to tradable goods.

The major measures included are privatization and reduction of the role of the public sector in economic activity, liberalization of trade and payments, de-regulation of prices and removal of all forms of price distortions (i.e. removal of subsidies), reduction of employment, limitation or complete freeze on wages and salaries in the public sector.

Such SAPs are advocated for based on the supposedly positive impact these policies would have had on the economy at the macro-level. However, after experiencing SAPs for many years most of these

¹ Structural adjustment and stabilization policies are usually grouped together under structural adjustment policies.

countries have not performed satisfactorily and as such debates on the relevance and desirability of these policies have ensued. It is not our intention in this paper to examine the impact of SAPs at the macro-level since this has received a thorough attention from economists and social analysts elsewhere (Onimode 1989). Rather, in this paper – which aims at stimulating discussion – we will be concerned with drawing attention to what is seen as a neglected area of analysis, that is the impact of SAPs at the micro-level. It is claimed that SAPs have neglected the realities of life at the disaggregated micro-level and have as such disregarded the differences in their impact on different segments and classes of population (those who benefit and those who lose) and for different sexes (gender effect).

With regard to the impact of SAPs at the micro level, this paper will focus on women in rural areas (emphasis is on poor women and households and on women farmers or agricultural producers).

The effects of structural adjustment policies on the household or on an individual are felt mainly via several dimensions;

Changes in income through changes in monetary wages or product price, changes in prices of purchases, especially food, changes in public expenditure, particularly those in the social sector (i.e. health, education, transport, etc.) (Elson 1989).

Regarding rural households (or individuals as earners of income, through the productive activities they are engaged in; i.e. as producers), it has generally been argued that SAPs would have a positive effect. This is because SAPs aim at stimulating agricultural production by renewing it and by increasing its price (through devaluation for export coupled with increasing producers' prices). Based on such analysis, it is usually argued that SAPs have a rural bias. It is worth mentioning that such benefits would be realized only if increases in prices of output cover increases in inputs' prices (e.g. fertilizers, farm implements) when subsidies are removed and devaluation raises prices of imported inputs. As cited by Meena (1991) for Tanzania a farmer could have purchased a ULV pump by selling 48.99 kilograms of cotton in 1986/87 but in 1987/88 the farmer has to sell 61.24 kilograms of cotton to purchase the same item. Also, while in 1986/87 a farmer needed to sell 131 kilograms of cotton to buy a sprayer pump and a package of agro-chemicals, in 1987/88 the farmer has to sell up to 178 kilograms of

cotton to buy the same inputs. The increase in the price of cotton is found to be insufficient to make up for the increased prices of necessary farm inputs. Thus, unless the prices of essential inputs and implements are controlled or subsidised, the increase of the crops' prices 'mandated by structural adjustment policies will not lead to an improvement in the economic status of a farmer' (Meena 1991). Other specific features and socio-economic structures of each country impede increased agricultural output. Price signals (price increases of crops) will not automatically and immediately increase output. The supply response of farmers to price signals is constrained by the existence of structural bottlenecks in these economies (e.g. insufficient irrigation, transport, etc.). Thus to increase output we not only need to effect changes in prices but also we need to transform the disabling structures.

Thirdly, the purchase of necessities, especially food, the effect of SAPs is different for the net producer (seller) and the net consumer (buyer), as consumer households suffer from the general increase in the level of prices brought about by the price liberalization and removal of subsidies. Taking the Zambian case for the period 1980-1985, the price of maize increased by 142 per cent but the positive impact of this increase in prices was eroded by the higher prices peasants had to pay for purchases. While nominal income has increased by 142 per cent real income increased by only 6 per cent (Elson 1989).

Finally, as beneficiary of government services, the majority of the population (especially the poor) would be adversely affected by government expenditure cuts and costs recovery programmes in these services (health, education, transport).

Having briefly sketched the probable and actual impact of SAPs on the rural household in general a question may arise as to whether SAPs are gender neutral in their effect (i.e. affecting men and women equally). The answer to this question is the main task of this paper.

SAPs and Women

To determine the specific impact of SAPs on women, we must first clarify the following issues: (i) women's role in the household and the economy; (ii) the conditions facing women (i.e. the context under which they live and work); and (iii) the nature and type of agricultural production which is supported by SAPs.

Women's Role

In low-income households (HH), women's work includes first the *reproductive work*.² Women not only 'experience the tax on their physical energies and time that biological reproduction demands' but also gender constructs oblige them to nurse sick family members, to cook, to clean the house, and to collect water and firewood (Palmer 1991). In other words, women have the responsibility of child bearing and rearing (which is required to guarantee the maintenance of human resources), care for the sick and old, and undertake house-keeping. The gender construct obligations represent a 'tax, or labour overhead' on women (Palmer 1991).

This reproductive role is viewed as natural and thus it is not valued. It is an unpaid work. It can be argued that since women's reproductive work brings about 'values of goods and services then this means that it is productive to the household economy. At least, it displaces expenditure or saves cash income' (Palmer 1991).

Macro-economic policies (SAPs being one obvious example) have no explicit consideration for the process of reproduction and maintenance of human resources (RMHR), which implies a bias against women. In other words, the reproductive role is not specifically accounted for in formulating macro-economic and sectoral policies. This lack of consideration is due to the implicit assumption that the process of RMHR, which is performed by women unpaid, will continue regardless of the way resources are allocated. As such the cost borne by women who perform it is ignored. By ignoring this work in their re-allocation of resources, planners and policy makers treat labour as a non produced, natural resource, a treatment which can strongly be challenged.

² This part has benefited greatly from the valuable work by Diana Elson, 1991.

Economists do not deny that human resources require inputs of caring, cooking, nurturing and nursing. Also, they do not deny that women are the chief providers of such inputs. But, they regard that these inputs (or activities) would be provided by women regardless of any changes in the level and composition of national income (i.e. changes in income have no impact on relative cost and benefit of maintaining and reproducing human resources). It is taken for granted that women unpaid labour is capable of being stretched to make up for any shortfalls in resources available (Elson 1989). Macro-economics assumes having an unlimited supply of female unpaid labour in the household sector ensures the continued supply of able-bodied adult to the paid sector (Elson 1991).

It is true that RMHR is different from the production of any other kind of goods because it does not respond to price signals in the same way as the production of other products (i.e. crops or manufactured products) which can be stopped or scrapped if prices fall. Mothers would not scrap their children if net returns to producing human resources falls. On the other hand RMHR is neither undertaken for love only, disregarding economic costs and benefits. Thus women, to some extent, weigh up the cost and benefit for themselves for what they provide without pay for their family, but they would not abandon or starve their family (children, especially) if costs are too high. In some cases of severe poverty, women would leave their children unattended but, as pointed by Elson (1989), this is a source of 'intense anguish not another rational economic decision'. Having shown the difference between RMHR and production of other goods (crops, manufacture, etc.), we haste to note that the unpaid work performed by women is not infinitely elastic. A point can be reached (breakeven point) where women's capacity to perform their reproductive role collapses. Even if this extreme point is not reached the success of economic policies that ignore this role would be won at the cost of longer and harder hours of work for women. As pointed out by Elson, 'cost' would be invisible to the macro-economic policy makers because it is unpaid time. But the cost will be revealed in statistics on the health and nutritional status of such women.

Secondly is the women's paid work, the so-called *productive work*. By virtue of its exchange value it is the only recognized productive work. It includes work in all economic sectors (formal and informal). In

rural areas and in the agricultural sector women as producer can be grouped under the following:

- (i) Tenancy holders (farmers): This category largely embraces women household heads.
- (ii) Family labour in husbands' or fathers' tenancies: This work has an exchange value but the way and how the income and surplus in the household are controlled and distributed may exclude women from having any income from this work. Through unequal power relations in the household (between women and men), men (especially husbands) can compel their wives to supply an extra unpaid labour in their farms. Men thus extract additional work through unequal power relations. In some cases, however, women may resist providing extra work on their husbands' farms (Dey 1980). Also women may, through joint action secure a direct payment form proceeds (Mbilinyi : 1988).
- (iii) Women working in large plantations (privately or publicly owned local or multinational corporations): Women here may be subjected to overexploitation by employers who pay a very low wage (lower than women's productivity). This is due to the fact that women are seldomly members of or actively engaged in trade unions as they often take less secured temporary work which fits with their family responsibilities.

Thirdly is the *community managing work*. This work is undertaken at the local community level. Women's responsibility in this work is an extension to their domestic responsibilities as this work is largely based on the provision of items for the survival of the family. In this paper, we will be concerned with the two roles viz. reproductive and productive.

Conditions Facing Women

Women, in general are facing extremely unfavourable conditions vis-à-vis men. In this section, emphasis will be on women farmers. Cases of social stratification and differentiation at the village and household level, the imbalance in power relations which determine who gets access to resources and who has the control on the surplus generated are widely

reported by economists and social analysts (Gladwin 1990). It has been documented that women suffer from unequal access to land, credit, basic modern inputs, extension services, and in many societies the right to grow cash or export crop. In the Sudan, such an unequal access is also reported (Badri 1986). In spite of the high level of female participation in agriculture (87 per cent in the traditional sector) in the Sudan, land is mainly owned by men. In the modern irrigated agricultural sector (e.g. Gezira Scheme), only 14 per cent of tenancies are owned by women (1982 survey). In the mechanized rain-fed agricultural sub-sector, although women perform all agricultural work, men's ownership of land is the dominant feature there.

The Types of Agricultural Schemes

Schemes which are supported by SAPs also have to be considered when examining the impacts of SAPs on women producers. Thus, whether the agricultural schemes or programmes supported by SAPs are large or small, or are for export or for food production, would make a difference for women when compared to men. This is because as the realities of life in the African context show, women are largely assigned the role of producing food while men specialize in export production. Women also are largely engaged in small scale plots for the production of food destined mainly for own consumption and for selling to the neighbouring markets (e.g. East African countries).

After clarifying the above mentioned areas, women's role, conditions facing them and nature and type of agricultural schemes promoted and supported by SAPs, we will discuss the probable effects of SAPs on women in rural areas.

Effects of SAPs on Women in Rural Areas

The burden on women in performing the reproductive role would increase for poor households which are net buyers of food and necessities and for HHS, which get prices of output that barely cover the increased cost of inputs (in other words, for households which experience a decline in real income due to high prices of purchases and low net income from production). In these HHS, women are badly hit. A decline in resources available for the household requires a high degree of effort and patience from women to make ends meet, which involves extra stress and time. For example, to economise on limited resources

available, women go to remote areas to buy cheap food which requires more preparation, e.g. coarse grain and root crops take longer time to prepare than wheat and home baking takes more time than buying bread. By resorting to such practices women are, in fact, provided an extra unpaid labour. This is from the side of supplying food (or production). On the side of consumption, when a household reduces consumption due to a fall in real income women's (as well as children's) share in total consumption will fall more than the fall in the share of men. Women unable to buy enough food of the right type to feed the whole family tend to give priority in feeding to adult males. This discrimination would have adverse effects on women's physical health and productivity, especially in the long-run. Moreover the stress and tiredness felt by women in their continuous efforts to stretch their husbands' declining real income with good housekeeping would have some adverse effect on their psychological health.

As a response to such hardships experienced while performing their reproductive role, women, besides their domestic responsibilities, used to engage in informal income-generating activities to supplement the household income. This again constitutes an extra burden on them. It can be argued that women can do this in their spare time; but we think women in such areas and in poor households can be regarded as fully engaged in work (i.e. work in farm, collecting wood, water, housekeeping, etc.). So, this is an extra work carried at the expense of their health. Women thus device a number of survival strategies to ensure the maintenance of their families, but with high cost to them.

Besides food provision, women look after children, the sick and the old. Cuts in government expenditure in social services (especially health) and the introduction of cost recovery programmes in providing these services increase the unpaid work of women in the household, e.g. when hospitals administration reduce the time patients spend in hospitals. Reductions in cost per unit of patient due to cuts in government expenditure cannot be considered as a good indicator of efficiency because the cost of looking after the sick and old is shifted (transferred) from the paid economy to the unpaid economy of the household. Funding of hospitals fall, but the burden on women in the household rises. Total labour inputs have remained unchanged and there has been no real increase in efficiency (Elson 1991). Neglecting women's unpaid work not only devalue women's contribution to the

economy but also obscures the true cost of these macro-economic policies.

Another burden on women in rural areas arises from out migration of men in search of increased income. For Africa it has been reported (Gladwin 1990) that many women do not know the whereabouts of their husbands and as such they are forced to assume the responsibility of household heads. Women-headed households tend to be the poorest, since women are discriminated against as farmers. Those women who have contacts with their migrant husbands (or sons) in urban areas suffer from lack of, or diminished, remittances from them due to urban wage freeze, rising unemployment, food prices, and cost of accommodation in urban areas, etc. Faced with such declining resources, women must put more efforts to bridge the gap between means and ends in order to ensure the survival of their families.

The productive role (paid work) is related to the conditions women are facing and the type of agricultural schemes or programmes SAPs support. Given that women in rural areas suffer from unequal access to land, provision of training to use high yield varieties, irrigation, inputs such as fertilizers or tractors, capital (credit) they could not benefit from incentives (i.e. high prices) provided. Furthermore, when we find that SAPs support large scale and export agriculture, women producers would draw no or less benefit compared to men because they are engaged mainly in production of food (e.g. East African farmers who work on small plots of land). Due to the emphasis of SAPs on tradable goods (exports mainly), which is the domain of men, we find that men who grow exports crop may take most of the basic inputs available. It is worthy to mention the warning given by Gladwin (1990) that the outcome of such a bias of SAPs in the African context (i.e. towards export) may be an African food crisis in the 1990s. In other words, neglecting the food sector which is largely the responsibility of women may lead to food crisis and may also jeopardize the success of SAPs themselves.

Women producers (farmers) can benefit from SAPs only if they are net sellers (i.e. sell more than they buy) and if the increases in prices of their output are more than the cost of inputs (which may not always be the case due to the discrimination against them).

Moreover, women producers are disadvantaged due to their double role. Because women are in charge of reproducing household members and producing goods and services, a rise in price of purchases, cuts in social services, etc., would increase the burden on them on the reproductive side and this will reduce the time and energy available to them for production. One woman is reported to have missed the entire planting season because she was busy looking after her family members (especially the sick) (Errars and Young 1988). Thus, cuts in the public expenditure make it difficult for women to redeploy some of their labour towards crop production. For Palmer (1991) public expenditure 'provides an external economy, a continuous complementary resource, to the supply response to price incentives'.

When women are so desperate for economic returns they are obliged to forego some degree of immediate welfare of family in order to have productive gainful work. Thus, women have to trade off their economic activities against their household responsibilities. The following quotation is telling: 'An OECD report argues that if women did not perform these tasks' i.e. reproductive work men would have to do so. We would then begin to speak of the important opportunity cost of male unpaid labour' (Palmer 1991). Also, the unpaid reproductive work performed by women not only limits the time women can spend in economic activities but also restricts them to activities that are compatible with home schedule (Palmer 1991). These compatible economic activities may not be the activities that make the best use of women's labour resources and, thus, there is a misallocation of such resources. Even if women could manage to perform the two roles satisfactorily this surely would be at the cost of reducing their health and productive capacity in the long-run. Also, the cost of performing these roles can be reflected in the stress and tiredness of women which may lead to instability of family life (i.e. lead to separation or divorce and fragmentation of family members).

Conclusion

In this short paper we have examined the probable impact of SAPs on women in poor rural household (with emphasis on women farmers)³. The examination shows that women are more disadvantaged when compared to men because they bear the cost of the fall in resources at the household level more than men. It has to be noted that examining the impact of SAPs on women is important not only for equity reasons, but also for growth generating reasons. Within the existing social division of labour in African societies, women play a significant role in the economy through their role in reproduction and maintenance of human capital (labour force which is a vital input for growth), and through the labour they provide to export and domestic crop production (especially food). Acknowledging such vital economic roles, macro-economic policies in their task of allocation or re-allocation of resources must consider the resources required to perform such economic roles. Failure to provide the necessary resources to accomplish these roles will affect not only women, but also the entire economy, especially in the long-run⁴.

³ By focusing on poor households we avoid the problems that may arise from class differences (i.e. the poor versus the rich). It is also important to draw attention not only to class differences but also to differences in religion, ethnic values and beliefs. Although women in most societies perform the roles mentioned in this paper, such differences may lead to differences in the degree of women's involvement and power at the household level.

⁴ This does not imply the acceptance of such existing social division of labour but rather it draws attention to the need to consider the existing gender relations when we formulate and implement macro-economic policies in the short to medium term.

References

- Badri, B., 1986, 'Women, Land Ownership and Development : The Case of Sudan', in *The Ahfad Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Khartoum.
- Dey, J., 1989, 'Gambian Women Unequal Partners in Rice Development', in *The Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3.
- Due, J. M. and Gladwin, C. H., 1991, 'Impacts of Structural Adjustment Programs on African Women Farmers and Female-Headed Households', *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 73:1431-39, December.
- Elson, D., 1989, 'The Impact of Structural Adjustment on Women: Concepts and Issues', in Onimode 1989, *IMF, World Bank & the African Debt*.
- Elson, D., 1991, 'Gender Analysis and Economics in the Context of Africa', Paper prepared for the CODESRIA Workshop on *Gender Analysis and African Social Sciences*, Dakar, September.
- Evan, A. and Young K., 1989, 'Gender Issues in Household : Labour Allocation, the Case of Northern Provinces in Zambia'.
- Gladwin, C. H. (ed.) 1991, *Structural Adjustment and African Women Farmers*, Gainesville, University of Florida.
- Mbilinyi, M., 1988, 'The Invention of Female Farming System in Africa', in Tanzania workshop on *The Economic crisis*.
- Onimode, B., 1989, *IMF, World Bank and the African Debt: The Economic Impact*, Vols. I & II, London, Zed Books.
- Palmer, 1991, *Gender and Population in the Adjustment of African Economics*, Geneva, ILO.