TOILING FOR NIL; Women in the Western Kenya Sugar Industry

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Abstract: Women provide the need for a major reassessment of the labour relations in the sugar industry which results in positive attempts to maximize on their labour in western Kenya. The sugar industry sought to encourage women particularly in Kakamaga, Bungoma and Busia, in order to bolster sugarcane output in the area. With the onset of the private sugar companies in the area, exemplified by Butali, West Kenya and Busibwabo, sugarcane production had to continue to prosper instead of diminishing at the expense of the benefits to the labourers (the women). The Luhya women in the area bore the greatest responsibility ensuring that sugarcane is not only produced to meet the needs of the “hungry” sugar companies, but equally the returns from sugarcane production was substantial. By 2004, increased women labour in the sugarcane industry of western Kenya had produced Luhya proto-capitalists (exclusively men), who had managed to accumulate the returns from sugarcane production at the expense of the woman labourer. The Luhya proto-capitalists have threatened the sociological equilibrium in western Kenya which saw the women in the area toil in the sugar industry for nil at the expense of communal solidarities. This paper applies the concepts of utility and expropriation to analyze how women were exploitative utilized in the sugar industry for nil returns. The concepts illustrate how the sugar companies squeezed the labour out of the Luhya women while the Luhya men siphoned the sugarcane returns from the women labour, therefore, letting the women in the western toil for nil in the sugar industry. This paper is founded on paramountcy of primary data, from farmers’ records corroborated by researcher observations, interviews and backed up by secondary data especially library literature for purpose of content and context analysis and grounding.

Keywords: Women, Subsistence, Sugarcane, Labour

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment, connotes that women shall enjoy human rights in practice regardless of gender. This prompts women agency and economic vibrancy in the realization of their full potential as productive workers, (Kardam & Kardam, 2017) especially in the sugar industry of western Kenya. Empowerment is, therefore, a process by which “oppressed” persons agentively gain control over their lives individually & collectively. Globally, cash crop farming as epitomized by sugarcane provides employment in the areas of production to stimulate economic returns to the labourers in the industry, hence the temptation by a large number of women to provide labour in the sugarcane plantations in western Kenya. The increased number of women providing labour in the sugarcane plantation is provoked by the women’s agentive utility response instincts (Anderson, 2002) to the family subsistence needs with an endeavour to utilize their labour and time maximally to their advantage in securing the family needs. However, discussions with some Luhya proto-capitalist sugarcane bourgeois revealed that women labour was not only reliable and effective and efficient, but, extremely cheap compared to the male labour in the same field and line of duty. These begged the question; if women are effectively and efficiently dedicated in their work in the sugarcane plantations, then why are they poorly paid. The paper affirms that, the deliberate low pay to the women was a fact by the sugarcane plantation owners of ensuring that women were tied to their work and hence the plantation owners were assured of the much-needed labour as the women and their families lived on hand to mouth “nations” from the plantations.

Empirical and Literature Review

In African and notably among the bantu of western Kenya, gender is seen as an aspect that defines individual identity. Among the Luhya in western Kenya, gender has a great influence on their lives from birth, and they enact its social and cultural meanings at every level (Castaneda & Bums-Glover, 2004). The incorporated individual adopts the value and behaviours the community encourage and repulses the ones the community discourages (Peason & Davilla, 2001). From the time a child is born, luhyas treat individuals differently depending on their genitalia. Boys and girls are even dressed...
in different kinds of clothing and regalia. The community and parents alike react uniquely to infants depending on whether they are boys or girls (Bell & Carver, 1980).

Social constructionists maintain that gender evolves as one relates and interact within their community structures. Among the Luhya, gender is constructed based on the language chosen for use in the community engagements on masculine or feminine topics of discussion (Pearce, 1976). Thus, gender is an inherent product of language and social learning (Perry, 1992). In western Kenya like anywhere else, women are often considered anomalous or a variant from the norm (Gilligan, 1982). Recently, women empowerment has emerged as a new developmental path for women resulting in constructive femininity Horner (1972) established that until the 1970s, research on women was despised for being at variance with findings in men.

Gender variations are augmented by ways through which men and women are brought up. Gilligan (1982) submits that men and women experience relationships. Through socialization and moral development, men depend on separation and individuation to institute their gender identity. Feminine identity on the other hand does not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the increase of individuation. Masculinity is outlined by separation and femininity through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy and female by separation (Gilligan, 1982). Children learn to be female or male from their parents (Perry, 1992). Parental influence on children’s gender socialization is directly and indirectly through interactions. (Marmion & Lundberg-Love, 2004). Children learn to embrace gender roles in childhood, applying gender rules to oneself and others. Thus, girls in western Kenya perfect the art in the sugarcane plantation. While this is primarily learned and reinforced through the influence of parents it is also affected by peers (Tanner & Bly, 1993).

The acquisition of deviant or conforming behaviour is through imitation. New responses to hierarchy are learned as a result of observing the behaviour of others. Social modeling is not a simple mimicry; but individuals breed new behaviour patterns in a similar way by going beyond what they have seen or heard. (Bandura, 1997). In western Kenya, girls learn how to work in the sugarcane plantations by imitating their mothers. In addition to cultivating new competencies, social modeling affects motivation by instilling behavioral outcome expectations or measures of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Behavioral change in line with social cognitive theory is possible through a personal sense of control. Women in western Kenya believe in their ability and capability to work hence they are more active and live self-determined lives (Luszczyńska & Schwarzer, 2005). Self-efficacy in women in western Kenya is widely regarded as a conciliator in the sugarcane plantations in the area.

Women Labour and Kitchen Garden alienation in western Kenya

Women labour was conventionally dedicated to kitchen garden for subsistence production. However, with the introduction of sugarcane farming in western Kenya and the capitalist mindset of the men, land was increasingly appropriated for sugarcane farming to an extent of diminishing the kitchen garden (Mukhwana, 2016), worked on by women for family’s subsistence. Therefore, with the introduction of the sugar farming in western Kenya it not only wrestle land from the kitchen garden, but alienated the women labour from the subsistence kitchen garden to the sugarcane plantation in the area. The introduction of sugarcane production in western Kenya in this context steered a new form of labour, the women labour in sugarcane plantations (Mukhwana, 2016). With the sugar plantations taking up the kitchen gardens, subsistence labour returns that accrued from the kitchen garden were untenable (Kennedy & Oniango, 1989), contravening the women guided economy of affection in the area.

The sugarcane farmers in western Kenya transformed women labour, from subsistence kitchen garden and absorbed it into sugarcane plantations in order to maximize on the returns from sugarcane farming. This dispossessed the kitchen garden, the women labour, and the land necessary for subsistence production to prosper. Resultantly, the kitchen garden in most homes in western Kenya was rundown by the sugarcane plantations (Sorre, 2005). Therefore, the introduction of sugarcane production in the region made the subsistence labour reservoir to drastically shrink. It equally caused food scarcity in the western Kenya as many homes relied on food purchases (Makana, 2008), as opposite to their conventionally produced foods in the kitchen garden. The conscription of most homes in western Kenya into sugarcane production was informed by the concentration of the sugar companies in the area exemplified by Butali, West Kenya, Busibwabo, Mumias and Nzoia (National Sugar Task Force, 2019). This high concentration is explained by a dichotomy; first, the soils in western Kenya are rich alluvial soils on the slopes of Mt. Elgon. Second, the fact that women labour was not only cheap to procure but comparatively cheap to maintain given that the kitchen garden had been rundown and the subsistence vulnerability of the women was exposed, prompting them into a utilitarian response. Barasa, a former Mumias Sugar Company official corroborates this indicating that sugar companies are ever competing to ensure that their immediate vicinity acquired a nuclear like status. While this called for the sugar companies to contract more land for sugarcane production, the collateral damage to the woman dominated subsistence sector was to reengineer women labour and reconfigure the same
Once and other family needs of the sugarcane trailer to be able to secure the kitchen garden and the economy of affection were from each other in the economy of affection. However, women and the neighbouring homes a chance to benefit from neighbours far preparation for sugarcane planting and sugarcane costed economy of affection as embedded in kinship ties. Land tubers, sorghum, sim, groundnuts, sweet potatoes and cassavas all of which are predominantly associated with women labour in the area. This revealed why the hilly areas of western Kenya is relatively subsistence secure in the region.

In the hilly areas of western Kenya elucidated by Mt. Elgon and its slopes, Samia hills, Kabasali hills, Chebuyuyi and Utieri hills, physical researcher observations revealed that limited women labour were devoted to sugarcane farming. This was explained by the fact that the hilly terrains of these areas made the location impassable for the sugar company trailers, grabbers and tractors to supply inputs, till the land where applicable and transported the sugarcane when harvested (Mukhwana, 2013). These areas were famous for subsistence produce, notably sorghum, millet, maize, sim sim, groundnuts, sweet potatoes and cassavas all of which are predominantly associated with women labour in the area. This revealed why the hilly areas of western Kenya is relatively subsistence secure in the region compared to the rest, for the diversity in food production.

On the sugarcane plantations, numerous categories of workers were contracted to offer labour services to the farms. The contracted services included land preparation services, seed-cane and fertilizer supply, planting and weeding, harvesting and transportation of the harvested sugarcane. Of these services, only seeds and where necessary fertilizer burdened the women in the kitchen garden for subsistence production. In most cases, suckers for potatoes, cassava stem, banana tubers, sorghum, sim sim and millet seeds could be obtained for free from a neighbour. This affirmed the economy of affection as embedded in kinship ties. Land preparation for sugarcane planting and sugarcane costed more than 50% of the deductions on the sugarcane farmers pay slips (Mukhwana, 2013). Planting was mainly shouldered by the family and when need arose from neighbours (House-Midamba, 1990). This gave women and the neighbouring homes a chance to benefit from each other in the economy of affection. However, with the raging spread of sugarcane farming, both the kitchen garden and the economy of affection were deliberately edged out and was replaced with sugarcane production and a cash economy. The exorbitant behaviour of the petty sugarcane bourgeoisie in western Kenya was comprehended as both the women labour and the kitchen garden were expropriated. Therefore, sugarcane farming in western Kenya occasioned food production scarcity in the area, as either the money acquired by the men as casual labourers did not directly translate into subsistence needs or the garden for subsistence production of its women labour were alienated to sugarcane production. The sugarcane harvesting equally heavily relied on local youths who were jobless in the region (Mukhwana, 2013). However, the company terms and conditions left them and their families poor and prone to hunger and starvation.

Notwithstanding the low payments, women also lacked proper attire for the work, like helmets, gloves, gum boots and overalls in addition to monilis. Moreover, they were exposed to the catastrophes of the weather like the heavy downpours that affected their health. Moreover, the study revealed that sugarcane plantation owners did not provide them with a medical cover. They, therefore, used the peanuts earned from weeding sugarcane plantations for medication when need arose. Chronologically, there has been an increase in the payment for the weeding of sugarcane (Mukhwana, 2013). However, the amounts paid to women were insufficient to provide subsistence and other family needs. Given then that food was the priority for the women labourers, it was obvious that the earned income although not satisfactory, did not escape the women’s subsistence functions of the family.

Women migrant labour evolved in the sugarcane plantations in western Kenya too. Here, women left their homes early in the morning to weed sugarcane and arrived back in the afternoons. The low wages and poor working conditions as irradiated were part of their lives. Given that most of the land in western Kenya had been dedicated to sugarcane cultivation, the returns from sugarcane after harvesting accrued to the Luhya proto-capitalists (Amadala, 2020) who had leased the land as opposed to the women workers. This then indicates that although sugarcane farming enabled the people of western Kenya to earn cash income, the financial returns failed to serve as a core provider of the family subsistence needs. Women were always away and no labour was committed to the kitchen garden. This resulted in food production scarcity that was caused by women absence in both the land and the labour to the subsistence production. Prior to the extensive cultivation of sugarcane in western Kenya, women devoted their labour and time to the kitchen gardens which provided the families with sufficient food produce. The men, on the other hand, devoted the kitchen garden and labour to sugarcane production both of which threaten women financial viability.
Winston Wekesa, Evans Wenchka and Maurice Lukhafwa sugarcane plantation owners confessed to hiring women labour and noted that women labour was highly utilized during the planting and weeding of sugarcane. Celestine Nanyama, a leader of woman group confirmed hiring out their labour to sugarcane farmers. However, she indicated that the returns were inadequate to sustain their family needs which made men to exit the labour market. Oniang’o observed that sugarcane labour caused hardship to female workers (Kennedy and Oniang’o). With regard to weeding, Nasiminyu, Nanyama and Nawire acknowledged being paid per acre of land they weeded. Conventionally, the women were paid 1200 shillings per acre of sugarcane they weeded. It was further established that women worked in groups of fours which meant that each woman got 300 shillings for each acre they successfully weeded. Therefore, commercial sugarcane production in western Kenya proletarianized women labour as women formed groups to hire themselves out to sugarcane farmers. Indeed, this was an adaptive way for women responding to the expansion of sugarcane by utilizing their labour time away from the eliminated kitchen garden.

Conventionally, sugarcane farming was perceived as a male domain. This was explained by the fact that most undertakings in the sugar economy were done by men (Mukhwana, 2016). This was contrary to the pre-sugarcane period, which indicated that women labour was expropriated in the kitchen garden for subsistence purpose. With sugarcane, the men decided what portion of land to be under sugarcane cultivation. In addition, they decided whether the venture would be private or contract. Land preparation was entirely a male domain as both the truck drivers and the leaders of the oxen teams were men. Moreover, sugarcane harvesting, pulling and loading was done by men in addition to transportation as established from research surveys and observations. However, planting and weeding involved extensive women labour as they formed groups for weeding sugarcane. For instance, renown sugarcane weeding groups in Navakholo were led by Celestine Nanyama and by Jude Masinde. The researcher observed both men and women provided labour on the farm during planting, however, with women were the majority.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper assessed how women labour as a key factor of food production in in the kitchen garden has been alienated and utilized in sugar production. The dominated spread of sugarcane in western Kenya and eventual encroachment on the kitchen garden left women in the region with no option than to loan their labour time to the ravaging sugarcane plantations. However, marginal pay for women labour in the area compromised food security in their homes. The social oriented women labour founded on the economy of affection favoured subsistence production. On the contrary, the cash oriented labour in the sugarcane plantations tore the social networks that characterized the women labour apart. This worked to the advantage of both the proto-capitalist sugarcane plantation owners and the numerous sugar companies in the area. Introduction of sugarcane in western Kenya, therefore, proletarianized women labour and redirected it to the cash economy from the subsistence one. This had adverse implications on the food production and security situation in the region.

**REFERENCES**