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# Women's Income-Generating Activities and Gender Roles in Rural Households in Mayo Danay Division, Northern Cameroon

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## Abstract

In sub-Saharan Africa, women participate in the rural labor market where they are present in subsistence agro-pastoral activities, which are more domestic work and, in other income-generating rural activities such as trading. Within the studies carried out on women's status in communities, those on women's access to income-generating activities in certain contexts such as Ghanaian urban areas, have revealed that, income-generating activities contribute to a redistribution of gender roles in households. This paper by questioning the impacts of women's economic activities on gender relations within households in rural areas of Northern Cameroon, aims to analyse the realities faced by women involved in income-generating activities in a particular rural area to assess if the changes mentioned above happened in all communities. The data used for this work are empirical data from a qualitative survey of 48 women living in 8 villages in Mayo Danay, an administrative territory in Northern Cameroon. The results of this survey reveal that rural women involved in income-generating activities are both breadwinners and domestic workers. Contrary to what was observed in Ghana, the status of female breadwinners does not participate in the emancipation of women. Indeed, even with their means of production, women are still dependent on men and are still alone to bear the burden of the domestic work. Access of women to income-generating activities and their participation in household expenditures have surely reduced poverty in households but have not contributed to gender roles changes.

**Keywords:** Women, Rural Area, Income Generating Activities, Households, Cameroon

## 1. Context

In sub-Saharan Africa, most women are active. According to International Labor Organization, sub-Saharan Africa, with a female activity rate of 61%, is the area with the highest female activity rate in the world (ILOSTAT, 2020). These women are present in all sectors of the economy. They are found in agriculture, industry but also in services. They participate in the rural labor market as well as in the urban labor market (Locoh, 2013). In the rural labor market, they make essential contributions to the rural economy by working alone as self-employed entrepreneur or by working for others as salaried employees or family helpers (Droy 1990; Roberts, 2001). The participation rate of women in the rural economy in sub-Saharan Africa stands at 60% and is the highest in the

world. With this high rate, some scholars as the Danish feminist author, Esther Boserup (1984), described Africa like the ideal context to study women involved in agriculture. Let's say that these percentages represent the mean of the participation of women in the various sub-Saharan countries and not the situation in each country. When observing the situation in the countries, we notice that, women's participation in the rural economy varies from one country to another. In some countries as Ivory Coast, the participation rate of women in rural economy is quite low with a rate of 36%. In other countries like Lesotho, Niger and even Cameroon, this rate is high varying between 60% and 70% (FAOSTAT, 2019). Within the rural economy, women are involved in subsistence farming which is more domestic work and, in rural income-generating activities such as trading of agricultural products (crops and animals), handicrafts, and food processing. Thus, rural women are actors of non-market and market economies.

Studies carried out on women's presence into gainful economic activities (Acharya Bell et al., 2010; Boateng et al., 2012; Brown, 1994), have revealed that involvement of women in income-generating activities is a favourable factor to female contribution to household decision-making, and expenditures on one hand, and to redistribution of social gender roles on another hand. In fact, in the households of women involved in income-generating activities, there has been a gradual entry of men into domestic tasks such as taking care of children, cleaning the compound, collecting firewood and many other related tasks (Nignan, 2005). This article, which addresses the issue of the place of active rural women within households in the northern of Cameroon, is part of the discussions developed on the topic of women's access to gainful economic activities and the redistribution of social gender roles in private sphere.

The analysis of the social roles of active rural women in Africa in the private sphere is quite relevant insofar as this reflection allows us to seize and understand the experiences of a large number of African female populations. Africa today is still the Africa of villages, as Jean-Marc Ela said. In Cameroon, the majority of the female population is still living in rural areas. The lives of these women are articulated between the private and public spheres. Indeed, women's lives are not only built around realities such as politics, economics, arts and culture. Household work, domestic violence, , sexuality, household charges and expenditures, occupy an important part in their daily lives. Moreover, with the concept of empowerment that emerged in the context of gender and development policy during the second half of the 1990s, the emancipation of women is no longer understood solely from the perspective of reduction of the gap between men and women in politics and in the labor market but as a multidimensional reality whose indicators are both quantitative and qualitative and taken into consideration the relations of domination as well as other elements like the sharing of domestic tasks, the margins of freedom given to women in decision-making, the capacity to influence (Roy, 2006). From the life of women in private areas, we can have clear ideas on the changes and mutations that take place concerning the status and roles of women in society just as we can understand the life of women in public sphere. Indeed, the life of women in the political and economic areas is strongly influenced by the life of women in domestic units. The dichotomy between private and public that confined the women in domestic work and offered men the exclusive power of public relations is presented as responsible for the ousting of women from the political scene and labor market. The female roles in domestic unit as the reproduction and taking care of children, contribute to the marginalization of women in the labor market, as the activity behavior of women has so clearly shown in the European Union where women leave the labor market for a period of time to take care of the family in general and children in particular (Battagliola, 1984). To analyze the place of active rural women within households in the rural areas in Northern Cameroon, we conducted a survey with women living in few villages of the Mayo Danay division.

## **2. Methodology: a qualitative study among women engaged in couple relationships**

This article is a reflection built on empirical data. The data presented at the level of the results are obtained during focus group discussions carried out with women engaged in couple relationships and living in rural localities of the Mayo Danay division such as Vonaloum, Zébé, Yirdeng and Djogoïdi which are all localities in the Yagoua subdivision ; and in the localities of Karam 1 and Massa-Yka of Gobo subdivision. In addition, women living in the villages of Tchalawa and Bangana located in the subdivision of Guere were also met. In sum, 8 villages of the Mayo Danay division constitute our study area.

Mayo Danay is an administrative territory, a division in the Far North region of Cameroon, located in the northern part of the country on the banks of the Logone River and which has a hot climate with rainfall of about 560 millimeters per year. This territory is mainly occupied by rural populations. According to the data of the last general census of the population in Cameroon (BUCREP, 2005), about 77, 2% of the population of Mayo Danay live in rural areas. In this area, the prevalence of couples living together is quite high. About 64.7% of the population above twelve years of age is engaged in a cohabitant couple. These couple relationships are: polygamous marriages, monogamous marriages and common-law unions. This population practice Christian, Muslim, and African traditional religions.

During the field trips carried out during the months of December 2020 and January 2021, we animated 8 focus group discussions with 48 women in the union and involved in income-generating activities. Each focus group constituted of 6 women working in various fields of activity. Thus, in each of the groups, we met farmers, artisans, traders, breeders, food processors. This diversity has been taken into account because it allows the collection of data on activities.

The data was collected using an interview guide and in two languages: French and Massa. With women who could understand and speak French, data was collected in French. But, for women who did not speak French well, data was collected in the mother tongue of the peoples living in the villages of Mayo Danay: the Massa language, which is a language understood and mastered by the team of researchers who collected the data. Data were collected on the following items: income-generating activities, household charges and expenditures, domestic work, sexuality and domestic violence. These data, recorded in a tape recorder, were transcribed, translated when needed, and recorded in French before being submitted to a thematic content analysis during which the data were categorized and codified.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1. Female activity in the rural area of Mayo Danay: A series of agro pastoral activities*

In the rural area of the Mayo Danay division, most women are engaged in agro-pastoral activities, supplemented by fishing, trading, handicrafts and food processing. An observation of the orientation of agricultural, fishing and food processing products reveals that some products are used for the subsistence of the family while; others are integrated in the market economy. With their activities, women are engaged in various types of economies: invisible and visible, market and non-market economies.

##### **3.1.1. Farming**

Nowadays, we see that farm work has become more and more a woman's job. The women are involved in agriculture more than men. And, they cultivate food and non-food crops. The main food crops the women grow are: cereals (irrigated rice, rain fed rice, sorghum, maize, voandzou, sesame, cowpea, penicillary millet, etc. ), vegetable crops (okro, folere, cucumber, eggplants, peppers, watermelons, etc.), legumes (peanuts, soybeans, etc.), plants with tubers (cassava and plantains) and fruit trees (mango trees). Cereals are sown in the rainy season while vegetable crops and tubers are cultivated in the dry season.

For the majority of food crops like market gardening and most cereals, women practice traditional agricultural methods using hoe, plow, unimproved seeds, slash-and-burn etc. Modern farming methods are only used for the cultivation of irrigated rice. The cultivation of irrigated rice which is widespread in all the sub divisions of Mayo Danay, was initiated and encouraged by an agricultural company, the SEMRY (company for the expansion and modernization of Yagoua rice cultivation), which offers technical assistance to farmers. Rice cultivation is practiced using modern cultivation methods that combine irrigation, the use of fertilizers and improved seeds. In fact, the peasants cultivate rice on plots irrigated by SEMRY, use fertilizers and improved seeds made available to them by SEMRY. This company operates on about 11,500 hectares of land. Food products from the food

agriculture are consumed locally in households, in the cities of Cameroon and even in neighboring countries like Nigeria and Chad.

The agriculture of non-food products consists mainly of the cultivation of cotton and tobacco. Cotton and tobacco are planted by few peasants in the subdivisions of Gobo and Guere. Tobacco cultivated here is a product used within the Mayo Danay division. It is not integrated into any transformation or exportation process. The cultivation of tobacco is promoted by the peasants themselves. And it does not benefit from any technical assistance and the peasants use traditional cultural methods as hoe, watering with open wells to grow this non-food crop. Cotton, on the other hand, is cultivated for exportation. It is not integrated in the local consumption. The cultivation of cotton as well as its trade is organized and promoted by the cotton development company (SODECOTON), a parastatal agricultural company. Cotton cultivation is carried out on plots of land belonging to the populations who benefit from SODECOTON technical assistance in agricultural inputs like fertilizers, improved seeds etc.

To grow these crops, women work as independent entrepreneurs in their personal fields and as family helpers in the fields of their spouses. In the fields' s of their husbands or spouses, women are involved in nearly all the tasks. They are the ones doing without being paid the following tasks: hoeing, planting, weeding, harvesting, threshing and placing in granaries. The men only do the land clearing and selling of the farm produce. Even though both men and women are involved in the agricultural activities of these farms; men are the main and direct beneficiaries of the products harvested. Women do not earn any income for their participation in the agricultural activities on the farms of their husbands and do not have the right to sell the crops. Thus, women are a free workforce for their spouses.

As independent entrepreneurs, women work with their children on the lands attributed to them by their spouses for agricultural activities. The women carry out activities in their farms after hoeing and planting in the farms of the men. Women work following a particular cycle. When the farming activities start, women firstly engage themselves in the farms of their spouses. It is when they finish planting in those farms that they can begin farming activities in their personal farms. Thus during the periods when farming activities are carried, women are very busy as declared by this informant *"the woman at this time is very busy, we can say that she is at the beginning and at the end of all the farming activities."*

### 3.1.2. Fishing

Fishing is a popular activity in the Mayo-Danay division, watered by Logone River, Lougoumatia River, Lake Guere, Lake Maga, ponds and other streams. The fishing activities are practiced throughout the year with a main fishing season from July to November. The fishing methods are artisanal. Fishermen and fisherwomen use for the activities: fishing nets, fishing canals, fishing hooks, and baskets. This fishery supplies with fresh and smoked fish, the local markets of the Mayo Danay Division, , the markets of the towns located in Divisions which shared boundaries with the Mayo Danay such as Maroua, Bogo, Kaele , and some markets situated in Nigerian and Chad villages. The main species fished are: tilapia, captain etc. Women are not engaged in all types of fishing. They mainly practice basket fishing in ponds and small streams during the rainy season.

### 3.1.3. Breeding

The breeders met in the Mayo-Danay Division, practice two types of breeding: sedentary breeding and transhumant breeding. However, women are only present in sedentary breeding which is a very dynamic business. The area is full of cattle, goats, pigs, poultry, horses and donkeys. This activity is carried out in the pastures that surround the villages, in animal farms and in the surroundings of the family compounds. Sedentary breeding mobilizes a large population of animals. Women are involved neither in transhumant breeding nor in practicing animal husbandry in pastures. They rear animals in their compounds.

#### 3.1.4. Gathering

Picking is carried out in the bushes where the population collects various parts of the plants. The products collected are leaves (*Cassia occidentalis*, *Corchorus olitorius*, *Leptadenia hastata*, *Amaranthus viridis*, false sesame *Ceratotheca sesamoides*), tree bark, lianas, skein, and wild fruits (jujube, tamarind, wild figs, desert dates, doum and ronier, annone, shea, néré) which are used in traditional pharmacopoeia, the construction of houses and enclosures, the nutrition of population specially in the dry season. It's a female activity. Only women carry out picking activities.

#### 3.1.5. Handicraft

Handicraft is an important activity in the area and its economic impact is very high in the domestic units. In this sector, women are present in ceramics, pottery, and basketry which are female activities. To make clay pots, women collect clay in ponds and use hand-building in shaping of clay. Thus, on the bottom of a round pot, the potter, who is a woman, applies a layer of clay and shapes it with her hands until it takes a slightly spherical shape. She can then do various decorations (circular lines, zigzags etc.) on the pot. Once dried, the pottery is burned to make it stronger and more resistant. The various kitchen utensils produced by potters are: canaries for storing water, and cooking pots.

#### 3.1.6. Food conservation and processing

The women of Mayo Danay are very involved in the conservation of animal and vegetal products. Indeed, the women salt, smoke, dry fish and meat after fishing and hunting trips. The species hunted and conserved are: antelopes, hinds, partridges, wild ducks, rabbits, guinea fowl, monitor lizards, squirrels. They also preserve food through drying to avoid post-harvest losses and ensure the availability of food in all seasons in domestic units and markets. Foods that benefit from conservation through drying are peanuts, sesame seeds, ground peas, okro, and corn. Concerning food processing, women produced from crops local beer (*bili bili*) and liquors (*arki*). All these processed and preserved foods are not only used for family consumption; women store them in their attic and wait for the lean season to sell them.

#### 3.1.7. Trading

Mayo Danay rural area is characterized by an important commercial activity that can be seen in markets and small stalls where items produced by the local population are displayed as well as manufactured or raw products from other areas such as gasoil, sugar, clothes, potatoes, etc. The markets are places where exchanges are done between inhabitants of the administrative territory, traders coming from Cameroonian big cities (Ngaoundéré, Douala and Yaoundé), and traders of neighboring countries (Chad and Nigeria). There are two main types of markets in this area: food markets and livestock markets. The women of the locality are more present in the food markets where they sell the products of their farms: cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplants, peanuts and many other foods. To sell, the women sometimes, travel on long distances; going from one village to another. This because, in these rural areas, the market of a village is only opened once per week. And villagers do trading in the market of their village and in the markets of other villages of the area, located near or far from their residential area. This is a prosperous activity, and by doing business, women have become independent entrepreneurs today.

### *3.2. Women in household expenditures: bearing all or part of the responsibilities*

Within the domestic units, women contribute to household responsibilities through domestic work and household expenditures. While all women are implicated in domestic work, only women involved in income-generating activities participate in household expenditures. Thus, economic activity determines the participation of women in household expenditures. In fact, women who do not have income-generating activities like the Muslim women are not involved in household expenditures; they only deal with domestic labor. Their male spouses provide for all household expenditures.

In households, with women having income-generating activities, the situation is quite different. Women are not only in charge of domestic labor, they also assume household expenditures. In these households, women take care of children and the other members of family; they prepare food, clean up the compounds, sponsor the education of the children, supply finances for the health and other needs of the family. In fact, women involved in income-generating activities are also breadwinners. Thus, in the rural areas of Mayo Danay, the traditional male breadwinner model is not observed in all homes. Women are major actors of the domestic economy. The data collected during the survey, clearly shows that in some households, women bear all the expenditures while in others, they assume part of the expenditures of the domestic units. Women carry the whole burden of the household when the disengagement of men from family responsibilities is observed. Indeed, in some households men are very careless and do not implicate themselves neither in household expenditures nor in domestic labor. Women thus, find themselves alone carrying the whole burden of the household responsibilities. They are both those who do the domestic labor and play the role of breadwinner. During the focus groups discussions, one woman identifies herself in these terms: *"I am the man and the woman of the house. I cultivate tobacco to assume the expenditures of my family. I sponsor the education of my children and I finance the health of the family members. My children attend secondary education and universities with my personal income."*

Alongside these brave women, who can be described as jack-of-all-trades, there are women who share family expenditures with their spouses. One woman on the field expressed herself in the sharing of expenditures in her home in these terms:

*"With my husband, we work so that we can meet the needs of the family. My husband is a primary school teacher, and I am a business woman. My husband gives me an amount of money each month to run the household. But this money is not enough to cover all the needs. I usually add my personal contribution to meet the needs. Even for the education of children, he finances school fees and I use my personal income to buy school supplies."*

Thus, women participate in all categories of family expenditures. There is no gendered division of the expenditures in households. In the budget of the domestic unit, we do not have needs that are systematically covered only by men or women. In couple where the expenditures are shared, the two spouses put money together to support the expenditures of the household. They spend collectively. Both men and women invest in all categories of expenditures that are: food, drinks, education, health, clothing, transport, cigarettes and tobacco, housing and household equipment, water-electricity, and gifts.

For the food and drinks for example, women's and men's contributions are made through financial contributions and through the use of the products of their various activities (farming, breeding, food processing and conservation ...) to feed the family. To prepare meals, women use crops from their fields, from the fields of their spouses or use their earnings or the contribution of their spouses to run the households expenditures to buy some food. In the Mayo Danay division rural area, households spend enough money for feeding. This because, mixed farming is not spread, traditions do not permit to kill animals reared in the compounds frequently, and the diet is much diversified. Peasants generally have monoculture fields where they grow a single crop. With this practice, a family grows between one and four types of crops per year and to prepare the meals composed of a wide variety of crops, the farmers are obliged to buy crops. Indeed, women go to the markets and buy foodstuff not produced by the household unit. This includes, foodstuff which are produced out of the Mayo Danay division such as palm or refined oil, broths (maggi cubes), salt, rock salt, potatoes, cocoyam and food produced at the local level as tomatoes, maize, sorghum, millet etc.. A woman during the data collection tells us about the expenditures done in her household in these terms:

*"The expenditures are made for potatoes, cocoyam, which are not cultivated here. They are produced in Maroua. I have two farms: a farm of beans and a farm of sorghum. My husband cultivates groundnuts. So when i want to eat something like millet, i buy. Here we do not cultivate many crops in a farm. No, some people only cultivate maize, others cultivate millet, others sorghum. You're not going to find someone who practiced mixed farming here. In ours farms we do not put many crops at the same time. No, it's not like that here in our localities."*

Another woman expresses herself on the same question, saying, *"We buy meat and fish regularly. The meat is bought because, according to the traditions, the animals that are bred at home are not for feeding. They are a sign of wealth and are used in traditional ceremonies or sold when the family faced financial difficulties. In addition,*

*we buy a lot of food on the market because foods like okra, tomatoes, in short, market gardening products are not cultivated throughout the locality. It is only the inhabitants leaving by the banks of the Logone River who cultivate these crops.”*

Money used to cover the various expenditures of the household (food, drinks, education, health, clothing, transport, cigarettes and tobacco, housing and household equipment, water-electricity, and gifts), comes from the various income-generating activities of women or their spouses. But, when couples face financial difficulties, they go out and take loans in associations or credit unions. In the rural area of the Mayo Danay Division, women are organized in associations in which activities such as savings and loans are carried out. Thus, with income-generating activities, women are now playing the roles of breadwinners in households in the rural areas of Cameroon. In various studies around the world, (Acharya Bell et al., 2010; Boateng et al., 2012; Brown, 1994), when women acquire the status of breadwinner, they are more emancipated and respected by their spouses. Is this situation also observed in the particular socio-cultural context in which we carried out our study? In the rural area of Mayo Danay, are women involved in income-generating activities benefit from more freedom, are less dependent and submissive to their spouses, less victims of marital violence and sexual assault?

### *3.3. The rural women of Mayo Danay, emancipated spouses?*

To understand the emancipation of rural women in Mayo Danay within households, we studied the margin of freedom given to women by their spouses in various aspects of domestic life such as the choice of the daily meals, the sexuality and, the authority of men. With the data collected, we noticed that, in these various aspects of the domestic life, women do not benefit of a wide margin of freedom that allows them to decide on the daily meals of the family and the sexual behaviors of the couple. They are still under the authority of men. When it comes to daily meals, for example, they prepare food according to the desires of their spouses. During our field trip, few women reported marital violence. They declared that, they were victims of domestic violence simply because they served to their spouses, some foods the men did not appreciate. It clearly appears that these women are not allowed to prepare the food they like but the meals their spouses appreciate.

Sexuality appears as a domestic area where the reins are held by men. According to the women, they do not benefit of any margin of freedom, there is no dialogue on sexuality in their couples, women execute what the men ask as indicated by this participant: *“When it comes to sexuality, it is the man who decides. We women cannot refuse sex to our husbands or we will be beaten. We cannot talk about condom use or abstinence to our spouses; they will not listen to us and if we insist, we will be beaten.”*

Sexuality in this particular context is not built up with dialogue. Indeed, women do not initiate a dialogue on sexuality with their spouses. These dialogues are almost absent among couples in our study area. Topics like the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and birth control are not discussed by the couples. The interlocutors for women on these topics are: health personnel, peer educators, health mobilizers and other women of the community. The Women are thus oppressed in their households even when they have income-generating activities. Daily, they face the authority and the violence of their spouses, who do not give them the opportunities to have a fulfilling personal life.

## **Conclusion**

The rural area of Mayo Danay division in the Northern part of Cameroon is a socio-cultural context where women are dynamic actors of the economy. They produce goods and are integrated into services through several activities: agriculture, fishing, breeding, food processing, handicraft and trading. In these activities, they are either independent entrepreneurs or family helpers. Thus, in this particular socio-cultural context, women are not only confined in domestic labor, an invisible work where they are daily engaged in the care of family members and household chores such as cleaning, washing, cooking etc. They are also present in the public spheres. Precisely, they are economic actors, breadwinners, domestic workers. Indeed, the products of the various activities of women are for family consumption and for trading. And, with these various activities, women partially or totally assume



the various household expenditures such as food, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, education, health, equipment of the domestic unit etc. In this rural area, the male breadwinner model is not observed in couples with women engaged in income-generating activities. These women contribute to the expenditures of the household. In some cases, we even have some households where the woman is the unique breadwinner, men having disengaged themselves from household expenditures and responsibilities.

These women who are breadwinners are marginalized. In the villages of Mayo Danay, women still have a narrow margin of freedom and are confined in traditional social gender roles. They are still very dependent on the desires of men and submissive to their male spouses. This situation is quite different from the situations observed in other contexts of sub-Saharan Africa such as the Ghanaian urban area and the Burkinabe rural area, where the integration of women in economic activities has empowered them and has incited changes in gender social roles (Boateng et al. al, 2012; Nignan, 2005). In our study area, women are not emancipated despite their important contributions to household expenditures and their double status in the domestic unit (breadwinner and domestic worker). The presence of women in income generating activities and in their participation in households expenditures have not contributed to their emancipation. The status of women in this rural area has not considerably change. In this society, women are still occupying the position they had in the years 1970s and 1980s as described in some anthropological and ethnological works carried out in the northern part of Cameroon by researchers such as Vincent (1979), Barbier (1985). We can thus conclude that, during the last decades, the situation of women in the rural areas of Northern Cameroon has not undergone significant changes concerning the emancipation of women and the men's participation in domestic work. Women continue to bear the burden of male domination and are classified in cadet's category. The fairer sex is dominated in this context despite the fact that they have means of production. Thus, the economic liberation of women does not guarantee emancipation. Indeed, as long as women remain engage in a socio-cultural system which is not restructured, emancipation remains a goal and an ideal still far to achieve. The deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural systems is thus an essential prerequisite for the emancipation of women in this particular context.

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